

November: Remembering to Love our Deceased

PASTORAL STATEMENT FROM THE BISHOP

Everyone has loved ones – family members and friends - who have died. November is the month when Catholics show love for their loved ones by praying for their eternal rest.

Why do we do this? Because God has revealed that our prayers help those who have died. Let us recall Christian teaching about death.

Why do we exist?

We exist for God to love. We may find this hard to understand but the reality is that God's love is infinite and beyond our comprehension.

God's wish is that each of us lives forever after death in an ever-deepening relationship with our Creator. This is the relationship Jesus called 'heaven'. It is an experience of eternal joy and happiness.

Jesus taught that, when he returns on the Last Day of creation, he will raise each of us from the dead. We will have bodies like his body after his Resurrection.

This is one reason why we do not mourn loved ones who have died as do others who think there is no life after death. We know that death is a temporary separation – not permanent.

What is the basic human life question?

Every child experiences the wish to be friends with another child - while knowing that the other child must agree before they can actually be friends. Also, many TV programmes, plays and songs are about people wanting relationships with others who do not want relationships with them. Relationships require agreement by both parties.

In a similar way, God's wish that we spend eternity in the relationship of heaven requires our consent to become a reality. God never imposes heaven on anyone.

The real question we must answer in our lives, therefore, is: 'Do I accept a loving relationship with God forever in heaven?'

What is the most basic purpose of our lives?

The basic purpose for each of our lives is to choose whether or not to agree to God's wish. Jesus taught us that we show our consent by praying, worshipping and trying to live daily as he taught. The consent of those who do not know Christ through no fault of their own is shown by their efforts to live lives of love and goodness.

The reason why Jesus, the Son of God, came was to help each of us to reach the relationship of heaven. He did this by teaching us, for example, how to live in relationship with God. He opened heaven for the human race by his life, death and Resurrection. He gave us the

Sacrament of Penance (sometimes called 'confession') so we can receive God's forgiveness for even the gravest sins that otherwise would prevent us from entering heaven.

What happens after we die?

Many ask this question today. Jesus revealed that, when we die, we face him first for our *particular judgement* – the judgement of whether or not we have chosen the eternal relationship of heaven.

Those whose lives show their consent to God's wish will enter *heaven*. However, anyone who has died while there is in them any hint of selfishness or wrong cannot enter heaven until they are purified of these.

The final book of the Bible warns us that we cannot experience heaven – the relationship with the God of perfect love and goodness – while there is the slightest trace of self-centredness, fault or imperfection in us [Revelation 21:27].

God therefore purifies all whose lives show their consent to heaven, but who have died imperfect. Catholics call this '*purgatory*'.

God revealed, even before Jesus came, that people's prayers assist the purification of those who have accepted heaven [2 Maccabees 12:40, 42, 44, 46]. This is why Catholics pray for them.

Jesus told us we will be held to account at our judgement for every *unforgiven* sin against God's commandments as Jesus taught them [eg Matthew 5:21-22, 7:1-5, 12:34-38 and 25:31-46].

However, God forgives people who repent *sincerely*, even in the last moments of their lives. Sometimes people think this unfair on those who have lived good lives – but such people do not appreciate the strength of God's love.

Jesus taught that he will come again at the end of the world. There will be the *General Judgement*, when the relationship of every person with God will be revealed. Jesus will raise all from the dead, and the eternal destiny of all will be revealed to all [eg John 5: 28-29].

Those who reject God

People whose lives show that they have rejected the relationship of heaven experience the eternal separation from God, Jesus referred to as 'hell'. This is not God's wish but the result of their choice. Jesus warned about its sufferings through images such as fire, darkness and the depths of the sea.

Sometimes people today say that there can be no hell because God loves all. However this overlooks the need for both parties to agree before there can be any relationship. It also implies that people really have no choice about their eternal destiny and that they do not need to accept the consequences of responsible choices. It effectively denies that human beings have free will.

Do I prepare daily for death?

Jesus warned us, therefore, to be prepared for death. He told: "So stay awake, because you do not know either the day or the hour" [Matthew 25:13].

A key element in Catholic prayer is to examine our consciences each day, and to pray for God's forgiveness for any thought, word or action against God's laws as Jesus taught them. It is foolish for anyone to die unprepared. It is good for us to heed Jesus' warning by asking ourselves honestly: "Am I ready for death today?"

Jesus taught that there would be little point in owning the whole world (if this were possible) if we fail to reach heaven after we die [Matthew 16:26]. We need to keep in mind always, therefore, the *eternal* consequences of our life choices.

How do Catholics pray for those who have died?

Catholics pray especially for those who have died each November as well as on other occasions. They join also in the Masses for the Dead (or Funeral Masses) on the days loved ones and others are buried.

Catholics pray too in the Eucharistic Prayer of every Mass for those who have died. They pray for them especially on the Feast of All Souls on the 2nd of November. They have Masses offered for loved ones on the anniversaries of their deaths. They pray daily for deceased loved ones.

Why Funeral Masses?

The Mass is the prayer of Jesus, the Son of God, to God the Father. It is the most powerful prayer Jesus gave his followers.

A Requiem Mass follows four basic steps.

- in the *Opening Prayer*, we pray for the eternal rest and the forgiveness of any sins our loved one may have committed, and for their purification of any personal fault that delays their experience of God in heaven
- in the *Liturgy of the Word*, we open ourselves to Jesus helping us to understand something of his teachings on death. The priest or deacon then explains this teaching further in his homily after the Gospel
- in the *Eucharistic Prayer*, we pray for our deceased loved one. We pray also for Jesus' power to help us in a difficult time
- Catholics, who can, receive Jesus in *Holy Communion* so he can draw them closer to himself.

Final farewell

The final step in a Requiem Mass is the community farewell. We pray for the one who has died, and farewell their earthly remains.

These days relatives often like someone to speak a few words of remembrance as well.

Let us pray for those who have died this November...

We love deceased loved ones by praying for their eternal rest. We show Christian love too by praying for others we have known, and for those with no one else to pray for them.

Let us renew our love this November for those who have died. Each day, let us pray:

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

May their souls and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.