

A Christian perspective on the journey of death, and the care of the Church for the faithful departed

Catechism of the Catholic Church

What happens in death when body and soul are separated?

678 Following in the steps of the prophets and John the Baptist, Jesus announced the judgment of the Last Day in his preaching. Then will the conduct of each one and the secrets of hearts be brought to light. Then will the culpable unbelief that counted the offer of God's grace as nothing be condemned. Our attitude to our neighbor will disclose acceptance or refusal of grace and divine love.⁵⁸⁴ On the Last Day Jesus will say: "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."

679 Christ is Lord of eternal life. Full right to pass definitive judgment on the works and hearts of men belongs to him as redeemer of the world. He "acquired" this right by his cross. The Father has given "all judgment to the Son". Yet the Son did not come to judge, but to save and to give the life he has in himself. By rejecting grace in this life, one already judges oneself, receives according to one's works, and can even condemn oneself for all eternity by rejecting the Spirit of love.

Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Suffrage for the Dead

How do Christians understand the meaning of dying in Christ?

248. "It is in regard to death that man's condition is most shrouded in doubt"(348). However, faith in Christ changes that doubt into the certainty of life without end. Christ has told us that he came from the Father "so that whosoever believes in him might not die but have eternal life" (John 3, 16). Again he says, "it is my Father's will that whoever sees the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life; and I shall raise him up on the last day"(349).

Based on the Word of God, the Christian firmly believes and hopes that "just as Christ is truly risen from the dead and lives for ever, so after death the righteous will live for ever with the risen Christ and he will raise them up on the last day"(350).

249. Belief in the resurrection of the dead is an essential part of Christian revelation. It implies a particular understanding of the ineluctable mystery of death.

Why do Christians believe that there is a unity of flesh and spirit in our person?

Death is the end of earthy life, but "not of our existence"(351) since the soul is immortal. "Our lives are measured by time, in the course of which we change, grow old and, as with all living beings on earth, death seems like the normal end of life"(352). Seen from the perspective of the faith, "death is the end of man's earthly pilgrimage, of the time of grace and mercy which God

offers him so as to work out his earthly life in keeping with the divine plan, and to decide his ultimate destiny"(353).

In one light death can seem natural, in another it can be seen as "the wages of sin" (Rm 6, 23). Authentically interpreting the meaning of Scripture (cf. John 2, 17; 3,3; 3, 19; Wis 1, 13; Rm 5, 12; 6, 23), the Church teaches that "death entered the world on account of man's sin"(354).

Jesus, the Son of God, "born of a woman and subject to the law" (Gal 4,4) underwent death which is part of the human condition; despite his anguish in the face of death (Mk 14, 33-34; Heb 5, 7-8), "he accepted it in an act of complete and free submission to his Father's will. The obedience of Jesus has transformed the curse of death into a blessing"(355).

What happens to the human person at death?

Death is the passage to the fullness of true life. The Church, subverting the logic of this world, calls the Christian's day of death his *dies natalis*, the day of his heavenly birth, where "there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness [for] the world of the past has gone" (Aps 21, 4). Death is the prolongation, in a new way, of life as the Liturgy says: "For your faithful, O Lord, life has changed not ended; while our earthly dwelling is destroyed, a new and eternal dwelling is prepared for us in Heaven"(356).

The death of a Christian is an event of grace, having, as it does, a positive value and significance in Christ and through Christ. Scripture teaches that: "Life to me, of course, life is Christ, but then death would bring me something more" (Phil 1, 21); here is a saying you can rely on: if we have died with him, then we shall live with him" (2 Tim 2, 11).

250. According to the faith of the Church, "to die in Christ" begins at Baptism. In Baptism, the Lord's disciples sacramentally die in Christ so as to live a new life. If the disciples die in the grace Christ, physical death seals that "dying with Christ", and consummates it by incorporating them fully and definitively into Christ the Redeemer.

The Church's prayer of suffrage for the souls of the faithful departed implores eternal life not only for the disciples of Christ who have died in his peace, but for the dead whose faith is known to God(357).

Why do we pray for the faithful departed?

251. The just encounter God in death. He calls them to himself so as to share eternal life with them. No one, however, can be received into God's friendship and intimacy without having been purified of the consequences of personal sin. "The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned. The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence and Trent".(358).

