

# *A Few Thoughts About All Souls Day*

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Every year on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, we celebrate All Souls Day by commemorating our beloved family members and friends who have passed away. All Souls Day is not a holy day of obligation, but many parishes offer a special mass for parishioners who would like to worship God and pray in a special way for the dearly departed. Some parishes draw particular attention to parishioners' family members who have died within the past year. They may even host a social gathering following the mass.

There are many beautiful ways to honor the feast of All Souls, but there seem to be two questions that arise consistently when one considers the meaning of All Souls Day. First, why do we pray for the dead? Second, why do the dead need our prayers?

## *Pause for Reflection*

- *Think about a time when you offered a prayer for a deceased loved one.*
- *Why did you offer the prayer?*
- *What assistance did you prayer give to your deceased loved one?*

## *Why Do We Pray for the Dead?*

The simple answer is love. God is love, and love binds us together with all who abide in God. We are alive and the dead are raised to new life; both of our lives are rooted in the love of God, or the love that is God. God's love is the foundation of life that spans both sides of the death barrier.

We love the family members and friends who have passed over to God through death. Death has not changed our love for them; therefore we should offer to them the same concern we offered to them when they were alive with us on Earth.

As we journey along the path of life together on Earth, we encounter many challenging changes – changes that require the prayerful assistance of a loving community. When we send a son off to school each year, we pray for him. When a daughter turns 16 and acquires a driver's license, we pray for her. When a grandmother is about to undergo cancer surgery, we pray for her. When a business closes and a friend is out of work, we pray for him. These are all significant changes in the course of life, and it is unthinkable for a Christian community not to offer prayerful support to the individuals who face the challenges associated with these transitions.

As we pass through death into eternal life with God, we experience the most profound change in the course of life. "For this momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison...." (2 Corinthians 4:17) We simply cannot imagine the dramatic difference between this life and eternal life – there is no comparison. Our love for those who have died compels us to assist them in their transition to eternal life just as we assisted

them in every other significant change they experienced in life. Perhaps we pray more fervently at the time of death because of the magnitude of the change that faces our loved ones.

Some may wonder why we would continue to pray for the dead each year on All Souls Day long after a loved one has passed away. Isn't our loved one in heaven now? Why do we continue to pray if their transition is complete?

### *Time and Eternity<sup>1</sup>*

Time and eternity are qualitatively, not quantitatively, different from each other. Eternity is not simply time that never runs out. Eternity is not the same as forever. In eternity there is no past or future although it is not unaffected by or unrelated to past and future. Eternity is the full experience of the present. God in eternity is fully present to each moment of history and yet this same God transcends all moments and exists before time began and after the consummation of time at the end of the world. This notion is distinct from time because in the human experience of time we can never fully experience the present. Time forces us to anticipate a future moment or remember a past moment. I can only imagine what will happen or remember what has already happened. The very moment I have an experience of anything, my awareness of the experience lags behind the experience itself even if only by a fraction of a second.

Many great scientists have pondered the relationship between space and time. From their discoveries, we have become more aware that even the things we see are all in the past. By the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf *Sacramentum Mundi*, Volume 2, edited by Karl Rahner, SJ. The relevant article is *Eternity* by Adolf Darlap and Joseph de Finance, pp 249-252.

time the light reflecting off of anything reaches our eye, time has already passed by. When I look at a tree outside of my window, what I am seeing is in the past by a fraction of a second because time has lapsed to allow the rays of light reflecting off of the tree to reach my eyes. I can never see, hear, touch, taste, or know a present moment because of the relentless movement of time.

