



Prayers for the Dead

Sixth Festival Letter of
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BISHOP OF PEORIA

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Prayers for the Dead

We can tell you this from the Lord's own teaching, that any of us who are left alive until the Lord's coming, will not have any advantage over those who have died. At the trumpet of God, the voice of the archangel will call out the command, and the Lord himself will come down from heaven. Those who have died in Christ will be the first to rise, and those who are still alive will be taken up in the clouds, together with them, to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

Death imposes a terrible audit upon the human experience of being alive. Death is the inevitable conclusion to every life. Except for those who are alive on the Last Day, everyone else born into this world will one day surely die. Death entered into our universal human reality not according to God's intention but rather as a sad consequence of sinful human choice. As the inspired words of the *Book of Wisdom* remind us: *God did not make death, nor does he rejoice in the destruction of the living. For he fashioned all things that they might have being (Wisdom 1: 13-14)*. So in our experience of life wounded by original sin, death has become integral to our fragile human condition. Yet the deepest desires of our human hearts are oriented to infinity. In lives bounded by birth and death, we have an innate human hunger for life without end.

As Saint Ambrose once instructed the Church of Milan: *The Lord only allowed death to enter into this world so that sin might come to an end. But in Christ he gave us the resurrection of the dead so that our nature might not end. Death was to bring guilt to an end and the resurrection was to empower our nature to continue forever (Ambrose, Let Us Show Christ Crucified in our Lives)*. The death and resurrection of Jesus has overturned the hopelessness and apparent victory of death, because our human existence will, in Christ, find its ultimate fulfillment through the general resurrection of the dead.

Centuries earlier, Saint Paul taught the Church of Corinth in a similar way: *What died was perishable, weak, mortal. What rose was imperishable, glorious, immortal (1 Corinthians 15:42)*. As he also wrote to the Church of Rome: *Sin came into the world through one man, and*

his sin brought death with it, as a result death spread through the whole human race because everyone has sinned. Just as sin reigned wherever there was death, so grace will reign to bring eternal life thanks to the righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 5:12-13, 21). Our salvation in Christ has ultimately defeated death. Our journey towards death now reveals God's promise of life without end. So believers should neither fear nor deny death. For those who live a new life in Christ, death has become a Passover from mortality into immortality.

Facing this inescapable passage is a very important aspect of the life-long process of personal maturity. Those who consciously face death can more easily appreciate the precious gift of life. An awareness of death should encourage a much deeper intensity in the experience of living. Looking honestly at death offers us greater liberty in our choices and enhances our appreciation of the meaning of human existence. Understanding our mortality invites us to discriminate between right and wrong, between good and bad, between what is important and what is unimportant. Accepting the limitations of time invites us to more deeply embrace generosity, mercy, and most especially love, because these virtues have eternal value.

Every Ash Wednesday, our heads are crossed with ashes, and we hear words that are profoundly true: *Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.* In this deliberate recollection, believers are invited to renew our savor for life and use our allotted time on earth more wisely. Redeemed and born again, Christians should really be the happiest people alive. Because we know that our endless longing will at last be fulfilled in the infinity of God, we can more readily delight in what is given, without placing eternal expectations on passing realities. As the Preface for the Mass of Christian Burial boldly proclaims: *The sadness of death gives way to the bright promise of immortality. Lord for your faithful people, life is changed, not ended. When the body of our earthly dwelling lies in death, we gain an everlasting dwelling place in heaven.*

How far from this confident Catholic perspective is the increasingly hopeless culture of our contemporary world. Those who live in denial of death tend to live unconsciously and often without moral purpose. In the face of wars and rumors of wars, natural disasters, accidents, pandemics, and the inescapable fact of human mortality, what is relentlessly promoted is not wisdom, but unremitting distraction and a desperate search for ever increasing sensation. Youth is foolishly idealized, and old age is just as foolishly denigrated. Any limitation on human choice, even in the face of God and nature, is angrily rejected. Attempting to live as if there were no eternity becomes increasingly mindless and most often ends in despair.

