



All Souls' Day — Including Yours

Job 19:1,23-27; Ps 23; 1Cor15:51-57; Jn6:37-40;

Wis 3:1-9; Philippians 3:20-21; Jn 11:17-27;

2Macc12:43-46; Rev 14:13; Jn 14:1-6

Today, with Catholics throughout the world, we commemorate all the faithful departed — those who died earlier today in Hyannis, those who died centuries ago in faraway lands, the beloved deceased members of our families, and those whose names are known only to God. November is the month in which the Church remembers the dead. We begin the month, as we did yesterday, by celebrating the saints — those who are definitively in heaven, the canonized and uncanonized saints — and by invoking their intercession as we continue on our pilgrimage of faith in this world. Today we recall all the others who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith and inaugurate a month of intense prayer for them.

Why do we pray for the dead? For two reasons. First, because the dead may need them — Except in the case of a canonized saint, whose presence in heaven God “certifies” by the working of miracles (which only God can do) through that person’s intercession after their death, we do not know where those who have died are in the after-life. It is a truth of faith that to enter straight into heaven, one must be completely attached to God and completely detached from sin any affection to it. “Nothing unclean shall enter heaven,” the Book of Revelation tells us (Rev. 21:27). There are many who do not live and die with that type of purity of life, that radical attachment to God and radical detachment from everything that is not of God, and hence they need to be purified to enter into the kingdom in which God is all in all. This state in which the dead are cleansed has been traditionally called by the Church “purgatory” from the Latin term “purgare,” which means “to cleanse.”

Sometimes Protestants will try to claim that Purgatory is an invention of the Church, that there is no purpose to praying for the dead, but this claim contradicts Scripture and the constant practice of the Church going back to the beginning. In the second book of Maccabees, written about 140 years before Christ’s birth, we see that that the Jewish people offered sacrifices in the temple for all those who had betrayed the Lord through conspiring with the Greeks who sought to destroy the temple and the Jewish faith. Very much to the point, the sacred author wrote “For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead” (2 Macc 12:43-45). In the Gospel, Christ says, “Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” (Mt 12:32), implying quite clearly that there are some sins that can be forgiven in the age to come, the type of sin which St. John’s first letter says is not “mortal” or “deadly.”

The early Church gives several clear indications of the practice of praying for the dead. One I know quite well, from my five years as a Vatican guide. Underneath St. Peter's basilica, there is a pagan city of the dead which was rediscovered just over sixty years ago. It had been buried underground by the emperor Constantine in the fourth century so that the first basilica of St. Peter could be built on top of it, centered literally on top of the tomb of St. Peter who was buried in the area that eventually became the necropolis. Prior to filling in the necropolis with dirt, Constantine allowed the pagan family members to remove their dead loved ones and bring them to another necropolis, so that they could continue to visit their tombs. Most of the pagan families started to remove their loved ones. Curiously, though, as this exodus of pagan dead was occurring, Christians took advantage of the opportunity to unbury their dead and re-inter them as close as possible to the tomb of St. Peter, hoping that St. Peter would intercede in a special way out of love for those who would be his "neighbors" expecting the resurrection of the body. When the necropolis was excavated in the 1940s, we found some of the inscriptions left by the Christians as they were placing their loved ones in evacuated pagan mausolea prior to the necropolis' being buried underground. They gave witness to the early Christian practice of prayer for the dead. One was written in Latin and said, "Peter, pray to Christ for all the holy Christian men and women buried near your body." In addition to showing clearly the early Christian belief and practice in the communion of saints and their intercession, this inscription showed that the early Christians also believed that the dead might be in a state in which they need our prayers. This is common sense: if their loved ones were already in heaven, they would have had no need of prayers; and no Christians have ever believed that there could ever be a furlough from hell. That means they implicitly believed in a third state, a temporary one, in which the dead need our prayers.

The second reason why we pray for the dead is because our prayers actually can and do help them if they are in the state of cleansing called purgatory, that state in which all self-love is transformed into love of God. Second Maccabees tells us, very succinctly, "It is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they might be loosed from their sins" (2 Macc 12:45). The Catechism of the Catholic Church says, "From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God. The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead" (CCC 1032). God has set up the economy of salvation so that our deeds of love offered in union with Christ's own sacrifice may help others. Christ calls us to be co-redeemers with him. Just as his passion, death and resurrection brought salvation to the whole human race, so our deeds of love united to his, by God's own design, can help them. This is the reason why St. Paul could exclaim, "In my own flesh, I make up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of His Body, the Church" (Col 1:24). By our prayers, even those we make in our flesh by fasting and other sacrifices, or in our spirit, by almsgiving and prayerfully doing those pious practices to which the Church accords indulgences that can be applied out of love to the dead, we co-redeem with the Lord. To pray for the dead is a spiritual work of mercy, a spiritual work of co-redemption. The greatest prayer of all we could offer for the dead is the prayer of the Mass, when we unite our own personal prayers — those emanating from our lips, our hearts, even our bodies in all types of actions of loving sacrifice for others — to Christ's own prayer in the Mass, the continuous, redemptive one he began during the Last Supper and finished on the Cross. That is why the Church has venerated for centuries the practice of praying for the dead at Mass, explicitly having Masses offered for a particular loved one as well as praying, in every

Eucharistic prayer, for “all those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith” (Eucharistic prayer I), even those “whose faith is known to [God] alone” (Eucharistic prayer IV).

