

All Souls day Reflections

On the first of November we celebrated the feast of All Saints and we remembered with joy and gratitude all those who have gone before us and who are now enjoying eternal happiness face to face with God. Today, on the second of November, we are celebrating All Souls' Day, also known as the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed, i.e. those who die with God's grace and friendship.

There are many customs associated with All Souls Day, and these vary greatly from culture to culture.

In Mexico they celebrate All Souls Day as "the day of the dead." Customs include going to a graveyard to have a picnic, eating skull-shaped candy, and leaving food out for dead relatives. The practice of leaving food out for dead relatives is interesting, but it is not exactly Catholic Theology.

In the Philippines they celebrate "Memorial Day" based loosely on All Souls Day. Customs include praying novenas for the holy souls, and ornately decorating relatives' graves. On the eve of All Souls (i.e. the evening of All Saints Day), partiers go door-to-door, requesting gifts and singing a traditional verse representing the liberation of holy souls from purgatory.

In Hungary the day is known as "the day of the dead," and a common custom is inviting orphans into the family and giving them food, clothes, and toys.

In rural Poland, a legend developed that at midnight on All Souls Day a great light shone on the local parish. This light was said to be the holy souls of departed parishioners gathered to pray for their release from Purgatory at the altars of their former earthly parishes. After this, the souls were said to return to scenes from their earthly life and work, visiting homes and other places. As a sign of welcome, Poles leave their windows and doors ajar on the night of All Souls Day.

In India special type of eats are prepared particularly in honor of the dead. Visiting the graves of the beloved persons and decorating graves with flowers is well practiced custom. All of these customs show the wide variety of traditions related to All Souls Day.

This is based on the Catholic theology that some of those who have departed from this world have not been perfectly cleansed from venial sin, or have not fully atoned for their past transgression. Being temporarily deprived of the beatified vision until such time as they have been completely sanctified in Christ, these departed souls are to remain in Purgatory, a state of purification.

To assist them in this process to be freed from Purgatory, we, their spiritual brothers and sisters in Christ, pray that they may receive the reward of the saints. The Church teaches us that, when we die, most of us are in need of some process of purification. This process has traditionally been called “Purgatory”. As a more everyday explanation, many liken Purgatory to a place or state where one gets purified before entering into the presence of Almighty God.

The Catholic teaching on Purgatory essentially seen in our belief in two realities:

First, that there will be a purification of believers prior to entering heaven and Second that the prayers and masses of the faithful are sure to benefit those in the state of purification. As to the duration, place and exact nature of this purification, the Church has no official dogma, although Saint Augustine and others used fire as a way to explain the nature of the purification. Many faithful Catholics, including Pope Benedict XVI, grant that Purgatory may be best thought of as an existential state, as opposed to a temporal place. In other words, because Purgatory is outside the confines of created time and space, it is not necessarily accurate to speak of a location or duration of Purgatory. Nonetheless, the prayers and Masses of the faithful do have an impact on the purification that the faithful are undergoing in Purgatory.

Some spiritual writers in the past described “Purgatory” in vivid details. Yet the official teaching of the Church is very circumspect and, beyond speaking of some sort of purifying process, does not speculate as to its nature. It is not helpful then to think of “Purgatory” as a place, but to see it as a process of purification, where in the benevolent God responds to the prayers of many to receive all his beloved children into his heavenly banquet.

From the early days, Christians have prayed for the dead and have undertaken works of penance and mercy on their behalf. There is scriptural basis for this intercessory prayer for the sins of others and for the dead in the Old Testament. Job’s sacrifices purified his sons. Judas Maccabeus made atonement for the dead that they are delivered from their sins. The tradition in the Church of having Masses said for the dead began in the earliest times. The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead.

The pre-Christian Roman religion, which held that some form of life continued after death, gave votive offerings to the gods on behalf of the dead at three specified times: the third, seventh and thirtieth day after death. This practice of praying for the departed on these same days was adopted by the early Christians and this practice continued in the Church. The Church offered Masses for the deceased person on the third, seventh and thirtieth day after the death of the baptized person.

