Vatican

Francis, the comic strip



Pope Francis arrives to celebrate a Mass in memory of cardinals and bishops who died in the past year, in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Nov. 3. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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For every Christian, but especially for those called to ministry, God's gift of life is a call to serve others, Pope Francis said at a memorial Mass for bishops and cardinals who have died in the past year.

"The meaning of life is found in our response to God's offer of love. And that response is made up of true love, self-giving and service," the pope said Nov. 3 during the Mass at the Altar of the Chair in St. Peter's Basilica.

The memorial Mass is an annual fixture on the pope's calendar for November, the month the Catholic Church dedicates particularly to remembering the dead. The Vatican said that in the past year 154 bishops and nine cardinals, including U.S. Cardinal Bernard F. Law, died.

"As we pray for the cardinals and bishops who have passed away in this last year," the pope said in his homily, "let us beg the intercession of all those who lived unassuming lives, content to prepare daily to meet the Lord."

The Gospel reading for the Mass was the parable of the 10 bridesmaids and their oil lamps from Matthew 25. Francis said the parable is valid for every Christian, who is called to go out to meet Christ, the bridegroom, and always to be prepared for that meeting.

"For ministers of the Gospel, too," he said, "life is in constant movement, as we go forth from our family home to wherever the church sends us, from one variety of service to another. We are always on the move, until we make our final journey."

"The encounter with Jesus, the bridegroom who 'loved the church and gave himself up for her,' gives meaning and direction to our lives," Francis said. "That and nothing more."

The parable emphasizes the need to have oil ready, but oil gives light only when it is burned, he noted. "Our lives are like that: they radiate light only if they are consumed, if they spend themselves in service."

"Whatever will remain of life, at the threshold of eternity, is not what we gained but what we gave away," he said. Serving means giving of oneself, and "those who hold on too tightly to their lives will lose them."

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Another characteristic of the oil in the lamps, he said, is that the light is seen, but the oil is not.

"What does this suggest to us?" he asked. "That in the Lord's eyes what matters is not appearances but the heart. Everything that the world runs after and then shows off -- honors, power, appearances, glory -- passes away and leaves nothing behind."

"Instead of our outward appearance, which passes away, we should purify and keep custody of our heart, our inner self, which is precious in the eyes of God," the pope said.

Like the bridesmaids in the parable, he said, those called to eternity with God "cannot be content with a sedentary, flat and humdrum life that plods on without enthusiasm, seeking petty satisfactions and pursuing fleeting rewards. A dreary and predictable life, content to carry out its duties without giving of itself, is unworthy of the Bridegroom."

As Catholics remember their beloved dead, Francis prayed that they also would keep their eyes on how they, too, are preparing for their ultimate destination, which is with God. "A life burning with desire for God and trained by love will be prepared to enter the chamber of the Bridegroom for all eternity."