

Praying for the dead

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Why pray for the dead? Does this make any sense? What possible difference can our prayers make to a person once he or she has died?

These are valid questions. 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 the person is already in heaven he doesn't need our prayers and if he is 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 every one of our desires, every one of our sins, and all of our goodwill. 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, let God wash things clean. That is one of the purposes of a funeral liturgy, to clearly put the dead person and our relationship to him or her into God's hands.

But this is not the most important reason why we have funeral liturgies and why we pray for the dead. We pray for the dead because we believe (and this a doctrine, the communion of saints) that we are still in vital communion with them. There is, death notwithstanding, 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.

Perhaps the words and prayer forms we use seem to indicate something else, since they are addressed to God and not directly to the person for whom we are praying. Thus, for example, in praying for the dead we use words like: "Lord, have mercy on her soul!" "Lord, we place her in your hands!" "She loved you in life, radiated your gentleness, Lord, give her peace!" The words 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 of course also talk directly to the person who has died, that too is valid enough within the doctrine of the communion of saints, but given the critical place of God's love, power, and mercy in this situation, our prayer is generally addressed to God so as to highlight that it is within the heart of God that we have contact with our loved ones who are deceased. Hence, our prayers for the dead generally take this particular form.

And classically, within Roman Catholic theology at least, we have believed that our prayers help release this person from purgatory. What's to be said about this?

Purgatory, properly understood, is not a punishment for any imperfection nor indeed a place distinct from heaven. The pains of purgatory are the pains of adjusting to a new life (which includes the pain of letting go of this one) and the pains of being embraced by perfect love when we ourselves are far from perfect. By praying for the dead, we support them in their pain of adjustment, adjustment to a new life and to living in full light. Purgation eventually leads to ecstasy, but the birth that produces that ecstasy requires first a series of painful deaths. Thus, just as we tried to hold their hands as they died, so now, in praying for loved ones who have died, we continue to hold their hands, and they ours, beyond the chasm of death itself.

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