

November - The Month of the Faithful Departed

by Bishop Peter Wilkinson, OSG, our Traditional Anglican Bishop in Canada.

ALL SOULS DAY

+In the doorway of the low grey house,
built of stones as old as the Crusades,
a woman of Bruges
sits in the sunlight, among the flowers,
saying her Rosary.

The story of Mary is her own story,
and her son was her life's joy
and her life's sorrow;
and for ever
her son is her life's glory.

In a field in Flanders,
among the red poppies,
he is sleeping;
he will sleep soundly
until the day of resurrection....

The story of the old woman of Bruges
is the world's story.

It is the story
of human joy and sorrow...
the story of birth and death,
of war and the rumours of war,
and of peace past understanding,
peace in the souls that live
in the life of Christ....

(Caryll Houselander)

The woman of Bruges in that poem of Caryll Houselander prayed for her dead son, killed in the First World War. How do you pray for yours? I have discovered that by writing down the names of all those I want to pray for - and indeed ought to pray for (my parents, relatives, friends, and benefactors both spiritual and material) the list is really quite long, and getting longer!

And if you think back on the 20th century you will surely be perplexed by the sheer number of the faithful departed - not only something like 170 million Christians who died violently just because they were Christians, but all those who died in the century's wars - "those millions (as Austin Farrer says) among whom our friends are lost, those millions for whom we cannot choose but to pray, because prayer is a sharing in the love of the heart of God, and the love of God is earnestly set towards the salvation of his spiritual creatures, by, through, and out of, the fire that purifies them."

I think, though I cannot prove, that it was the tremendous slaughter of the 20th century's wars, especially the First World War, that gave an added impetus for Anglicans to pray for the dead. The Catholic Revival of the 19th century had helped to restore the practice, and in many parishes the Guild of All Souls was established to promote prayer for the dead particularly by offering the Eucharist for the repose of the faithful departed. There was also the custom of a "daily Requiem" on the first free day at the beginning of the month. In fact my old copies of the SSJE (Bracebridge) Order of Divine Service from the 1970's show Requiems on every free day in November.

Now there is no doubt that from the beginning the Church has honoured the memory of her dead, and offered prayers for them, especially at the Eucharistic Sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God. Do you remember the request of St Monica, the mother of St Augustine? She told her son that he should not bother taking her body back to North Africa if she should die in Italy, “All I ask of you,” she said, “is that wherever you may be, you will always remember me at the Altar of God.”

The trouble for some Anglicans is that the Holy Scriptures seem to be silent about the practice, with the result that Evangelicals object to prayers for the faithful departed, even though Anglican tradition supports the practice, and such prayers occur explicitly in our BCP. Consider, for example, this section from the Prayer of Consecration (*Canadian BCP, page 83, also BCP 1662, Prayer of Oblation to be said after Communion and the Lord's Prayer*),

“And we entirely desire Thy Fatherly goodness mercifully to accept *this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving*, most humbly beseeching Thee to grant that, by the merits and death of Thy Son Jesus Christ, and through faith in His Blood, we and *all Thy whole Church may obtain remission of our sins, and all other benefits of His Passion.*”

There are *three* phrases in this passage that I want you to consider:

First, what does *this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving* mean? It does not mean “a sacrifice that consists in praise and thanksgiving” hymn singing and the like! It is really a Hebrew way of saying “Eucharistic Sacrifice”: a way of referring to the whole action that has taken place since you heard the words, “Lift up your hearts” [*Sursum corda*], and which is now summed up in the consecrated Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ on the altar. Bishop Ridley said that the phrase is equivalent to “our unbloody sacrifice...a sacramental representation of that one only bloody Sacrifice offered up once and for all [on the Cross]” [Works, pp210, 211]. Fr Palmer even suggested that when we priests pronounce these words we should make the sign of the Cross over the consecrated sacrament deliberately to point this out. And in 1897 the Archbishops of Canterbury and York settled the matter when they wrote to Pope Leo XIIIth explaining that, “We are accustomed to call this the Eucharistic Sacrifice.” [*Saepius officio*, p.14] This teaching was accepted in the 1930s by a delegation of Eastern Orthodox bishops when they inquired about our Eucharists.

Second, what is the meaning of the phrase *we and all Thy whole Church*? It refers both to the living and to the departed. I can say that because Bishop John Cosin and Bishop Lancelot Andrewes in the seventeenth century were already teaching that the Eucharistic Sacrifice was efficacious for the living as well as for the departed.

By *all thy whole Church*, Bishop Cosin (who played a prominent part in the revision of the Prayer Book in 1662) said that it meant, “those which are here on earth, and those...departed in the faith of Christ.” [Works, v. p. 119].

And Bishop Lancelot Andrewes (who, by the way, was one of the translators of the Authorized Version of the Bible) wrote to Cardinal Perron,

“The Eucharist ever was, and by us is considered, both as a Sacrament and as a Sacrifice...available for present, absent, living, dead (yea, for them that are yet unborn). When we say the dead, we mean it is available for...all (because we are all members of one body)” [*Minor Works*, Ang. Cath. Lib. p. 19].