Hence derives the pious custom of suffrage for the souls of the faithful departed, which is an urgent supplication of God to have mercy on the souls of the dead, to purify them by the fire of His charity, and to bring them to His kingdom of light and life. This suffrage is a cultic expression of faith in the communion of saints. Indeed, "the Church in its pilgrim members, from the very earliest days of the Christian religion, has honored with great respect the memory of the dead; and 'because it is a holy and a wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins' (2 Mac 12, 46) she offers her suffrages for them"(359). These consist, primarily, in the celebration of the holy sacrifice of the Eucharist (360), and in other pious exercises, such as prayers for the dead, alms deeds, works of mercy (361), and the application of indulgences to the souls of the faithful departed (362).

In what way does the Church care for her children in death and express their dignity as Christians?

252. The Roman Liturgy, like other Latin and Oriental Liturgies, contains many and varied forms of suffrage for the dead. The rite of Christian Funerals consists traditionally of three parts. Because of the profoundly changed circumstances of life in the greater urban conurbations, these are often reduced to two or even only one part. The rite of Christian Funerals consists in:

a. prayer vigil at the home of the deceased, or somewhere else as circumstances permit, during which family, friends and members of the Christian community gather to pray to God in suffrage, to hear the "the words of life eternal", and in their light, to see beyond this world by contemplating the risen Christ in faith; to comfort those who mourn the deceased; and to express Christian solidarity in accordance with the words of the Apostle "be sad with those in sorrow" (Rm 12,15)(364);

b. the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, which is highly desirable when possible. In the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, the Christian community listens to "the word of God which proclaims the paschal mystery, assures us of the hope of meeting again in the Kingdom of God, enlivens our devotion to the dead and exhorts us to witness through a truly Christian life"(365). The celebrant comments on the word of God in his homily, "avoiding any form of funerary eulogy"(366). In the Holy Eucharist, "the Church expresses her efficacious communion with the departed: offering to the Father in the Holy Spirit the sacrifice of the death and Resurrection of Christ; she asks Him to purify His child of his sins and their consequences, and to admit him to the Paschal fullness of the table of the kingdom"(367). A profound reading of the requiem Mass allows us to see how the Liturgy has made of the Holy Eucharist, that eschatological banquet, the true Christian *refrigerium* for the deceased;

c. the Rite of committal, the funeral cortege, and burial; at the committal, the deceased is commended to God, "the final commendation by which the Christian community says farewell to one of its members before his body is buried"(368). In the funeral cortege, mother Church, who has sacramentally borne all Christians in her womb during their earthly pilgrimage, now

accompanies the body of the deceased to his place of rest, while he awaits the resurrection (cf. 1 Cor 15, 42-44).

How is the sacredness of the body expressed?

253. Every stage of the rite of obsequies should be conducted with the greatest dignity and religious sensibility. *Hence, it is necessary for: the body of the deceased, which was the Temple of the Holy Spirit, to be treated with the utmost respect; funeral furnishings should be decorous and free of all ostentation; the liturgical signs, the cross, the paschal candle, the holy water and the incense, should all be used with the utmost propriety.*

If I or a loved one is cremated what happens to the remains?

254. Christian piety has always *regarded burial as the model for the faithful to follow since it clearly displays how death signifies the total destruction of the body.* The practice eschews meanings that can be associated with mummification or embalming or even with cremation. Burial recalls the earth from which man comes (cf. Gen 2, 6) and to which he returns (cf. Gen 3, 19; Sir 17,1), and also recalls the burial of Christ, the grain which, fallen on the earth, brought forth fruit in plenty (cf. John 12, 24).

Cremation is also a contemporary phenomenon in virtue of the changed circumstances of life. In this regard, ecclesiastical discipline states: "Christian obsequies may be conceded to those who have chosen to have their bodies cremated, provided that such choice was not motivated by anything contrary to Christian doctrine"(369). In relation to such a decision, the faithful should be exhorted not to keep the ashes of the dead in their homes, but to bury them in the usual manner, until God shall raise up those who rest in the earth, and until the sea gives up its dead (cf. Aps 20, 13).

In what ways does the Church continue to remember the faithful departed and pray for their souls?

255. The Church offers the sacrifice of the Holy Eucharist for the dead not only on the occasion of their funerals, but also on the third, seventh, and thirtieth day following their deaths, as well as on their anniversaries. The celebration of the Mass in suffrage for the souls of the faithful departed is the Christian way of recalling and prolonging, in the Lord, that communion with those who have crossed the threshold of death. On 2 November, the Church incessantly offers the holy sacrifice of the Mass for the souls of all the faithful departed and prays the Liturgy of the Hours for them.

The Church daily supplicates and implores the Lord, in the celebration of the Mass and at Vespers, that "the faithful who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith [...] may be given light, happiness and peace"(370).