In the early days, departed Christians’ names were written on special parchments to remind people to pray for them. In the sixth century, Benedictine communities held commemorations for the departed on the feast of Pentecost.

All Souls’ Day became a universal festival largely on account of the influence of Odilo of Cluny in the year AD 998, when he commanded its annual celebration in the Benedictine houses of his congregation. This practice soon spread to the Carthusian congregations as well. The day was celebrated on different days, including October 15th in the 12th century Milan.

Today all Western Catholics celebrate All Souls' Day on November 2, as do many Anglicans and Lutherans. Initially many Protestant reformers rejected All Souls' Day because of the lack of theology behind the celebration but it is now celebrated in many Protestant communities, in some cases with the Catholic theology of Purgatory. Some Protestants even pray for the dead; many Anglican liturgies include such prayers. While the Eastern Churches lack a clearly defined doctrine of Purgatory, they still regularly pray for the departed.

On this day we remember and pray for our dear departed members. Death is painful and can awaken feelings that are powerful, changing and compelling. The experience of death can be painful, enveloping the person to imagine the afterlife, the longing to be with the divine and to enter into a new experience. On this day we are faced with the mystery of death and we are reminded of the promise of resurrection and eternal life.

We believe that God will bring with Jesus all people to himself, persons who have died believing in him. When a person dies and the body is buried it is mortal. But when raised from the dead it will be immortal, a spiritual body. Our respect for the dead specifies our respect for all human life which comes from God. The feast of All Souls is a reminder that they are members of the Communion of Saints, have been saved and will one day be in heaven. However, they need to be perfected before they can go to heaven that is cleansed of all blemishes; they come into full unity with the perfection that is God.

On this day the Church is asking of us to pray in a very special way for all the deceased, for all those whom we knew, but also for all those who have died without their going away ever being communicated to us. We know only a minute part of this multitude of people who died since the creation of the world, but God on the other hand, knows them all and each person in their individuality. God knows all things: he knows what we are doing now because he watches us, he listens to us. He waits for us to turn to him with the simplicity of a child who confides in his Father full of love and tenderness.

Today, when we are commemorating all the faithful departed we turn towards Heaven and towards the eternity. We go to the God of Love, the all holy, all powerful and to him we direct our prayers for the souls of all those who died, our brothers and sisters waiting to be one in Jesus. We must remember that the saints are not people who are free from human imperfections. Rather they are those who are outstandingly good in spite of and through their shortcomings.

Every saint is also a sinner and it is a sign of sainthood that one is always aware of that. Let us ask Mary, who saw her Son on earth, and who sees him constantly in Heaven, to grant us this grace of eternal life. We pray to Mary our Mother that through her intercession all Christians receive the eternal life which is in her Son, and may the souls of all the departed rest in eternal peace through her intercession. At the same time we are aware of our future destiny with God that depends to a large extent on how seriously we have taken the words of Jesus to our hearts that he is our resurrection and life.

On All Souls' Day, we ask God for mercy on those who have died. We pray for an ever deeper and abiding awareness of the steadfast love of God expressed through Jesus Christ. God's love made known in Jesus Christ is the reason for our hope. Today is a day of solidarity between all Christians.

It is a celebration of what we call the "Communion of Saints", where 'saints' signifies all persons baptized in Christ. Our love and sense of duty do not permit us to ignore them. They are all our people some of whom are intimately known to us. They call out to our help and one day we too will need help from others. Let us, then, make the prayer of today's Mass our own: "God, our creator and redeemer, by your power Christ conquered death and returned to you in glory. May all your people who have gone before us in faith share his victory and enjoy the vision of your glory forever."

Eternal Rest grant unto them O Lord and let perpetual help shine on them and May their souls rest in peace. Amen