But there is another purpose to All Souls’ Day and to the month of November besides praying and sacrificing for those who have gone before us. The Capuchin friars — the community to which Archbishop Sean O’Malley belongs — have a few chapels in Europe that are quite unlike any other Church I’m sure you’ve ever seen. I have visited two of them, one in Evora, Portugal, the other very close to the American Embassy in Rome. In the basement of each, there is a Purgatory chapel in which everything in the Church — and I mean EVERYTHING, from the walls, to the floor, to the ceiling, to the pulpit, to the legs of the altar — is made of the bones and skeletons of thousands of deceased friars. Such a concept may seem strange to our American sensibilities, but it has a clear purpose. Hanging on the walls on the side of the Chapel are three friars decomposing before our eyes, with the exact amount of years the body of each has been decaying. Next to them is a sign, “WHERE YOU ARE, WE ONCE WERE; WHERE WE ARE, YOU ONE DAY WILL BE... REMEMBER DEATH, AND LEARN HOW TO LIVE.” The second purpose of All Souls’ Day and this month of November is for us to remember the sure fact that EACH ONE OF US WILL DIE. Every one of us is born under a death sentence. The moment we die, we will meet God face-to-face: God who is infinitely merciful and who loved us so much that he traded his own Son’s life on the Cross for ours; but God who is also infinitely just, a God who will know everything, a God whom we will not be able to deceive, to smooth talk our way past, a God before whom it will as obvious as it will be to us where our treasure on earth has been. The most striking thing of all is we have no idea when this encounter will take place. We may die even tonight, if not sooner. No matter how old or how young we are, no matter how sick or how healthy, death will come to us all, and it will come to us like, as Jesus says, a “thief in the night” (Mt 24:43). And that burglary might take place in a matter of minutes.

To remember the fact that we are going to die, and that we might do much sooner rather than much later, is not supposed to be morbid. In fact, it should be salutary. During the Renaissance, which was time of many public hangings, there was a common expression that “the noose focuses the mind.” Some even looked at the death penalty as merciful to those hanged, to give them a clear knowledge of that they would die “on the morrow,” so that they who were prone to commit the types of deeds for which one could be hung would be able to make their peace with God. All of us stand in some sense before the certainty of our own death should “focus our mind.” We will die and therefore we should make our peace with God. This was the sage wisdom of the Capuchin corpses, preaching to us still in death: “We you are we once were; where we are, one day you’ll be. Remember death and learn how to live.” What do they mean? We discover the answer in the teachings and lives of some of the great saints. They used to wake up every morning and live each day as if it were their last. In their retreats, homilies and various instructions, they advised us to wake up each day and think, “I may die today.” They suggested we live every hour of the day as if it were the last hour. To live every event as if it were the last thing we will ever do. You will be surprised at how much of a difference “remembering death” will make in helping you to “learn how to live.” It is already made a huge difference in mine. When I am having a conversation with someone who really is trying my patience, I say to myself, “Roger, be charitable and patient. This might be the last conversation you ever have. Treasure it.” If I am tempted to rush through my prayers, I remind myself, “Roger, you may die within the hour. Pray for all the things you would if you knew this were your last opportunity.” My prayer takes on new meaning. If I’m tempted to commit a sin, I recall that that deed might be the last thing I ever do, and that if it’s not worth it to gain the WHOLE WORLD if I lost my soul in the process, then surely it’s not worth it to gain whatever momentary and illusory pleasure that particular sin might bring. Indeed, if we were to realize

that we may in fact die today — for we know not the day or the hour and today is just as likely as five years from now — it would change the whole way we would spend the day. What would you do if you knew you were going to die today? Would you go to confession? If so, then go. Do not be foolish and give into the devil's greatest lie, that there's always time. Would you call up someone and tell that person that you loved them? Then do it.

Would you call up someone you have hurt and say you are sorry? Then do not put it off. If this were the last Mass you would ever attend, would you give into the temptation to leave Mass early, as Judas did at his first and last Mass? Well, then, stay a little after Mass and thank God for the gift of the Mass which is so much more important than anything we will be doing after Mass. To wake up each morning and live each day as if it were our last is the secret to having life come truly alive, to treasure each moment, each person, each event as a real gift. It is the secret of the saints, who in chorus remind us of that truth at the beginning of this month of November.

“Remember death and learn how to live.” As we come together to commemorate all the faithful departed and to commit ourselves to praying and sacrificing for them so that they may be cleansed from whatever keeps them from the fullness of God's kingdom, we also remember that through our prayer and our sacrifices God is also cleansing us of whatever keeps us from that same kingdom. As we join these prayers to Christ's own from the Upper Room and the Cross for us and our salvation, we ask him to help us to receive this Communion with the love with which we hope to receive him at our viaticum, because today may in fact be our viaticum. As we prepare to receive Him who is the Resurrection and the Life, the Conqueror of sin and death, the Living Bread come down from Heaven so that we may eat of Him and never die, we ask him for the grace to die to ourselves today so that he may rise from the dead within us, and so that we may fully live together with him in this life and forever in the next.

Praised be Jesus Christ!

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