

The Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed Praying for the Dead

“It is... a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead.” (2 Maccabees 12:46)

Christians have always been accustomed to pray for one another. Just as we can help one another in everyday life, so we can help one another in following the way of Christ. Death is clearly the end of their present life but, for a Christian who believes in the resurrection of the dead, it is not the end of everything. The liturgy teaches us that, “For your faithful, Lord, life is changed, not ended...” (Roman Liturgy, Preface I for the Dead). From earliest times, then, Christians have prayed for those who have died, for “our brothers and sisters who have fallen asleep in the hope of resurrection” (Roman Liturgy, Eucharistic Prayer II), that God may deal mercifully with them at the last judgement.

November is traditionally a time when we pray for the dead. On the day following the celebration of All Saints, on the first of the month, we solemnly commemorate all the faithful departed; for the rest of the month we continue our care for them. We can pray for them and we can direct our prayer to gain indulgences for them.

The notion of an indulgence springs from a particular understanding of ‘sin’. Sin is not just wrongdoing. It is a theological concept meaning an offence against God. It is not just an act which offends God but does not offend any person or group of people. In practice, however, as in the case of theft someone’s sin offends both God and other people. The relationship between the perpetrator and the victim is damaged. Even when the victim forgives the perpetrator their relationship as fellow human beings must be repaired. So it is with God who forgives a repentant sinner unconditionally but the loving relationship between God and the sinner needs to be restored. This is why, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, a gentle act of reparation is imposed on the penitent. Many centuries ago these ‘penances’ – pilgrimages, etc. – were life-changing challenges and the repentant sinner could call upon his brothers and sisters for assistance in carrying them out. An indulgence can be thought of as a Christian, acting on behalf of the Church, offering help to restore a fellow Christian’s relationship with God. The doctrine of Indulgences is typically expressed in complex juridical language: an indulgence is the remission before God of the temporal punishment due sins already forgiven. More than anything else, however, seeking an indulgence is an act of love towards one’s fellows..

The doctrine of indulgences was brought into disrepute in the 16th century when it became a flashpoint in the disputes between reformers and the Catholic establishment: at that time indulgences were being sold to raise funds, a blatant and terrible abuse, rightly condemned by the reformers. Because of this some of them began to deny the need or efficacy of prayers for the dead. The business of indulgences

remains a sensitive issue, but since the Reformation the Catholic Church has continued to encourage the faithful to make use of indulgences. It remains part of Catholic practice. A relatively recent expression of it is to be found in an Apostolic Constitution of Pope Paul VI, of January 1st 1967, shortly after Vatican II.

It is an unfortunate circumstance that most of us will die before that relationship is fully restored. The dead are unable to act on behalf of themselves but they are still part of the community of believers and those they left behind can still help them.

Nowadays indulgences are sought by prayer and good works. They can be either partial or plenary. Partial indulgences help towards their goal, plenary indulgences achieve it. All Souls' Day has two traditional means of gaining a plenary indulgence associated with it: (i) visiting a cemetery to pray for the dead and (ii) visiting a church to pray the Our Father and Creed. The first is available during the octave of All Saints (1st – 8th of November, the second on the Commemoration of the faithful Departed (November 2nd).

This year, because of the difficulties caused by Covid 19 restrictions this year these indulgences can be gained on any day during the whole month of November. The Sacred Penitentiary issued a decree which states that: *The gift of Special Indulgences is granted to the faithful suffering from Covid-19 disease, commonly known as Coronavirus, as well as to health-care workers, family members and all those who in any capacity, including through prayer, care for them.* It also states that these indulgences may be gained on any day during the month of November instead of the usual, more restricted, period.

The whole month of November is a time to follow the advice given in 2 Maccabees. Remember those who have died: "To our departed brothers and sisters, and to all who were pleasing to you at their passing from this life, give kind admittance to your Kingdom.