In the classic novel, *The Diary of a Country Priest*, published in 1937, the author Georges Bernanos tells the story of the pastor of a parish in the French countryside. The priest is seriously ill. But his greater struggle is with his people who are self-centered and not open to his faithful ministry. They are bored with him and with life in general. He goes for advice to a neighboring pastor who tells him flatly: “No true priest is ever loved.” While this is an exaggeration, the young cleric takes solace in this statement because it reminds him that Christ was crucified for being too good. In fact, there is some truth in this advice because a pastor, like all leaders, cannot please everyone and almost by necessity makes some enemies. But the sick man does not engage in self-pity. On the contrary, he is a noble Christian who does his best and by grace overcomes many challenges to his ministry – while all the time having terrible bouts of pain in his gut.

At the end of the novel, the priest ends up in the city where a doctor diagnoses him with cancer of the stomach. At this point, he is already pretty weak and he goes to stay at a friend’s place. This friend, a former priest living with his girlfriend, takes the man in and cares for him in what proves to be his last hours. They basically pull an all-nighter and talk a lot about the past and memories and sin and goodness. The sick man begins to fade into unconsciousness at times. At one point, his friend states that he has left the priesthood because he has undergone an “intellectual evolution.” The priest replies: “if I ever had the misfortune to go back on the vows of my ordination, I would rather it were for the love of a woman than as a result of what you call ‘intellectual evolution.’”

The friend senses that his guest is close to death and he sends a neighboring boy for the local pastor. But the dying man cannot wait and so he asks his host in
this emergency to give him absolution of his sins. This he gladly does, mindful that he is still (after all) a priest. At the very end, he tells his dying friend that he is sorry that the parish priest is not going to make it to give him the complete Last Rites. But the moment before he dies, the country priest says to his kind host: “Does it matter? Grace is everywhere.”

Our readings on this All Souls Day remind us that grace is, indeed, everywhere. The Book of Wisdom, the first scripture this morning, was written in the first century B. C. and it reflects the growing belief in the afterlife among Jews of that time. The author makes the point that the just who die only seem dead but are really alive in God. They have fallen into the “hand of God” and he will take care of them. They seemed to be punished in this life because of all the trials that human people face; but in reality they have not been punished but rather disciplined and these earthly trials proved they were worthy by grace of immortality and of triumph in the next life with God. There they will be like sparks that dart about joyfully.

In the second reading from our patron St. Paul which is from his Letter to the Romans, he says that our Baptism into Christ makes us one with his Body and makes us a new person free from sin as we rise from the font to holiness of life. This reading affirms the basic message in the Book of Wisdom that we are destined by grace to “live in newness of life” forever. We have an immortal destiny.

Finally in the Gospel from St. John, we have a beautiful passage which follows immediately after Jesus has said: “I am the Bread of Life. He who comes to me will never hunger and he who believes in me will thirst no more.” Then Jesus says in today’s reading that he will never reject anyone who comes to him to be nourished because God sent him not to lose anyone but rather to raise everyone who believes in him on the last day. This means that by grace, we have eternal life if we cling to the Lord as best we can. The church has interpreted this to
mean that grace is available to everyone of good will, even if they do not have an explicit belief in Christ, God wants everyone to be saved and Christ died for everyone. Grace is everywhere.

On this day of great hope, we thus have every reason to trust in the promises of the Lord in the Old and the New Testaments that our loved ones live with him. While we honor them on this Feast, we also dedicate ourselves to be agents of divine grace and so live out our vocation as Christians. Grace is nothing other than the power and strength of God which comes to us through the infinite merits of his son Jesus Christ. Put more succinctly, grace is simply the presence of God himself in our lives and in the lives of all human persons and in all of creation from the beginning of the universe.

We give witness that grace is everywhere when we lift each other up every day, when we give healing comfort to the sick, when we get close to the poor and really help them, when we tell the truth even when it harms us, when we humbly put the needs of our family and friends and even strangers before our own needs, when we (like Christ) nail our selfishness to the cross for the sake of the good of others, when seek the path of peace rather than conflict, when we love justice so much that we can’t get enough of it, and perhaps above all when (Godlike) we forgive those who have wronged us.

When the country priest tells his friend that only the love of a woman could in some conceivable way justify violating his promises of ordination, he brings his host back down to earth. His friend is too stuck on ideas and ideologies and intellectualism. Of course, there is nothing wrong with ideas and thought. But it can all be carried too far -- it can become extremism which is always sterile. But the way of the Christian is the little way of love (as St. Therese the Little Flower taught us). This way is always fruitful because it is real. Not everyone can be an intellectual, but everyone can love. Everyone can use the power of grace to be like God. Our loved ones lived simple and humble lives. They who have fallen
into the “hand of God” showed us the way – the only way to Life that is forever. May we have the courage to follow their example and to show daily that grace is everywhere!