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Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
November 1, 2020 Streaming Mass
Solemnity of All Saints Matthew 5: 1-12a

France is dotted with cathedrals, many of which were erected in the thirteenth century, a testimony to the faith of the people of that era and of their desire to fashion something of beauty, giving glory to God. One of the most beautiful is the cathedral of Chartres, located about 50 miles from Paris. I have been fortunate to visit there a number of times, the first about 50 years ago. What struck me then, and no doubt struck many others as well, was the darkness of its interior, the sense of mystery it evoked, its blackened walls bearing the soot from the candles and incense used in religious ceremonies down through the centuries. Those dark walls served as a kind of frame for the explosion of colors in the stained glass windows. Someone has described such windows as the "baptism of light," the religious imagery sanctifying the sunshine.

I returned to Chartres a few years ago, and the visual effect upon entering the cathedral was quite shocking. It was one of those "what were they thinking of" moments. The interior had been "restored" by the French government, which owns all churches built before 1905, and hence is responsible for their upkeep. The walls had been steamed clean, appearing as they no doubt did when first constructed. The whole space has been brightened up. A dull beige now covered the pillars of the cathedral's nave and apse, replacing the grime of centuries past, giving the space the anodyne appearance of your typical apartment building lobby. In the process the vibrant colors of many of the windows seem to have lost their intensity, deprived of the richly darkened walls that once framed them. What was no doubt a well-intentioned attempt to restore the beauty of the cathedral stands more as a metaphor of the bland secularism, characteristic of France and the rest of Europe today, that has replaced the vibrant faith that was able to erect such beautiful structures. What the "restorers" saw as just dirt to be removed, was seen by people of faith as the vestiges, as the testimonies, of all the acts of devotion and prayer offered by countless worshippers down through the centuries.

It is the people who left those marks, now erased, that we honor today of this feast of All Saints. It is they and the countless others who, although they are not listed among the official list of the Church's saints, are the ones through whom God has passed. They are the one who have welcomed the light of God into their heart and passed it on to the world. Just as the cathedral windows permitted light to enter in different shades of color, those un-canonized saints possessed their own transparency, allowing the light of divine love to shine through their lives, each according to his or

her own distinctive "hue."

It is in today's Gospel, with a passage from the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, that we are reminded of how we are called to live the Christian life. The Beatitudes are given to us by Jesus as a challenge, and as an antidote---a challenge to pursue a way of life that will always be at odds with what passes for "conventional" wisdom, and as an antidote to so much of the cynicism, the expediency, the pretense, the avarice and the violence all around us. Jesus says, "Blessed are they who...", but the way to hear them as addressed to each of us is to understand them as, "Would I not be blessed, would I not be fortunate indeed, would I not be better off if..., if I incorporated those sayings into my everyday life? What if...?"

What if I could be "poor in spirit," if I could be convinced that the accumulation of material things mattered less than cultivating the simple joy of living? Would I be better off if I were able to "mourn," if I did not live insulated and remote within a bubble of my own making, but instead was able to feel for people, to be upset with the injustices, the suffering, the violence that so many in our city, our nation, our planet have to endure every day? And what if I were "meek"---not that I have to become a doormat---but that I did not have to be a slave to the demands of my ego, compelling or manipulating people always to dance to my tune; would I not be better off? And if I were merciful, that quality which Shakespeare describes as the "milk of human kindness," just to be able to give another person a break when they needed it, not worrying if they really deserved it or not; would I not be better off, if I could be like that? Would I not be fortunate indeed if I were "clean of heart," if I possessed a moral compass so clearly set on what is noble and decent and good, that I need not compromise or equivocate in trying to do the right thing? And would I not be blessed if I were a "peacemaker," if I saw differences between people, differences of income or social status or race or gender or sexual orientation, not as barriers but as bridges to be crossed, and did something to cross them?

Let us pray that we can find ways to live out the challenge and the antidote for so much of our society's sickness given in the Beatitudes, that one day we may share in the glory that those "who have gone before us in faith" now enjoy.