

Commemoration of the Faithful Departed – November 2, 2018 – Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of Saint Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 12:10pm Mass – 650 words

As on every All Souls Day, we offer a requiem Mass for all the faithful departed. I would like to comment on one element of the requiem we offer today. I am grateful to our Music Director, Bruce Ludwick, for having arranged a schola to sing the traditional requiem propers at this Mass. The propers are the scriptural and poetic texts given to us by the Church for the opening, the offertory, communion, the gradual (which takes the place of the responsorial psalm), and alleluia chants. Today's gradual, in particular, merits special attention.

The melody of the requiem gradual starts out the same as the one used in a nuptial Mass, and so calls it to mind, though the texts sung are different. For the requiem gradual, which we just heard, the text used is essentially the "Eternal Rest" prayer that we all know and hopefully pray often. Whereas for the nuptial Mass, it is verses from Psalm 128(127): "Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house, and your children like shoots of an olive". Why these two texts? And why should these two very different Masses be related by the same chant melody?

(Some cynical types would joke about how this is fitting: a wedding is a sort of funeral, they would say! But we may set cynicism aside and consider the deep, beautiful spiritual reasons behind this connection made by the Church's sacred liturgy.)

We do well to recall that a nuptial Mass, like a requiem, is first and foremost an act of divine worship, entering in to Christ's worship of his Father. The "wife" spoken of in that nuptial gradual is a reference to the Church, whom Christ unites to himself and offers to the Father. The Church is like a fruitful vine and her children are numerous, like the shoots of an olive tree. The bride and groom are thus invited to contemplate how their marriage is meant to be like Christ's love for his Church: profoundly intimate and bearing abundant fruit unto God.

Now a requiem Mass is also about marriage: hence the melody chosen for its gradual chant. At the requiem what we contemplate is not the marriage of two people on earth and how that reflects Christ's love for his Church; no, we contemplate, rather, the wedding feast of the Lamb – the heavenly wedding banquet – to which the soul of the deceased person is now called. At the end of our life on earth we commend our souls to God, which means we give ourselves entirely to him in a final way: "Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit".

But while the chant of the requiem calls to mind the nuptial melody and imagery, the text it uses is one of supplication: "Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord." We beg God to draw the souls of the departed into his rest. Many must pass through a final, cleansing fire of his love. We already know of that fire on earth, for every state of life – including holy matrimony – is a sort of crucible in which we are tested. But whatever impurity yet remains at death is purified by God's love in Purgatory, so that the soul can enter in to the feast, clothed in the wedding garment.

Today, then, as we pray for the souls, we ponder the marriage feast of heaven. Yesterday, we celebrated and begged the intercession of those who are already there. Today we ask God that their number may grow, with many holy souls being receiving into the wedding feast thanks to our prayers. How beautiful are the Church's chants and canticles,<sup>1</sup> when we come to understand them on a deeper level! How beautiful the singing will be at the wedding feast in heaven: may our Lord admit many to it this day – and help us to reach it someday as well. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> A favorite quotation from St. Augustine's *Confessions* comes to mind: "How I wept when I heard your hymns and canticles, being deeply moved by the sweet singing of your Church! Those voices flowed into my ears, truth filtered into my heart, and from my heart surged waves of devotion. Tears ran down, and I was happy in my tears."