### *Pause for Reflection*

- *Ponder the passing of time. Look at some object off in the distance. Think about the time it takes for the light that is bouncing off of that object to reach your eye. Consider that the image you are seeing is already history. The image of the object that you see is in the past because of the time it takes for the light from the object to reach your eye.*
- *Ponder the passing of time in another way. Try to focus on a present moment as it is happening. Close your eyes and try to focus on the present moment. Notice how every thought in your mind about a moment is either in anticipation of the moment or a remembrance of the moment which has already passed. Human beings cannot fully experience a present moment because of the relentless passing of time.*

## *God is Eternal*

God, however, is eternal, and eternity is not limited by the movement of time. God is fully present to every moment of history and every moment that is to come because it is part of God's identity to express the divine self through time. In other words, every moment that ever was and will ever be is pregnant with the full presence of God. But time does not define God because God created time and, therefore, existed before time. It follows that those who experience unity with

God after death enter the realm of eternity and can also be fully present to a moment without experiencing the limits of passing time. Like God, they don't simply remember and anticipate moments; rather, they are eternally or fully in the moment, every moment, with God.

Although time and eternity are distinct, there is a fascinating and mysterious connection between the two; they are not unaffected by each other. This truth is based upon our belief that the eternal God entered history in Bethlehem 2000 years ago in the person of Jesus. Nothing of God's eternal nature was compromised when that divine nature expressed itself in human form, just as nothing of Jesus' human nature was compromised by the full presence of the divine in him. Time and eternity were mingled mysteriously in the person of Jesus.

We are able to touch eternity because eternity touched humanity in the person of Jesus. We can pray for people who died years ago, and our prayers enter the eternal realm of God and are present in a full way to our loved one's eternal moment of death. When a person enters death and experiences God's eternal realm, all of history, past and future, becomes present to that person. It doesn't matter, in one sense, when we offer a prayer of purification for anyone because the person experiencing the purification of Purgatory is eternally present to our prayers of support.

### *Pause for Reflection*

- *Offer a quiet prayer for a deceased loved one. Consider that your prayer, which was offered right now, was present at the moment of your loved one's death because of the eternal nature of the experience of death.*
- *Offer a prayer for yourself. Pray for a peaceful death for yourself. Know that your prayer is transforming your own experience of*

*death. Because your experience of death transcends time, the prayer you offer today is fully present to you at your moment of death.*

## *Purgatory Here and Now*

Another related thought to the timeless nature of Purgatory is that one can experience Purgatory at any time during life. Since Purgatory is part of the eternal presence of God, our experience of Purgatory transcends time and can touch us in a partial way at any moment of our lives. When we cooperate with God's grace in our lives at any moment, we experience a small purification of our souls. Sin is stripped away and we become more open to love. For example, we may have a Purgatory moment, so to speak, when we move beyond selfishness in order to do some kind act for another person. Prayer can be a Purgatory moment. Acts of justice can be Purgatory moments. Helping someone with homework or a chore can be a Purgatory moment. Making time for family and friends when we're tempted to work extra hours for more money can be a Purgatory moment. Anytime we purify our motives and our actions we experience Purgatory in some small way.

Experiencing Purgatory here and now can tempt us to quantify the afterlife. This would be a mistake. We can start to believe that the more good deeds we do while we're alive on Earth, the less "time" we will spend in Purgatory. We don't abandon selfishness and embrace love in order to hasten our passage from Purgatory to Heaven in the afterlife; rather, we abandon selfishness and embrace love in order that we might get a deeper taste of Heaven here and now. Our happiness on Earth is not unlike our eternal Happiness in Heaven. The more

we hand ourselves over to God, the happier we will be. The reign of God is among us now. The reign of God is the key to our happiness. We seek to purge sin from our lives now, so that we can begin to find true happiness with God now. It could be said that daily life gives us many opportunities to practice for death as we let sin die in our lives so that grace will fill us with joy. On our last day, all sin will die and we will be filled with grace and experience complete joy.

