

November and Remembering the Deceased

During the summer and early autumn of the year 1226, as Saint Francis knew that he was about to end his earthly pilgrimage, our Seraphic Father composed one final verse to his *Cantico delle Creature*, his Cantic of the Creatures or Cantic of Brother Sun: “*Laudato sie, mi Signore, per sora nostra morte corporale, da la quale nullo homo vivente puo skappare* – Praised be you, my Lord, through our sister Bodily Death, from whom no living person can escape. Woe to those who die in mortal sin. Blessed are those whom death will find in your most holy will, for the second death shall do them no harm.” Article #19 of our Secular Franciscan *Rule of Life* assures us that it is our immersion in the resurrection of Christ “which gives true meaning to Sister Death.”

We, as faithful Catholics, believe in the Communion of Saints which we commemorate every time we come together to celebrate Liturgy and which we especially emphasize during the month of November. This is all the more true of us as Secular Franciscans. Article #27 of our *General Constitutions* exhorts us that we “should be firmly convinced that the community of those who believe in Christ and who love one another in Him will go forward into eternal life as the ‘communion of saints.’”

On November 1st we celebrated the Solemnity of All Saints, those who have died in God’s grace, who have been perfectly purified of any vestiges of sin from their lives on earth, and who now live forever with Christ, seeing God face to face. Some of them have been formally canonized by the Church; countless others whose names are known only to God live also as saints in heaven.

On November 2nd we celebrated the commemoration of all the Faithful Departed, All Souls’ Day. As much as we would like to think of all our deceased loved ones, friends, parishioners and fraternity members as being with God in heaven right now, the truth is that we simply cannot know with certainty the state of a person’s relationship with God at the moment of his or her physical death. And so the Church has always observed the practice of offering prayers and sacrifices for its deceased members, especially during this month of November, a time of year when with the approach of winter our thoughts just naturally turn to the end of physical life on earth.

It makes sense, doesn’t it, that to live in the presence of Absolute Holiness and Utter Perfection that we must be holy and perfect? And what if we fail to live up to the Lord’s call to holiness and perfection in this life? What about those who die having lived basically good and decent lives but not perfectly purified from small attachments to sin or from sin’s effects in their lives? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has this to say about such persons: “All who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. The Church gives the name *Purgatory* to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned. From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them,

above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God.”

Today we celebrate the truth that God gives us every possible opportunity for accepting the gift of salvation made available to us through Christ in baptism. If there were only Heaven and Hell, it would make no sense to pray and offer sacrifices for the dead: if they were in Hell, our prayers could not help them; if they were in Heaven, they would not need our help. Even if we don't get the business of being God's Holy People exactly right during our lifetime here on earth, we still have the opportunity for final purification after our death. The Church invites us to pray and to do penance for those in Purgatory, and to give alms to the poor and offer indulgences for the souls in Purgatory.

What is an indulgence? According to Blessed Pope Paul 6th, it is the removal of punishment due to sins already forgiven, which the Church grants to a person from the treasury of satisfaction won by Christ and the saints. This means that the process of purgatorial purification can be reduced by our gaining an indulgence and applying it to the Poor Souls. Although indulgences were abused in the 16th century, the Council of Trent and subsequent statements by the Popes have emphatically taught that the proper use of indulgences was to be continued in the Church. Many indulgenced works are available to us, especially as Franciscans: making a simple sign of the cross, praying the Franciscan Crown, spending some time during the day reading from Sacred Scripture, and making a visit to the Blessed Sacrament.

All we must do is to meet the required conditions: to receive Eucharistic communion, to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and to offer prayer for our Holy Father the Pope and for his intentions. In addition to helping us grow in holiness, the merits of these faith-filled actions can be applied to the souls in Purgatory.

The Church-approved documents which give us guidance in living our Franciscan way of life also exhort us to pray for our departed sisters and brothers. In describing the characteristics of our life in fraternity, article #24 of our *Rule* reminds us that the communion of life and love which we forge within fraternity in this life “continues with deceased brothers and sisters through prayer for them.” The same essential point is made in article #54 of our *General Constitutions*: “The fraternity remembers with gratitude its brothers and sisters who have passed away and continues its communion with them by prayer and in the Eucharist.”

As we remember with love and affection all those sisters and brothers of ours who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith, marked with the sign of the TAU, and as we commend them anew to the love and mercy of God, let us renew our own commitment to be faithful to our Christian and Franciscan vocations in the hope that we may be found among “those whom death will find in God's most holy will.” Then perhaps, one day, the brothers and sisters of our Franciscans of the Prairie Region will gather at a Memorial Mass to remember us.

[Taken from a homily of Deacon Dave Ream, O.F.S., November 2014]