

All Souls' Day is unique on the liturgical calendar. Prayer and remembrance for the dead reaches deep into our human history. It has been our custom and practice from the earliest days of the Church. The belief that our prayers can be of assistance to the dead is a treasured tenet of our Catholic faith. In the Apostles Creed, the creed used as the profession of faith at Baptism and here at Mass as an alternate to the Nicene Creed we state: "I believe in the communion of saints/ the forgiveness of sin/ the resurrection of the body/ and life everlasting."

Today's celebration and the credal statements emphasize two related doctrines of our faith—the communion of saints, and purgatory as the means of God's merciful love and care for us after death.

In today's second reading from St. Paul's letter to the Romans we hear of the fundamental relationship between God and us through Jesus which we enter through the waters of baptism. "Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life" (Rm 6: 3-4). Through the waters of baptism, our life is forever united to Jesus through the Holy Spirit in God. While we still live in this world with all its wonders and opportunities, as well as its sufferings, and ultimately our physical death, yet our life in Christ is a divine life that cannot die. In today's Gospel, Jesus assures us that "everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and I will not reject anyone who comes to me...and I shall raise him on the last day" (Jn. 6:37,40). What a comfort these words are! What comfort and hope regarding our family and friends who have died! This is the basis of the doctrine of the Communion of Saints.

In Christ, through baptism, we are formed into a communion, a community, the body of Christ, the Church: the Church here in this world which we see, and the Church which has passed beyond this world and is present before and in God. This leads us to the doctrine of purgatory.

Today's first reading affirms that "the souls of the just are in the hand of God" (Wis.3:1) No one who belongs to God is lost to God, as Jesus has assured us, except by a deliberate, conscious, fully willed rejection of God through mortal sin. However, at our death, (unless a person died as an infant or very young child) there remains the effects of sinful choices by which we failed to live and show the divine life received through baptism in our relationship of love for God and each other. Some little, or perhaps, much work of reconciliation, of fully "putting on the mind and heart of Christ" may remain to yet be attained. Purgatory assures us that at death God's loving care and mercy do not abandon us, but continue to be available to us to assist us in our growth of divine grace until we are fully clothed in eternal glory. While the Scriptural basis of purgatory speaks of this divine love as a "purifying fire" such language is not to be understood literally, but metaphorically in the sense of yearning, longing, rather than of punishing.

Purgatory consoles us with the merciful love God, that in a way known only to him, God provides a means by which our departed loved ones, and someday each of us, at death can continue on the path of conversion begun in baptism until we have attained to the fullness of our life in Christ, clothed in glory. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI teaches that purgatory is a process of spiritual growth already active in this life as we turn away from sin through prayer and action continuing to completion in the fullness of God's glory and love after death. In this process, today's celebration proclaims our union with our beloved dead in the communion of saints, and in this communion that our prayers and actions offered for them do assist them in their purgatory journey to fullness of life in God even as they, freed from the constraints of this world, through their prayers assist us in our purgatory journey now and at the hour of our death.

We celebrate today God our Shepherd whose "grace and mercy are with his holy ones and whose care is with his elect" (Wis. 3:9).

Fr Jim Secora