



# Theology Corner

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## “Why Do Catholics Pray (to/for) the Dead?”

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As we approach All Hallows' Eve (i.e. Halloween) and All Saints'/Souls Day, it is most appropriate to examine the purpose behind praying *to* or *for* the dead. The term Halloween is taken from the Scottish language literally meaning “Hallows' Eve” and this is the vigil prayer for All Saints' Day which is the day dedicated to praying to the saints (i.e. those in heaven) in honor and petition. Why do we honor them? We honor them because of the exemplary lives they have led, and we can draw inspiration from their example as they have overcome the difficulties of sin and persevered through the grace of Christ.

Why do we petition to the saints? Aren't they dead? Well, not exactly. Of course, they have undergone an earthly death of the body, but they are not actually “dead” in the absolute sense. On the contrary, they are actually quite alive, and, in fact, they are even more alive than we are when considered from the spiritual side of things. Remember, those in heaven are *fully* alive in union with God who is life itself! The connection that the baptized have to the saints in heaven is a strong one since this common grace unites us in what the Church calls the “communion of saints.” As long as we remain in a state of grace, inasmuch as we are united to Christ the vine, all of the members of his body are connected as the branches. We petition to the saints in a similar way that we ask a friend to pray for us. The difference is that the saints are closer in union with God than any of the faithful on earth, so imagine the greater efficacy of the prayers of the saints for us! This is what Halloween and All Saints' Day are about -- remembering, honoring, and asking for the saints to pray for us. Eating candy and dressing up is fun and can certainly be done in celebration of those human beings who have attained to perfect happiness and perfection with God, but the essence of the celebration is to turn our attention to the saints in heaven. This is the reason why Catholics are encouraged to dress up as saints instead of scary things.

The day after All Saints' Day is All Souls Day. The difference between these two days is that while All Saints' Day commemorates those who are in heaven, All Souls Day commemorates those who are not yet in heaven. These souls cannot be those in hell because our prayers would not profit anything for them. Rather, these prayers are for the souls in Purgatory which are *not yet* in heaven. Why are they not yet in heaven? We know in Revelation that it states “...nothing unclean shall enter it [heaven].” (Rev 21:27). This is consistent with reason because union with God would be impossible without being perfect. Yet, the vast majority of people die with imperfections in their soul. I have often heard people say, “I hope I die right after confession because then I'll go straight to heaven.” This is not true. As we all know from experience, even after confession, while we are indeed forgiven and absolved of our sins, the scars that we have from our sin still remain. These attachments are disorders in the soul and need to be purified before complete union with God in heaven. This is what purgatory is -- an intermediate state of purification preparing us for full union with God. Purgatory is not a state in which souls are weighed to determine if they are going to heaven or hell. Souls in purgatory will most definitely enter heaven.

If souls in purgatory will definitely enter heaven, why should we pray for them? The term the Church uses in reference to our prayers for the dead is “suffrage.” This means that we literally “vote” for them (interestingly enough, this happens to be done the day before election day!). Just as a vote helps to elect a person, so too does a prayer for the dead help that they may be finally united with God in peace. We pray *to* the saints that they may intercede on our behalf. We pray *for* those in purgatory that they may reach their home (we can't pray *for* the saints because they are already home!). The bible tells us that it is “holy and pious” to pray for “those who fall asleep in godliness,” to “pray for the dead that they might be delivered from their sin.” (II Macc 12:45). Let us, then, all join together in prayer to the saints in heaven for *our* benefit, and for the souls in purgatory for *their* benefit that they may be led home - their final destination for which they were created.