

32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time Year “A”

November 7-8, 2020

Readings: Wisdom 6:12-16; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

The scenario has become all-too familiar. An elderly parishioner dies, and a son or daughter calls us to begin to make initial funeral arrangements. Soon thereafter another sibling calls to explain that the family has decided to go another direction– sorry for any inconvenience. In other words, they decided not to have a funeral. While some of this is surely Covid-19 related, it was increasingly happening long before the pandemic.

Saint Paul remind us today that “we shall always be with the Lord,” that through Jesus, God will bring with him all who have fallen asleep at the final coming of the Lord. In the meantime, we remain on earth and our prayers for those who have gone before us are a crucial witness to the Communion of Saints. Part of this communion involves praying for the dead, something for which the entire month of November is set aside.

Church Funerals are important for several reasons. First, there is the psychological need to experience the closure that a burial provides, including viewing the deceased body. While difficult, it is a valuable reminder that our earthly self is not the totality of our personhood. Our souls are very much alive with God. Funerals are praiseworthy, both for closure and reflection on the brevity of life and its ultimate purpose.

Secondly, it is a wholesome and worthy idea to pray for the dead. The Old Testament Book of Maccabees teaches this. Recall, Judas Maccabeus believed it was worthwhile to pray for his fallen soldiers. Apparently, they had turned to idols, as after the battle their bodies were discovered wearing sacred amulets to other gods. So, he suggested prayer as a form of expiation: “(they) turned to prayer, beseeching that the sin which had been committed might be wholly blotted out.”<sup>1</sup> Yes, our prayers for the dead matter; they bear witness to our concern for their eternal salvation.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. 2 Macc. 12:42

All during the month of November, we have the opportunity to seek to apply the All Souls Day indulgence for our deceased loved ones. We may have confidence that God will apply indulgences to the dead in some way, but the precise manner and degree of application are unknown. The theology of indulgences is rich, though admittedly somewhat confusing to many Catholics. It is a divinely revealed truth that due to God's justice, our sins carry with them punishments that must be expiated or atoned for in some way.<sup>2</sup>

The faith of the Church was outlined by the Council of Trent, which under the Holy Spirit's guidance, dogmatically taught "...that there is a purgatory, and that the souls therein are helped by the suffrages of the faithful, but principally by the acceptable Sacrifice of the Altar."<sup>3</sup> For an indulgence to be full (i.e. plenary), three conditions must be fulfilled within several days before or after the prescribed work: sacramental confession, Eucharistic Communion and prayer for the intentions of the Supreme Pontiff (typically and Our Father and Hail Mary).

It is further required that the individual must be free from all attachment to sin, even venial. Yes, this is a high bar, and we leave it in God's hands. As no one can know for certain the state of the soul of one of God's faithful departed, we would not definitively claim to have "earned" an indulgence for a deceased loved one.

Our belief in the Communion of Saints assures us that there is a vital link between those on earth, in heaven, and those deceased faithful "on the way to heaven." Good works that flow from our faith help to restore the good order damaged through our sins. This is at the core of the theology of indulgences. Applying spiritual gifts to the deceased gives voice to our belief that the bonds that unite us in life do not end with bodily death.

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<sup>2</sup> Augustine, Exposition on Psalm 58, 1, 13: "Every sin, whether small or great, must be punished, either by man himself doing penance, or by God chastising him."

<sup>3</sup> Council of Trent, XXV Session, 4 December 1563

Good works have been offered to God for the salvation of sinners since the earliest days of the Church. The Fathers of the Church were convinced that the entire Catholic Church as a body united to Christ its head, was bringing about satisfaction for the sins of her members.<sup>4</sup>

During this November, let us do our part. Visit a cemetery- do not fear it. They are places of peace and refuge and you will feel the power of the Communion of Saints. Pray for your deceased loved ones. Seek the All Souls Indulgence on their behalf, remaining united with all who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith.

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<sup>4</sup> The ancient words of Tertullian (ca. 200 A.D.) are appropriate here: "The body cannot rejoice when one of its members suffers, but the whole body must needs suffer with it and help to cure it. The Church is in both one and the other; the Church however, is Christ." (*On Penance*, 10, 5-6)