Despite the sobering universality of death, the actual experience of dying is now mostly concealed from our view. Folks usually die away from family and friends, hidden in hospital rooms or nursing homes. For those left behind, grief is supposed to be managed in just a matter of days. Nearly all of the older rites of grieving, mourning, and shared remembrance are often limited to the day of the funeral. Even among believers, this unreflective culture has made unfortunate inroads. As a partial antidote, I would propose that all of us in the Church of Peoria not only strive to more deliberately remember the reality of death, but also to reclaim the comforting richness of our Catholic tradition and spirituality.

To remember the dead in prayer is both a work of mercy and an unbroken practice of the Holy Catholic Church. Extending back to apostolic times, the inscriptions left by Christian believers at cemeteries, catacombs, and the shrines of the martyrs clearly evidence their faith that the dead can be assisted by the intercession of the saints and the prayers of the living. The great Communion of Saints is made up of the holy ones in paradise, the holy souls in purgatory, and the faithful here on earth. There are no limits on the compassion of those in glory for those in the state of purgation or for all who continue to strive in this life. Through the mercy of Christ, the constant prayers of the entire Church assist the souls of the faithful departed who are now safely on their way to absolute perfection.

The reality of death will, most often, first confront us in the passing of those we love. Both our hope in the resurrection and our love for one another should oblige us to pray constantly for *all those who have died and gone before us*. The Church faithfully honors the memory of the dead and offers ceaseless prayers for their eternal rest, above all in the Eucharistic Sacrifice. In the Mass, the infinite grace and endless mercy of the Lord's one perfect oblation on the cross is renewed and truly made present. In the Mass, it is Christ himself who intercedes for all those who have died. In the Mass, our High Priest and Mediator prays that the dead may at last attain the fullness of salvation in the beatific vision of God. In the Mass, the truly immense and unfathomable supplication of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph, and all the angels and saints are united in Christ with the prayers of the entire believing community on behalf of the dead. We simply have no better way to express our love for those who have died than to arrange for Masses to be offered on their behalf. As we loved them in life, we must never forget them in death.

The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance on behalf of the dead. As Saint John Chrysostom once preached: *Let us help and commemorate the dead. If Job's sons were purified by their father's sacrifice, why should 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 (Chrysostom, Homilies on 1st Corinthians). *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* also teaches: *Since the faithful departed now being purified are also members of the same communion of saints, one way we can help them is to obtain indulgences for them, so that the temporal punishment due for their sins may be remitted* (CCC 1490).

In very real and significant ways our prayers and Masses for the dead also keep us in personal communion with them. In prayer and worship, the experience of time dissolves, and this passing world and the eternal *world to come* are drawn closer together. In the great mystery of the Body of Christ, we are spiritually united with those holy souls who loved us in this life and continue to love us in that eternal life after death. In Christ, they see us more clearly than we are now able to see them. In Funeral Masses, in anniversary Masses, in visits to the cemetery, and in our persistent prayers for our deceased relatives and friends we give expression to our grieving and grow through sadness into more attentive lives of faith. In the solemn intercessory rites of our religion, we also have the opportunity to retell our family story to our children and our children's children. In the face of a culture increasingly without memory, we can share with the young the unwavering faith of their Catholic ancestors and pass on the Church's beautiful and sustaining traditions of familial prayer and piety.

I would like to use this *2008 Festival Letter* as an opportunity to remind all the clergy, religious, and faithful of the Church of Peoria of some very basic obligations related to the pastoral rites for the dead: Except in the most extraordinary circumstances, every Catholic who dies should have a Mass for Christian Burial offered on their behalf. The Mass is never something superficial, much less a bother, even when offered for those who die in great old age or after an extended illness. There is no priest or parish in this Diocese who would not fail to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass for any Catholic who has died, no matter how destitute or little known. The Mass is always an effective means of grace for both the living and the dead, and must never be neglected. It is a scandal and even a grave sin when ungrateful children do not arrange Catholic funerals for parents who in life were always faithful to Sunday or even daily Mass. Almighty God will certainly judge them severely for their impious neglect.

