

In a cemetery in Tennessee one tombstone had these words: "He was a simple man who died of complications."

One in Chattanooga said: "I came into this world without my consent and I left in the same manner."

A dentist in Scotland left these words: "Stranger, tread here with gravity; Dentist Brown is filling his last cavity."

This was found in Albany, New York: "Harry Edsel Smith looked up the elevator shaft to see if the car was on the way down. It was."

Here lies Ann Mann,/ Who lived an old maid/ But died an old Mann.

Here lies Lester Moore/Four slugs from a .44/ No Les no More.

OK, we just can't get around it. It's November. It's All Souls Day. And we're Catholic. So we do death. I always love seeing these lists of those who have gone from us during the past year – remembering many of them now from personal experience having been here at St. Andrew's for 4 and a half years. The lists remind us that they are still with us – both in our hearts – but also in the great communion of saints we one day hope to enter. We are literally surrounded by memories of those we loved and who loved us. And so we talk honestly about heaven, hell, and today especially, purgatory, the church's great doctrine of hope. Purgatory tells us that God loves us so much that He does not give up on us – even in death. His wish is for us to be with Him forever. And He goes to extraordinary lengths to make that possible for us, even after we die.

Here in the south, we are often asked about our church's teaching about praying for the dead. Someone is killed in a tragic accident, and people wonder: Does it make sense to pray for the dead? Our answer as Catholics is an unequivocal YES! It makes sense to pray for the dead, and our faith asks us to do so, and this day enshrines this belief. The Feast of All Souls is considered important enough that it even 'bumps' the regular Sunday readings of Ordinary Time when it falls on a Sunday. The Church wants us to pray for the dead – and to know why.

First, why? What possible good can it do? Do we need to remind God to be merciful? God needs no reminders – God IS mercy. Do we need to ask God to see a good heart beneath all the struggles of human life? God does not need a lesson from us on understanding. God is already perfect understanding, perfect love, and perfect forgiveness. A cynic might voice the objection this way: Why pray for the dead? If the person is already in heaven, he or she does not need prayers; if he or she is in hell, our prayers will not be of any help! So why pray for the dead?

For the same reason we pray for anything. We need to pray. It does us good. Objections to praying for the dead might, with equal logic, be raised against all prayers of petition. God already knows everything, and there is no need to remind God of anything. Yet God has asked us to pray and to pray in petition because prayer is meant to change us, not God. Thus, the first reason we pray for the dead is because that prayer helps us, the living. Prayer for the dead is meant to help console the living.

Closely tied to this is a second reason: we pray for our dead loved ones to help heal our relationship to them. When someone close to us dies, it is often with a certain amount of guilt, not because that person died and we go on living, but because, being human, we have had a less-than-perfect relationship with him or her.

There is often unfinished business between us. In praying for that person, among other things, we help wash clean those things that remain painful between us.

Third, this takes us to the heart of the matter. We pray for the dead because we believe in the communion of saints that a vital flow of life continues to exist between ourselves and our loved ones, even beyond death. Love, presence, and communication reach through death. We pray for the dead to remain in communication with them. Just as we can hold someone's hand as he or she is dying, and this can be an immense comfort to both of us, so too we can hold another's hand beyond death. Indeed, since death washes many things clean, in our prayers for our loved ones who have died, often more so than our conversations with them when they were alive, the connection is purer, the forgiveness is deeper, the perspective is wider, and the distance between us is less. Communication with our loved ones after death is privileged, undercutting much of what kept us apart in this life.

Our faith reminds us that praying for the dead not only consoles us, but also offers real strength and encouragement to the loved one who has died. How? In the same way as loving presence to each other offers strength and consolation here in this life. Picture, for example, a young child learning to swim. The child's mother cannot learn for the child, but if she is present and offering encouragement from the edge of the pool, the child's struggle and learning become easier. Things are more easily born, if they can be shared. This is true even for a person's adjustment to the life of heaven, and our adjustment to the pain of the loss of their physical presence. That pain of adjustment is part of what we call Purgatory – the pain of letting go – of this life for the deceased, and our letting go of them. In our prayers for the dead, we offer them our presence and love as they adjust to a new life, and they reassure us that they remain present to us. Purgatory is not a geography, a place distinct from heaven, but the pain that comes from being in heaven without having fully let go of earth. Love, even as we know it in this life, already teaches us that.

From my own experience of having loved ones die, as well as from what others have shared with me, I have found that usually, after a time, we sense that our deceased loved ones no longer need us to pray for them. Now they just want us to connect with them. Prayer for the dead does that, and even though our prayers might still need to be formulated as if we are praying for them, we are now simply connecting with them; what was formerly a cold, cutting absence now becomes a warm, comforting presence.

You may have noticed that I always pause when we get to the part of the mass where we remember those who have died – that pause allows all of us to think of those we love who have died. I always think of my parents, and other close friends and family members, and also the one for whom the mass is offered. It's a great consolation to feel my parents and these others still with me, even though some of them they died many years ago.

I'm glad that we have this teaching – so comforting on so many levels – hope for those who have already gone ahead of us, hope for us who never seem to be able to get living our Christian faith 'just right,' hope that our bonds of love – with both God and others – do not cease when we die. It's hard to have better news about the afterlife than this. Purgatory tells us to hope – forever. Amen. (help from Ronald Rolheiser)