### *Pause for Reflection*

- *Think about some of the things you have done with your life that were purifying experiences for you. What are your "Purgatory moments"?*
- *How do your Purgatory moments bring you a sense of peace? How do they help you to experience Heaven on Earth?*

### *Why Do the Dead Need Our Prayers?*

The simple answer is change. Anyone going through a significant change needs the prayerful support of a loving community. The profound change a person experiences at death is purification; the person is transformed and made pure by the merciful love of God. We traditionally call this the experience of Purgatory. Our loved ones who have passed away need our prayers to assist them as they experience Purgatory, the state in which one is purified from sin and the effects of sin as one enters into full communion with God for eternity (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1030-1032). We offer our prayers as a community both at the person's funeral and each year at the celebration of All Souls. Our prayers can assist our loved ones by encouraging them to abandon all attachment to sin and to be open to God's mercy. Our love for

them, expressed in prayer, can be a prelude to God's eternal love.

Pope John Paul II taught that Purgatory is not a place, rather it is a state of being in the same way that heaven and hell should not be thought of as particular places. Heaven is the state of being in which one experiences perfect union with God, and hell is the state of being in which one experiences God's absolute absence. Purgatory is the experience of purification as one passes through death and moves into the state of being that we call Heaven.

In his address, the pope traced the long biblical tradition of making purified offerings to God. This tradition is a foundation for our belief that we must offer ourselves to God in a purified way through the power of God's merciful grace when we die and enter the experience of Heaven. The pope cites passages from the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> chapters of Leviticus as examples of the need for purity as one approaches God or makes an offering to God.

Leviticus 22:19-20 is particularly interesting: "... if it is to be acceptable, the ox or sheep or goat that he offers must be an unblemished male. You shall not offer one that has any defect, for such a one would not be acceptable for you." Clearly the intention behind the practice of using unblemished animals is to make a purified offering to God. The underlying belief is that God, who is perfect, cannot be in full communion with anything or anyone that is not pure. Sin and imperfection do not dwell in God, and so a blemished offering cannot dwell in full communion with God.

Our earthly life is a mixed experience of love and sin. We encounter the love of God in the midst of an imperfect world

that is tainted by sin. Our experience of God is partial and incomplete because our sin and imperfection prevents us from giving ourselves completely to God. We have partial experiences of heaven when we give ourselves to God by overcoming selfishness in our relationships with each other, but at the same time, we have partial experiences of hell when we turn away from God and worship our own self-centered pursuits. When we finally offer ourselves to God at the time of death, God purges all sin and imperfection from us as God gives us the gift of a complete communion with Father, Son, and Spirit. Nothing is held back as all duplicity is wiped away and our experience is one of total and complete love. God's grace makes us an acceptable, purified offering.

### *Pause for Reflection*

- *What are the blemishes in your life that need purification?*
- *Focus on one blemish. Decide to take one step in your life this week to purify that particular blemish. Thank God joyfully for the gift of that one, small, significant step toward purification.*

## *The Offering Maker*

Another interesting aspect of Leviticus 22:19-20 is the focus on the intention of the one making the offering. Notice that the pure animal is not pure for the sake of the animal or for the sake of God, rather it is pure for the sake of the one making the offering, "... for such a one would not be acceptable for you (emphasis mine)." The purified animal represents the purification of intention and action of the person making the offering. God is only pleased with sacrifice insofar as it represents a transformation of heart and action in the person. The person experiences purification as God is approached, or better, as God draws near to consume the offering.

### *Pause for Reflection*

- *What offerings do you make to God?*
- *What offerings do you make to other people?*
- *What is in your heart when you make your offerings? Do you seek praise for your offering or do you seek to express your love with your offering? For most of us, our offerings are a mixture of both selfishness and altruism. It is good to be aware of this and to pray for a purified heart so that we can grow deeper in love and move further from selfishness as we mature in our faith.*

## *Possibility of Transformation*

The purifying experience of Purgatory is a profound transformation. God's boundless, merciful love cleanses us of every blemish of sin. God's warm embrace ignites a fire of love in our hearts that burns away our selfishness. But, like all experiences of God, it is not an isolated experience. We benefit from the prayerful support of those who love us and pray for us as we melt in God's embrace and come to a full understanding of what it means to love God and be loved by God, and to love our neighbor and be loved by our neighbor.

### *Pause for Reflection*

- *Close your eyes and sit quietly for a moment as you reflect on the meaning of this article for you life.*