I would also propose that it would be wise for most people to make their own advance funeral arrangements with their parish priest and their funeral home. Planning for a Funeral Mass, for their own burial in consecrated ground, and for Masses to be offered for the repose of their souls is a prudent step for any Catholic believer and would save families from difficult decisions at a time of grief and stress. Everyone should also have a legal will, and a certain portion of their wealth, no matter how great or small, should be left for the poor, for good works, and for the ministries of the Church. We are but temporary stewards of our time and our treasure. The wealthy in particular should make careful provision that what they leave behind

will accomplish good. November, the month of the Holy Souls, should be an annual occasion for pastors to encourage believers to make prudent arrangements for the end of their lives and for the beginning of their eternity.

There are specific Church ordinances and sensibilities that should also be regularly taught in our parishes, schools, and apostolates. Internment in consecrated ground is preferred in our Catholic tradition because it testifies to our belief in the sanctity of the body and our faith in the promise of resurrection. Cremation is allowed but preferably only after a Funeral Mass is celebrated with the body present. Memorial Masses with ashes brought into church are also allowed, but the ashes of the dead should ideally then be interred in a cemetery. Keeping ashes at home on the mantle, in a back closet, or in the trunk of a car indicates worldly indifference rather than Christian reverence.

Funeral homilies are a tremendous opportunity for a priest or deacon to comfort, teach, but most especially, to evangelize. Thankfulness for the life of the deceased would be an aspect of nearly every funeral homily, but preaching should very seldom take on the character of canonization. Only the Blessed Mother was entirely preserved from sin, while according to the scriptures even the just have failed daily. It is for God alone to accurately judge a human life. The assembled congregation at a Funeral Mass should be encouraged to feel a sense of awe, not only before God's great mercy, but also before his perfect justice. The wise and holy among the faithful have always asked for the intercession of the Church to assist them after death, rather than for words of flattery at a funeral which can no longer do them any good.

We must also recognize that the predominate religious culture of our country is Protestant. Their funeral services consist mostly of hymns, some scripture, a sermon, and often several eulogies, without any intercessory prayers for the dead or the celebration of a sacrament. Catholic worship, however, should always be intentionally Catholic. Multiple eulogies at a Catholic funeral can distort the nature of our sacred liturgy and even diminish the profound centrality of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. Extended words offered by family members or friends are best given at the wake service or funeral meal. If *words of remembrance* are offered at Mass after the Post Communion Prayer, they should normally be given by only one person, be brief, and certainly be entirely orthodox in content. It would be best if a priest were able to review the text beforehand.

I would also ask that throughout the year priests and deacons preach more frequently about the brevity of life, about the necessity of preparation for death, and about our obligation to offer prayers for all those who have gone before us. Pastors and chaplains, Catholic school

teachers and parish catechists should regularly encourage the celebration of Masses on behalf of the dead. They should also strengthen or even reintroduce those Catholic customs of piety and devotion that would so greatly assist those in the midst of bereavement. All Souls Day and the entire month of November should be a special time when all our parishes, hospitals, cemeteries, and schools offer Masses for the dead, remember in prayer our deceased relatives and friends, and in charity extend our prayers for the repose of all the poor souls in purgatory.

We will always grieve for the loss of those we love, but not like those who have no faith. The happy death of Saint Joseph in the arms of Jesus and Mary should fill us with confidence, but we should also never be ashamed of our own tears. Jesus himself cried out in anguish at the death of his friend Lazarus. The great sorrow of Mary embracing the body of her Son beneath the cross teaches us that even the most faithful will know the awful pain of separation. But like the holy women at the tomb, like the holy apostles gathered in the upper room, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the Risen Christ announces to us the greatest possible Good News: *Peace be with you. Look at my hands and my feet, and see that it is myself. Touch me, and you will know that a ghost doesn't have flesh and bones, as you can see I have* (Luke 24:39-40). Christ is risen! Christ is truly risen!

In summary, the hope filled, the exulting, and the sanctifying words of our Catholic liturgy should be faithfully offered by family, friends, parish, and diocese on the occasion of the death of each and every believer and in the subsequent years of memory and recollection.

God our eternal Father, by your endless power Christ conquered death and returned to you in glory. May all those who have gone before us in faith come at last to share in the fulness of his victory and enjoy forever the vision of your glory, where Christ lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever.

Amen.

V. Eternal rest grant unto them O Lord.

R. And let perpetual light shine upon them.

V. May they rest in peace.

R. Amen.

V. May their souls and all the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God

rest in peace.

R. Amen.

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