

November 9, 2008

While it is always a wonderful expression of our continuing solidarity with our departed family members and loved ones to pray for their eternal blessedness and to offer Masses for their eternal repose, the Church during the month of November encourages us to pray for them and to reflect upon our own death.

God has created us with a destiny beyond this earth. The Father sent His eternally begotten Son to conquer sin and death through His own death and resurrection.

Through Baptism, we died with Christ sacramentally in order to live the new life in union with Him. Physical death completes our “dying with Christ” in order that we might share eternal glory with Him and with our brothers and sisters who have died in the Lord. We might well consider our time on earth as a pilgrimage, as a journey to everlasting life on high with the Blessed Trinity.

The death of a family member or loved one is certainly a time of sorrow and grief. We mourn the temporary separation from one who has meant so much to us. However, the celebration of the funeral Mass is an occasion for much hope and comfort. The Preface of Christian Death puts it this way: “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.” The prayers and Scripture readings at the funeral Mass speak to our rich theology that just as Christ is risen and lives forever, so all of us who believe in Him and live in union with Him will rise at the last day.

As we are celebrating the Year of St. Paul, I would like to offer for your own reflection some of St. Paul’s reflections on the very positive meaning of Christian death. “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil 1:21). “The saying is

sure: if we have died with Him, we will also live with Him” (2 Tim 2:11). “My desire is to depart and be with Christ” (Phil 1:23).

“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 unto 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...if, then, we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him” (Rom 6:3-9).

“For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed...Death is swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?...But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Our Lord, Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 15:52-57).

“We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and place us with you in His presence” (2 Cor 4:14). “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).

“If we have died with Him we shall also live with Him; if we persevere we shall also reign with Him. But if we deny Him, He will deny us. If we are unfaithful, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself” (2 Tim 2:12-13).

I hope you find much comfort in meditating upon the prayers of the funeral Mass and the texts of the Sacred Scriptures, such as those above, when you grieve the passing of a loved one. Those same prayers and texts also help us to reflect serenely upon our own death. They help us view death, not as an enemy, but as a friend. Nonetheless, we are all too conscious of our sins and shortcomings. Thus, we pray many times each day in the Hail Mary: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”