

November 8, 2009

During the month of November, the Church encourages us to reflect upon the mystery of death, to pray for our beloved faithful departed, and to make appropriate preparations for our own death.

Death entered the world as a consequence of sin. We all will experience death. Fortunately, because of Jesus' own suffering and death, He has overcome death for all of us. How is this so?

Through Baptism, we die with Christ sacramentally and already begin to share in the new life that He has gained for us through His Passion, Death, and Resurrection. Thus, St. Paul said: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21).

In one of our hymns we sing: "If we die with the Lord, we shall live with the Lord. If we live with the Lord, we shall reign with the Lord."

In one of the Prefaces for Masses for the dead, we pray: "In Him, who rose from the dead, our hope of resurrection dawned. The sadness of death gives way to the bright promise of immortality. Lord, for your faithful people life is changed, not ended. When the body of our earthly dwelling lies in death, we gain an everlasting dwelling place in heaven."

St. Paul describes the mystery of death in his Letter to the Romans: "Are you not aware 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" (Rom 6:3).

Elsewhere Paul writes: "Our citizenship is in heaven and from it we also await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will change our lowly body to conform

to His glorified Body by the power that enables Him also to bring all things into subjection to Himself” (Phil 3:20-21).

Because Jesus has conquered sin and death through His suffering, death, and resurrection, we view death as the doorway from our pilgrimage on this earth to life everlasting. In the face of death, we have hope. While there is sadness in temporary separation, we truly believe that we will one day be reunited with God and with each other in eternal peace and blessedness.

The Church encourages us to pray and offer Masses for our beloved faithful departed. We believe that all who die in God’s grace and friendship, while still imperfect, are assured of their eternal redemption. However, after death, they undergo purification which is necessary to achieve the holiness proper to enter the joy of heaven. We call this stage of purification Purgatory.

Our belief in the “communion of saints” leads us to pray for the dead. Just as the saints in heaven intercede for us, we are encouraged to make intercession for those who are yet in a stage of purification so that they might more quickly attain eternal glory.

From the earliest days of the Church, the faithful on earth have respected the memory of the dead and prayed that they be loosed from their sins. Thus, we visit the graves of our loved ones and we offer prayers and Masses in their behalf. Each year the priests and deacons of the diocese join with me in offering a Mass for our departed bishops, priests, and deacons as we did on this past Wednesday at Holy Angels Cathedral.

The Church encourages us to prepare for our own happy death by living each day as best we can in the love of God and sharing God’s love with others. We are also encouraged to pray for a happy death as we do in each Hail Mary when we pray: “Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.” The

Church also invites us to entrust ourselves to St. Joseph, the patron of a happy death.

We owe it to our family and loved ones to prepare appropriately for our death through updated wills. November is a good time to review our wills and arrange for our burial in consecrated ground at one of our two diocesan Catholic cemeteries or in a cemetery of your parish. These are places of prayer and spiritual healing as well as places where we show respect for our beloved dead. Finally, we may wish to make our preferences known regarding Scripture readings and hymns for our vigil and funeral Mass.

Because of our incorporation into the Body of Christ who suffered, died, and rose for us, we need not fear death. We can face it calmly as we know with surety that it is but the transition to life on high with Jesus Christ. As the Old Testament psalmists prayed: “When will I come to the end of my pilgrimage and see the Face of God? When I see your Face, O Lord, I shall know the fullness of joy. Let your Face shine on your servant, Lord. Save me in your love.”