

BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT

Observing Grief

Why Do Catholics Pray for the Dead? On 2nd November the Church celebrated *All Souls Day* also known as the *Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed*. During the month of November, Catholics continue to pray for the deceased.

Why Pray for the Dead A number of objections can be raised against the practice of praying for the dead: Do we need to call God to mercy? Does God need to be reminded that the person who died was in fact a decent, warm-hearted, person? God already knows this, is already as merciful as mercy allows, and needs no nudging from us to be understanding and forgiving. Cynically, the objection might be put this way: If those who have died are already in heaven they don't need our prayers and if they are in hell, our prayers won't help anyway! So why pray for the dead?

We pray for the dead for the same reason we pray for anything, we feel the need and that is reason enough. Moreover the objections raised against praying for the dead are just as easily raised against all prayer of petition. God already knows everyone one of our desires, every one of our sins, and all of our good will. So why remind God of these?

Because prayer builds us up, changes us, not God. This is the first, though not foremost, reason why we pray for the dead.

Prayer is meant to change and console us. We pray for the dead to comfort ourselves, to stir and celebrate our own faith, and assuage our own guilt about our less than perfect relationship to the one who has died.

In praying for the dead we do two things: We highlight our faith in the power of God and we hold up the life of the person who has died so as to let God take care of things. That is one of the purposes of a funeral liturgy, to clearly put the dead person and our relationship to them into God's hands.

We pray for the dead because we believe in a doctrine, called **the communion of saints**, and that we are still in vital communion with all those who have died. Beyond death there is still a vital flow of life between them and us. Love, presence, and communication reach even through death. We and they can still feel each other, know each other, love each other, console each other, and influence each other. Our lives are still joined. Hence *we pray for the dead in order to remain in contact with them*.

Just as we can hold someone's hand as they are dying and this can be an immense consolation to them and to us, so too, figuratively but really, we can hold that person's hand through and beyond death.

Our prayers are addressed to God because it is in and through God that our communication with our loved one who is deceased now takes place: God's bosom is the venue for our communication, God's power is what is holding both of us in life, and God's mercy is what is washing things clean between us.

We can talk directly to the person who has died and address our prayer to God. *"It is within the heart of God that we have contact with our loved ones"* who are deceased. *"Anything can be borne, if it can be shared"*. By praying for the dead, we share with them the adjustment to a new life (which includes the pain of letting go of this life). We offer encouragement and love to them as they, just born from the womb of the earth, adjust to a new life and new spirit. This is what we mean by our prayers **releasing them from purgatory**.

Adapted from <http://ronrolheiser.com/praying-for-the-dead-2/#.VFK1eMtxlMs>

"When you remember me, it means that you have carried something of who I am with you, that I have left some mark of who I am on who you are. It means that you can summon me back to your mind even though countless years and miles may stand between us. It means that if we meet again, you will know me. It means that even after I die, you can still see my face and hear my voice and speak to me in your heart. For as long as you remember me, I am never entirely lost." - [Frederick Buechner](#)

"Death does not end our story. Death does not end our relationships"