

November - Month of the Holy Souls

It is therefore a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins. (2 Mac. 12: 46)

The Second Book of Maccabees provides the principal Scriptural support for the venerable tradition of praying for the dead. It is also one of the seven spiritual works of mercy prescribed by the Church. During the month of November it is especially recommended that the faithful remember in prayer the souls of those who have gone before us.

Why pray for the dead?

On All Saints Day (1st November) the Church on earth rejoices with those of her children who have entered the glory of heaven. They see God "face to face" and intercede for us. However, only those who at the hour of death are in the grace of God and have no need of further purification join the ranks of the Church Triumphant after the particular judgment.

A defiled soul may not enter heaven and so for many souls of the departed there is the need to purify the traces of venial sins and/or the remaining temporal effects of sin before entering heaven. Such souls obtain a favourable particular judgement and are assured of heaven but must first suffer in the purifying fires of Purgatory:

Purgatory is the state of those who die in God's friendship, assured of their eternal salvation, but who still have need of purification to enter into the happiness of heaven.

[Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 210]

How can we on earth aid the poor souls in Purgatory?

The souls detained in Purgatory constitute the Church Suffering. We do not know how long an individual soul must spend being purified before it is perfected and ready to be admitted to God's immediate presence. However, the souls in Purgatory cannot aid this process by their own merits. That is why the Holy Souls are in great need of prayers of encouragement by those in heaven and on earth.

The dogma of the Communion of Saints expresses the mysterious union of the Church Triumphant (in heaven), the Church Suffering (in Purgatory) and the Church Militant (the pilgrims on earth). Our membership of the mystical Body of Christ imposes a duty of charity and justice upon the faithful. The merits and prayers of each one are able to help all.

The greatest prayer offered for the dead is the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Christ's death on the cross delivers us from sins and from eternal death. The most perfect sacrifice of love on Calvary is renewed daily on our altars at Holy Mass. It is fitting then that Masses are offered for the souls of the departed and that these intentions should be at the forefront of our minds, especially in November.

Aside from the Eucharistic sacrifice, the faithful on earth may also aid the souls in purgatory by almsgiving, indulgences and works of penance.

Indulgences

Gaining an indulgence is another way to assist the dead. Especially in November certain indulgences are prescribed for the Holy Souls. The Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains indulgences in the following way:

Indulgences are the remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven. The faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains the indulgence under prescribed conditions for either himself or the departed. Indulgences are granted through the ministry of the Church which, as the dispenser of the grace of redemption, distributes the treasury of the merits of Christ and the Saints.

[Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 312]

The two-fold consequence of sin explains the purpose of indulgences. Mortal sin entails eternal punishment, i.e. the permanent separation from God in hell. Absolution in the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation remits (removes) this eternal punishment of mortal sin. However, all sin "whether mortal or venial" also involves temporal punishment which is suffering to atone for our sins and to purify our souls. Hence, even after forgiveness we undergo suffering either in this life or the next (purgatory) as a result of sin committed.

Indulgences are drawn from the "treasury of merit" established by Christ's death on the cross. These merits or rewards were won through Christ by His life, death and resurrection and are offered to believers as free gifts from God in the form of indulgences. The Church administers and distributes this treasury of grace by virtue of the authority given to Peter by Christ: "whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven." (Mt 16: 19)

An indulgence may be either "partial" or "plenary". A partial indulgence remits part of the temporal punishment due to sins. A plenary indulgence removes all of that punishment. Any Catholic in a state of grace may obtain an indulgence. When carrying out the indulgenced prayers or good works the Catholic must have the intention of gaining the indulgence.

Some additional conditions pertain to the granting of a plenary indulgence because it represents such a wonderful gift of grace. These conditions are:

- i) An interior disposition of complete detachment from sin.
- ii) Confession of sins (may take place some days before or after the work or prayer).
- iii) Reception of Holy Communion (preferably on the same day as the prayer or work).
- iv) Prayer for the intentions of the Supreme Pontiff (usually an Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory Be).

Indulgences can always be applied to the Catholic who performs the indulgenced work or to the holy souls in purgatory. A complete list of indulgences granted by the Church is provided in the latest edition of the Enchiridion Indulgentiarum (published in English as "The Handbook of Indulgences"). Examples of the many indulgenced prayers and works include:

Plenary Indulgences

- Making the Stations of the Cross.
- Visiting the Blessed Sacrament for at least 30 minutes.
- Praying 5 decades of the Rosary while meditating upon the mysteries.
- Reading Sacred Scripture for at least 30 minutes.

Partial Indulgences

- With a spirit of love and mercy, Catholics who give of themselves or their goods to help others in need.
- With a spirit of penance, Catholics who deprive themselves of what is pleasing and licit (e.g. abstaining from meat on Fridays; foregoing a pleasure during Lent).
- Devoutly visiting a cemetery and praying for the departed, even if the prayer is only mental (Only applicable to the souls in purgatory).
- Praying the "Eternal Rest" (Applicable only to the souls in purgatory).

Further Information

The Doctrine of Purgatory
By Fr. John A Hardon, S.J. (courtesy of Catholic Culture)

Praying for the Dead and Gaining Indulgences during November
By Jennifer Gregory Miller (courtesy of Catholic Culture)

Indulgentiarum Doctrina
1967 Apostolic Constitution of Pope Paul VI setting out norms relating to indulgences

Let us pray for the faithful departed

Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis. Requiescant in pace. Amen.

Eternal rest grant to them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. Amen.