

PRAYING FOR THE DEAD IN THE MONTH OF NOVEMBER.

The month of November is set aside to remember in prayer our deceased relatives and friends. The Catholic Church sets aside November 2 as “commemoration of the faithful departed,” but this commemoration continues throughout the month.

Praying for the dead can be a helpful part of the grieving process, but it’s also part of Catholic tradition to pray for those who are no longer here on Earth with us. So, where did the practice come from?

The earliest Scriptural reference to prayers for the dead comes in the second book of Maccabees. The books of Maccabees were among the latest written books found in the Old Testament, and they recount the struggle of the Jewish people for freedom against the Seleucid Empire, around 100-200 years before the birth of Christ. As such, they are written from an Orthodox Jewish point of view. The second book of Maccabees tells how Judas Maccabee, the Jewish leader, led his troops into battle in 163 B.C. When the battle ended, he directed that the bodies of those Jews who had died to be buried. As soldiers prepared their slain comrades for burial, they discovered that each was wearing an amulet taken as booty from a pagan Temple. This violated the law of Deuteronomy and so Judas and his soldiers prayed that God would forgive the sin these men had committed (II Maccabees 12:39-45).

This is the first indication in the Bible of a belief that prayers offered by the living can help free the dead from any sin that would separate them from God in the life to come. It is echoed in the New Testament when Paul offers a prayer for a man named Onesiphorus who had died: “May the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that day” (II Timothy 1:18). The cavelike tombs under the city of Rome, which we call catacombs, also bear evidence that members of the Roman Christian community gathered there to pray for their fellow followers of Christ who lay buried there. By the fourth century, prayers for the dead are mentioned in Christian literature as though they were already a longstanding custom.

How are ways that we can remember our loved ones? Prayer. It is through prayer that we encounter the Risen Lord and know He is with us. In prayer, we do not pray alone. We pray as a member of the Body of Christ which includes those on earth as well as those gone before us. In our prayer we are in union with them. Thanksgiving: Those who have gone before us have shared their life, their love and their faith with us. In being grateful for them, we are invited to notice their fingerprints on our hearts and in our souls. Good Works. As we are the hands and heart of Christ reaching out in sacramental ways (notice the small "s") to our brothers and sisters to serve, to heal and to respect, so we continue the good work of those who have gone before us by doing what they did in serving others.

We believe in the communion of all the faithful of Christ, those who are pilgrims on earth, the dead who are being purified, and the blessed in heaven, all together forming one Church; and we believe that in this communion, the merciful love of God and his saints is always [attentive] to our prayers (CCC, 962).

Eternal rest grant unto them O Lord ! And let your perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. Amen.

WHAT THE CHURCH TEACHES ABOUT DEATH:

▪Dying Well

Most people have an instinctive fear of death, but many also have a conviction that something lies beyond, that death does not have the last word. The Catholic faith is rooted in the belief that God made us to enjoy eternal life with him.

▪The Church and death

There is a natural longing in the human heart for peace, friendship, love and happiness – for a life that is purposeful and worthwhile. And there is an even deeper longing, sometimes quiet or hidden. This longing is to discover the ultimate meaning of life, to know the love of God, and to share in a destiny beyond the horizon of death. As St Augustine of Hippo, one of the great teachers of the Church, wrote: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” The Christian understanding of death is inseparable from the Christian understanding of life. It’s worth summarizing some of these key Christian beliefs.

▪The reality of death

In God’s plan, human beings were created for holiness and eternal life with him. But through the original sin of our first parents, our nature has been wounded, and we experience suffering and death. This was not part of God’s original plan, but it is part of the reality of our lives now. On the one hand, in purely natural terms, death is a frightening mystery. We are stripped of all our attachments to this world; our body lies corrupt; and our immortal soul goes to meet the Lord. We will see the whole truth of our lives, and we will face God’s judgment.

▪The hope of eternal life

On the other hand, Christians who have faith can approach death with peace and trust. There is a longing to be ‘at home’ with the Lord. They have the hope of eternal life and the knowledge that Christ has already conquered death by dying on the cross. And rising from the dead and opening the gates of heaven for those who believe in him.

▪The gift of salvation

Jesus said: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No-one can come to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). When we die, those who believe in Christ, those who freely choose to accept the mercy and salvation he offers, will enter heaven. However, some of these (“the Faithful Departed”) will first need to pass through the purification of purgatory, helped by the prayers of the Church. People in purgatory are already with God, yet they need our prayers to help them to be purified of all the effects of sin and ready to see God face-to-face.

▪Choosing salvation Those who reject Christ, who freely choose to turn away from the mercy and salvation he offers, will be condemned by their own actions and choices. They have irrevocably turned away from the possibility of life with God. This is the tragedy of hell. But this does not mean that those who have not known Christ in this life are simply excluded from the salvation he brings. The Bible says that God “desires all people to be saved” (1 Timothy 2:4). Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know Christ or his Church, have the hope of attaining salvation, if they sincerely seek God and strive to do his will as far as they know it. This salvation will still be through the redeeming love of Jesus Christ, but in ways perhaps unknown to us.

▪Sharing in the Resurrection

At the end of time, when Christ comes again, our bodies will share in the Resurrection. God will reveal the hidden purposes of his creation, and reconcile all things in Christ. Those justified by Christ will live in the presence of God for all eternity. The hope of heaven gives us joy even in the sufferings of this life, and gives us reason to keep close to Christ through lives of faith and love.

▪How Christians approach death

At the end of life, in sickness or old age, we prepare for death through prayer, acts of love, the Sacraments of Penance (Confession) and the Anointing of the Sick, together with Holy Communion. In this way, we are assured of God’s mercy and supported by the prayers of the Church. The hope of every Christian is to die in a state of grace, reconciled with God and at peace with others. The joy of the saints in heaven The final goal of our lives is to see God face to face in heaven, to be wrapped up in his joy and love and happiness forever in the company of all the angels and saints. The angels and saints in heaven are involved in God’s work. We ask them to pray for us and help us, because death is not a barrier but a bridge for those who love one another in Christ. And we pray for the holy souls in purgatory.

It is such a consolation to know that we are spiritually united, even now, with

those who have died, and that we have the hope of seeing them again in heaven when we die ourselves. End.