

Beyond the doorway of death is life

THE DEATH OF one we love leaves us empty. Yearning for lost companionship, we grieve through remembrance, tears, and prayer. Whether death comes mercifully to end a long illness or ruthlessly in violence or accident, mourners struggle to live day by day without the person who made those days bright, who made them feel loved, and who lightened burdens like these.

Catholics who grieve find comfort in faith. Belief in life after death helps us receive the loss of someone we love with anticipation. We believe we will reunite with those we love after death.

Catholics also believe that the prayers of the living benefit the dead. So our comfort comes not just from believing in life after death, but from praying about it. We are not helpless before the specter of death. We have power — to pray, to intercede, to beg forgiveness, and to seek eternal rest for those we love.

On All Souls Day the Catholic instinct to pray for the dead meets the Catholic instinct to establish feasts. In the Roman Catholic Church it took nearly a millennium for All Souls Day to develop, but the relentless desire to pray for the dead eventually brought the feast to birth.

PRAYER FOR THE DEAD has been a part of Catholic life and practice all along. The first Christians established shrines at the tombs of the martyrs and commemorated the anniversaries of their death with prayer.

Scripture provided at least two key passages which supported the practice. In the Old Testament, when Judas Maccabeus claimed the bodies of his fallen soldiers, he prayed for them. "If he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin" (2 Maccabees 12:44-45).

In Matthew's Gospel (12:32), Jesus uses a strange expression when talking about the forgiveness of sins. He says some sin will not be forgiven "either in this age or in the age to come." His saying seemed to establish two courts of forgiveness — one in this age and another in the age to come. Christians concluded there must be some sin unforgiven in this world which could still be forgiven in the next. The saying supported the custom of praying for the dead.

The establishment of November 2 for All Souls began much later. At the time of Charlemagne, Amalarius of Metz (c. 780-850) expressed his personal decision regarding the feast: "After the office of All Saints I have inserted the office for the dead; for many pass out of this world without at once being admitted into the company of the blessed." Odilo, abbot of Cluny, established November 2 as the day to pray for the dead throughout all his monasteries in 998. It became so popular that the day was finally approved by Rome in the 13th century. Thus, All Souls was from the start a grassroots day of prayer, a day not imperiously legislated from on high, but a day established by the promptings of the sorrowful human heart.

Fr. Paul Turner



the
Good News
God's word in
everyday living

THE READINGS for the day may be drawn from the lectionary Masses for the Dead. The three readings you hear next Sunday will be selected from a larger pool. We will not hear the same three Scriptures in every church, at every Mass, nor every year.

The readings on this page are examples of what you will hear next week. Isaiah (25:6-9) prophecies to exiled Israel about the day the people will return to their land, eat and feast, and have their tears wiped away. We see in that prophecy a promise for the end of our earthly exile, when we can enter into the land God has prepared for us.

Paul (1 Cor 15:12-26) answered some questions from the Corinthian Church about the resurrection. He assures them, and us, that as Christ rose from the dead, so shall we.

Jesus (Mark 8:27-35) foretells his own death and resurrection and prepares his followers to lose their own life for his sake.

These passages — and this feast — bring us into the central mystery of Christianity. Death is a doorway. Life lies beyond. □

Father Paul Turner is pastor at St. John Francis Regis Parish, Kansas City.

Daily Scripture Readings

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary

Time, Sunday, October 26

Jeremiah 31:7-9

Psalms 126:1-6

Hebrews 5:1-6

Mark 10:46-52

Monday, October 27

Romans 8:12-17

Psalms 68:2, 4, 6-7, 20-21

Luke 13:10-17

Tuesday, October 28

Ephesians 2:19-22

Psalms 19:2-5

Luke 6:12-16

Wednesday, October 29

Romans 8:26-30

Psalms 126:1-6

Luke 13:22-30

Thursday, October 30

Romans 8:31b-39

Psalms 109:21-22, 26-27

Luke 13:31-35

Friday, October 31

Romans 9:1-5

Psalms 147:12-15, 19-20

Luke 14:1-6

All Saints Day, Saturday, November 1

Revelations 7:2-4, 9-14

Psalms 24:1-6

1 John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12a

All Souls Day, Sunday, November 2

Isaiah 25:6-9

1 Corinthians 15:12-26

Psalms 23:1-6

Mark 8:27-35

