

## **November is observed as month of prayer for the dead**

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November is observed in the Catholic Church as the month of prayer for the dead. On November 2nd we celebrate the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed, known as All Souls Day. This annual memorial reminds us to pray for those who have died, not only in November but throughout the year. In fact, prayer for the dead is a hallmark of our Catholic faith and is one of the practices that distinguishes us from some other Christian denominations.

The recognition of the need for and efficacy of prayer for the dead is found even in the Old Testament: "Therefore [Judas Maccabeus] made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin." (2 Macc. 12:46). From the earliest Christian centuries the practice of prayer for the dead is evident. St. John Chrysostom wrote in the 4th century: "Let us help and commemorate [the dead]. If Job's sons were purified by their father's sacrifice, why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them."

The most beautiful prayer that we can offer for each of our deceased faithful is, of course, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the first such Mass for the dead being the Mass of Christian Burial (the funeral Mass). As mandated by the Second Vatican Council, the funeral rites of the Church were revised to more adequately express the Christian hope in the resurrection. The Mass of Christian Burial is the centerpiece of the Church's funeral liturgy. The funeral rites begin with the vigil, as family and friends gather in the presence of the body to console one another and begin to pray as a community for the deceased. The prayers for the vigil are indeed beautiful and should be used whenever possible.

It has long been the custom of Catholics to bring the body of the deceased to the church for the celebration of the Mass of Christian Burial. (Sometimes we see the funeral Mass referred to as the Mass of the Resurrection. This terminology is incorrect. The Mass of the Resurrection is celebrated on Easter Day.) Every Catholic has the right to the funeral Mass, unless it is forbidden by law (as on the days of the Sacred Triduum). How sad it is when relatives of the deceased inform us that they do not want a funeral Mass. Sometimes this reflects the fact that the mourners are not practicing Catholics or Catholics at all. Sometimes relatives say that the mourners are so few in number that a Mass is unwarranted. Neither of these is reason to deny a Catholic the full rites of the Church at the time of death. The funeral Mass expresses the faith of the Church in the paschal mystery of Christ. It is eminently appropriate that the deceased, who ate the bread of eternal life while on earth, should be brought one last time to the Eucharist so that the whole Church can pray that he or she might enjoy eternal life in heaven.

Following the Mass of Christian Burial is the committal (burial). Again, it has long been our Catholic practice to bury the bodies of the dead. For most of our history cremation was forbidden, except in special circumstances. Now the Church permits cremation, but does not encourage this practice. The preferred manner of final disposition of the body is still burial because this expresses

best our abiding respect for the human body. When cremation is chosen, however, it is always preferred that the body be brought to the church for the funeral Mass and cremated afterwards. If this sequence is not followed, the cremated remains may be brought to the church for the funeral Mass. The cremated remains must always be interred in either a cemetery or a columbarium. The remains may not be kept by relatives or friends, nor may the remains be scattered. These practices are absolutely forbidden by the Church.

Our practice of prayer for the dead is closely connected to our belief in purgatory. Again, this is a dogma of the faith that distinguishes us in our beliefs as Catholics. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reiterates this teaching: "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." (1032). Sometimes we hear Catholics say that they do not believe in purgatory. Not only does this defect of faith jeopardize their full communion with the Church, but it also means that they believe there is no reason to pray for the dead. Another obstacle to our praying for those who have gone before us is a growing tendency to assume that the deceased is already in heaven. It is natural that we think only the best of those who have been very dear to us, but the truth is we do not absolutely know if any of the dead are in heaven, unless they have been canonized by the Church. When anyone says that "surely our dear departed is now in heaven", not only does he not speak the truth, but he also gives implicit permission to stop praying for that person. This does no service to the one who has died. It is because we do not know with certainty the fate of any of the deceased that we continue to pray for them.

It is my hope that every Catholic will offer prayers each day for the souls of the faithful departed. Especially commendable is the practice of requesting that Masses be offered for the deceased. Our faith assures us that these prayers for our deceased loved ones are indeed efficacious for their final journey to the eternal life of heaven.