It is important to instruct the faithful in the light of the celebration of the sacrifice of the Eucharist, in which the Church prays that all of the faithful departed, of whatever place or time, will be brought to the glory of the risen Lord, so as to avoid possessive or particular ideas that relate the Mass only to one's "own" dead (371). The celebration of Mass in suffrage for the dead also presents an important opportunity for catechesis on the last things.

What are the ways to foster prayer for the souls of the faithful departed?

256. As with the Liturgy, popular piety pays particular attention to the memory of the dead and carefully rises up to God prayers in suffrage for them. In matters relating to the "memorial of the dead", great pastoral prudence and tact must always be employed in addressing the relationship between Liturgy and popular piety, both in its doctrinal aspect and in harmonizing the liturgical actions and pious exercises.

257. It is always necessary to ensure that popular piety is inspired by the principles of the Christian faith. Thus, they should be made aware of the paschal meaning of the death undergone by those who have received Baptism and who have been incorporated into the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ (cf. Rm 6,3-10); the immortality of the soul (cf Lk 23, 43); the communion of Saints, through which "union with those who are still on their pilgrim journey with the faithful who repose in Christ is not in the least broken, but strengthened by a communion of spiritual goods, as constantly taught by the Church"(372):"our prayer for them is capable not only of helping them, but also of making their intercession for us effective"(373); the resurrection of the body; the glorious coming of Christ, who will "judge the living and the dead"(374); the reward given to each according to his deeds; life eternal.

How does the Christian faith respond to the cultural experience of death or customs relating to the dead?

Deeply rooted cultural elements connoting particular anthropological concepts are to be found among the customs and usages connected with the "cult of the dead" among some peoples. These often spring from a desire to prolong family and social links with the departed. Great caution must be used in examining and evaluating these customs. Care should be taken to ensure that they are not contrary to the Gospel. Likewise, care should be taken to ensure that they cannot be interpreted as pagan residues.

258. In matters relating to doctrine, the following are to be avoided: the invocation of the dead in practices involving divination; the interpretation or attribution of imaginary effects to dreams relating to the dead, which often arises from fear; any suggestion of a belief in reincarnation; the danger of denying the immortality of the soul or of detaching death from the resurrection, so as to make the Christian religion seem like a religion of the dead; the application of spacio-temporal categories to the dead.

What are the ways to promote the positive reality of death as encounter with Jesus Christ?

259. "Hiding death and its signs" is widespread in contemporary society and prone to the difficulties arising from doctrinal and pastoral error. Doctors, nurses, and relatives frequently believe that they have a duty to hide the fact of imminent death from the sick who, because of increasing hospitalization, almost always die outside of the home.

It has been frequently said that the great cities of the living have no place for the dead: buildings containing tiny flats cannot house a space in which to hold a vigil for the dead; traffic congestion prevents funeral corteges because they block the traffic; cemeteries, which once surrounded the local church and were truly "holy ground" and indicated the link between Christ and the dead, are now located at some distance outside of the towns and cities, since urban planning no longer includes the provision of cemeteries. Modern society refuses to accept the "visibility of death", and hence tries to conceal its presence. In some places, recourse is even made to conserving the bodies of the dead by chemical means in an effort to prolong the appearance of life.

The Christian, who must be conscious of and familiar with the idea of death, cannot interiorly accept the phenomenon of the "intolerance of the dead", which deprives the dead of all acceptance in the city of the living. Neither can he refuse to acknowledge the signs of death, especially when intolerance and rejection encourage a flight from reality, or a materialist cosmology, devoid of hope and alien to belief in the death and resurrection of Christ. The Christian is obliged to oppose all forms of "commercialization of the dead", which exploit the emotions of the faithful in pursuit of unbridled and shameful commercial profit.

What are healthy and orthodox ways to pray for the souls of the faithful departed?

260. In accordance with time, place and tradition, popular devotions to the dead take on a multitude of forms: the novena for the dead in preparation for the 2 November, and the octave prolonging it, should be celebrated in accordance with liturgical norms; visits to the cemetery; in some places this is done in a community manner on 2 November, at the end of the parochial mission, when the parish priest takes possession of the parish; visiting the cemetery can also be done privately, when the faithful go to the graves of their own families to maintain them or decorate them with flowers and lamps. Such visits should be seen as deriving from the bonds existing between the living and the dead and not from any form of obligation, non-fulfillment of which involves a superstitious fear; membership of a confraternity or other pious association whose objects include "burial of the dead" in a the light of the Christian vision of death, praying for the dead, and providing support for the relatives of the dead; suffrage for the dead through alms deeds, works of mercy, fasting, applying indulgences, and especially prayers, such as the *De profundis*, and the formula *Requiem aeternam*, which often accompanies the recitation of the Angelus, the rosary, and at prayers before and after meals.

