

Prayers for the dead are meant to provide consolation for the living

by Father Ron Rolheiser

Recently I received a letter from a woman asking me to explain the Christian teaching about praying for the dead. Her son had been killed in an accident and she had been dissuaded from attending any special prayers for him. Her question: Does it make sense to pray for the dead?

The Christian answer is unequivocal: yes! It makes sense to pray for the dead and our Christian faith asks us to do so, both in liturgy and in private.

Why? What possible good can it do? To remind God to be merciful? God needs no reminders. To ask God to see a good heart beneath all the struggles of a human life? God doesn't need a lesson from us on understanding. God is already perfect understanding, perfect love and perfect forgiveness. A cynic might ask, "Why pray for the dead? If the person is already in heaven, he or she doesn't need prayers; if he or she is in hell, our prayers won't 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. Praying for the dead is meant to console the living.

Closely tied to this is a second reason: We pray for our dead loved ones to help heal our relationship with them. When someone close to us dies, it is natural, always, to feel a certain amount of guilt, not just 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 unfinished business between us. In praying for that person, among other things, we help wash clean those things that remain painful between us.

This takes us to the heart of the matter. We pray for the dead because we believe in the communion of saints, an essential Christian doctrine that asks us to believe 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 more pure, 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.

Praying for the dead, our faith assures us, 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 borne if they can be shared. This is true even for a person's adjustment to the life of heaven.

By praying for the dead, we share with them the pain of adjusting to a new life. Part of that pain of adjustment (which classically Roman Catholics have called "purgatory") is the pain of letting go of this life. In our prayers for the dead, we offer them our presence and love, as a mother on the edge of the pool, as they adjust to a new life. 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 be formulated as if we are praying for them, we are now simply connecting with them and what was formerly a cold, cutting absence now becomes a warm, comforting presence.