Third, what does the Church ask of the Father for her beloved departed? In the Collect of the Requiem Mass (*Canadian BCP, p. 608, & Indian BCP p.186*) she prays that they may receive “all the unsearchable benefits of [Christ's] Passion”; and in the Eucharistic Prayer (*Canadian BCP p. 83, also 1662 BCP, etc*), she asks “that we and all Thy whole Church [including as we have learned the faithful departed] may receive remission of our sins, and all other benefits of [Christ's] Passion [*Canadian BCP, p. 83, English 1662, & Indian BCP, etc.*]” Nearly identical phrasing isn't it?

There are at least *three* places in the BCP where *all the other benefits of Christ's Passion* are actually spelled out:

The *first* is at a very solemn moment. It is found in the prayer to be said at the commendation of a soul as it departs from the body (*Canadian BCP*, p. 590, and *1662 BCP & Indian BCP*, etc.). The prayer begins by commending the dying person into the hands of God, the hands of a faithful Creator and merciful Saviour, and continues, "Wash *him*, we pray Thee, in the blood of the immaculate Lamb, that was slain to take away the sin of the world; that whatsoever defilements *he* may have contracted in the midst of this wicked world, through the lusts of the flesh or the wiles of Satan, being purged and done away, he may be presented pure and without spot before Thee."

In the Burial Office *another prayer* asks that "the good work which Thou didst begin in [the faithful departed] may be perfected unto the day of Jesus Christ" [*Canadian BCP* #3, p. 600; *Scottish BCP*; *South African BCP*]; and yet another prays, "in Thy loving wisdom and almighty power, work [in the faithful departed] the good purpose of Thy perfect will" [*Canadian* #1, p. 601, *English 1928*, *similar*].

So what the Church asks for when she prays to the Father for her beloved dead is surely this: "please forgive their sins, cleanse and purify them until they are absolutely holy, and so ready for the open vision of Thy Face." And, furthermore, when she does this at the Eucharist the priest is praying over the consecrated sacrament which is lying before him on the altar -- Christ in His glorified humanity as He is now in Heaven at the Father's right hand, the abiding Propitiation for our sins, the Lamb standing as though slain in the midst of the Throne. The Archbishops of Canterbury and York sensed this when they told Pope Leo, "the sacrifice of [Christ] the Eternal Priest and the sacrifice of the Church...in some way certainly are one" [*Saepius officio*, p. 15]. Indeed they are, for at this moment heaven and earth meet, the earthly altar and the heavenly altar are one - in *heaven* Christ is presenting Himself to the Father, pleading the Atonement once finished on the Cross, but ever living in operation, in the midst of the "Angels and Archangels and all the company of Heaven"; and on *earth* He is doing the same, presenting Himself at our altar through His priest in union with His people for whom He once offered Himself upon the Cross. This is the very heart of the Eucharist: Christ's Sacrifice offered to the Father, by Christ's own members united in Him, and then received in Holy Communion, so that, day by day, they in turn may offer themselves as holy sacrifices to the Father.

But apart from all this, can you possibly imagine a Church in which the faithful departed - the war dead, parents and children, husbands and wives, and on and on - are *not* prayerfully remembered? It has been said, "the self-evident certainty with which the prayer of all ages has always included the departed is itself a living expression of a deeper knowledge, peculiar to the Faith, that the interrelationship of human beings with and for one another does not end with death, *but is precisely that which death cannot destroy.*" "Our religion is not a simple relation of every soul separately to God. It is a Mystical Body [a phrase you hear in the All Saints Day Collect and at every Mass in the Prayer of Thanksgiving after Communion], [a mystical Body] in which we are all members one of another...every soul should, in its thought, embrace the other souls. For apart from this mutual embracing it would be unintelligible why we should pray at all, either for the living or for the departed." [*Austin Farrer*].

So here are two practical things you can do:

First, make sure that you do pray for your own faithful departed - parents, relatives, friends, benefactors (spiritual and material) - and the departed members of the parish when their anniversaries come around. Make a list, and, as I said, you'll be surprised how long it is! As we have learned from the BCP, your prayers can help them: you can also, I believe, be reconciled with them if you have been estranged, you can come to know and love them better, and the Church of the ages also believes that they can help you by their prayers. So when you come to the Eucharist have in mind some of the faithful departed you want to pray for, and mentally insert their names in the Intercession for Christ's Holy Catholic Church, in the Eucharistic Prayer, and pray for them after you have received Holy Communion. In addition you can give alms in their memory, and you can ask for a Requiem to be said on or about their anniversaries. How can you not do this if you know that you can be of some help to them? Won't you want your friends to do the same for you?

And that thought brings me to the *second* practical matter: remember that one day you too will come face to face with the Lord in judgement, when all the "straw and hay" of your life will be consumed, and nothing will be left but what is truly lasting. In other words the process of your transformation has already *begun* in this life, and the question of how it will be for you after death is to a large extent up to you. Remember St Thomas Aquinas's advice to his sister who asked him how to become a saint. He replied, "Will it!" If you are obedient to God's will you can have all the cleansing necessary in this life. But then you know that, don't you?

So as you always ask mercy and forgiveness from our merciful Lord for yourselves, ask mercy and forgiveness for your brethren departed, so that in the communion of love, which is the Church, He will give them the forgiveness they always desired, and refresh them with the light of His glorious Countenance.