

November 2 – All Souls Day
Prepared by Sr. Luise Ahrens, MM, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Isaiah 25:6, 7-9 • Psalms 103:8, 10, 13-14, 15-16, 17-18 •
First Corinthians 15:20-24, 25-28 • John 11:21-27

“I will raise them up on the last day” (John 6: 37-40) and “I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day” (John 11: 17-24) from today’s gospel are read differently in countries and cities around the world. In Cambodia, All Soul’s Day is celebrated according to the lunar calendar, and the Church has moved the feast to coincide with the traditional days of mourning the dead, ordinarily in late September. The Cambodian, or Khmer, feast is called “*pchum ben*.” In custom and Buddhist practice, people are supposed to go to the temple nearest the place where the bones of one’s ancestors are buried in order to make offerings and say prayers of remembrance.

The unique tragedy of Cambodia — in which the United States was active and the world was complicit — is that the U.S. bombing and the subsequent three-year regime of the Khmer Rouge killed two million people and separated almost every Cambodian family. Some were sent to camps where they were worked or starved to death, others were sent to areas where there was literally no food; others were condemned to instant death as they poured out of Phnom Penh, running from the sirens and loudspeakers crying out: “The Americans are bombing again — run, run.” Almost a whole generation of Cambodians died just within the three-year regime of the Khmer Rouge.

Anyone who has seen the movie *The Killing Fields* can remember the horrors they saw on the screen. Children were killed for stealing a mango; infants were left by the side of the road as families carried what they could while they fled to the borders; the newly-consecrated Cambodian bishop was worked to death in a re-education camp; teenagers were taught to spy on friends and family, reporting “sins” of taking extra rice, or speaking of better days, or cherishing a loved one’s picture. I know no Cambodians who did not lose someone in these years — and some lost all. If we imagine ourselves without parents, husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, who would we be?

But the terrible legacy of those times has given rise to yet another tragedy — Cambodians do not know where to go during the days of “*pchum ben*” to make offerings for their dead parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters. We in the United States are able to remember our loved ones who have died. Our hope is in God who has the power and the will to raise us and those we love from the dead. But for Cambodians, the separation between themselves and those they love who have died is total. Their hearts ache with the wrenching loss and is compounded a hundredfold by not being able to make the offerings that will bring their loved ones to another way of life, another, better incarnation.

Being here in Cambodia in mission, this pain of my Cambodian friends has made me think about what I really do believe — about God and about the resurrection from the dead. How will it be? Will those I have loved be a part of this new life? Will I really know the things that have enabled me to live with God forever, and those which have drawn me away from God?

I know from my own life here in Cambodia that I cannot forgive myself for my apathy when the secret invasion and bombing of Cambodia were revealed. I ask myself daily what was I doing — why was I dead to the cries that were coming from these people? I try to justify my hard heartedness with “I was busy,” or “I didn’t really

know what was happening.” But meeting the people here has exposed my weakness and laziness for what it was.

The lesson I learned from this, and one that we all have to learn over and over, is that while the United States is no longer the only superpower in the world, our foreign policy does make a difference. No matter which party one supports, which candidate seems to bring us the most hope, what is important is that each one of us takes part in the political process — not just on election day, but throughout the year. What we do DOES make a difference — to Somali people, to Burmese families, to Cambodian children, to Salvadoran refugees, to Mexican migrant workers. If our foreign policies are those that explore every means to bring long-lasting peace, that serve to assist countries out of poverty by better trade; that encourage transparency in governments across the world, then our hearts can be at peace.

The United States has the lowest per capita aid budget in the developed world, and yet we perceive ourselves as generous people — why does our kindness not translate into policies that reach out, gather in, raise up, give life? Where is the breakdown in the systems of government that we support? What can we do to bring the hopes of people around the world to fruition by our compassion and support?

However we want to see our own personal “eternal life,” we do not know what it will be like — no one has come back to tell us. It remains a mystery until the day of death. So, we observe All Souls Day in remembrance, comforted by prayer and shared tears and laughter. But, as people who are citizens of the world community, we can also mourn with the Cambodians who want to give offerings and prayer for their dead but do not know the place to go to offer incense and prayer. More importantly, we can play some role in our national political life so that Jesus can be brought to fulfillment: “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” Why else are we here on earth — why else are we here together in worship — what else will give meaning to our lives?

For more information:

Exercise your power to choose good leaders who will shape foreign policy so that all might have live in abundance. Read more about the global impact of U.S. political and economic decisions in Maryknoll’s “Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world,” a resource developed by Maryknoll missionaries who witness the global impact of U.S. political and economic decisions. Through this resource, Maryknoll missionaries encourage voters in the 2008 elections to scrutinize candidates’ policy proposals through the lens of those who, both in the United States and overseas, lack basic necessities, endure the scourge of racism, live with gender-based discrimination or feel the immediate impact of climate change.

Email for a copy, or find the election guide here:
www.maryknollogc.org/2008elections/index.htm

**Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns:
Peace, Social Justice & Integrity of Creation**
P.O. Box 29132 Washington, D.C. 20017
phone: (202)832-1780 fax: (202)832-5195
ogc@maryknoll.org www.maryknollogc.org