

Prayers for the faithful departed

November is the month of All Souls, the month dedicated to praying for the souls of the faithful departed. But what are we praying for?

As a critic of our belief in purgatory recently wrote to me: “When you die, you are judged, and you either go to heaven or to hell. You don’t pray for those in heaven. It’s too late to pray for those in hell!”

The issue of purgatory has indeed been a point of debate between Catholics and Protestants. No doubt terrible abuses of the concept of purgatory have indeed existed. Selling indulgences in the 16th century is one well-known abuse.

How might we understand purgatory in a more ecumenical way? If we are judged worthy of heaven, do we immediately move right into that Divine Presence, or is there some kind of purging?

My best personal, although admittedly humble, explanation is that entering the presence of God is much like entering the house of a friend or loved one on a rainy or snowy day. When your host opens the door, you don’t immediately embrace the person. You put down your umbrella, take off your hat and coat, remove galoshes or boots, and then move toward your friends or loved one for a hug or kiss.

Perhaps entering God’s presence is something like that. Not all of us are so spiritual that something of earth might not still be clinging to us, and we still might be clinging to things of earth. Purgatory might be the process of letting go of anything less than God.

A second understanding of purgatory is that at the moment of death, we suddenly realize how much God has loved us and how little we have returned that love. The “purging” might really be an expanding of our hearts to receive God’s unconditional love. Mother Teresa described prayer as expanding our hearts to make room for God. Perhaps the expansion we didn’t complete in this life will be completed after this life.

Another question, though, is for whom do we pray? I pray daily for all those who

have died. I pray daily for all the faithful departed: "O, My Jesus, forgive us our sins. Save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls to heaven, especially those most in need of your mercy!"

On a more particular basis, I pray for those who may have just recently died, individuals recently brought to my attention.

I also pray for those whose prayer cards I carry in my Breviary. Since it's a four-volume set, I often carry different cards in different volumes. For example, even though my mother died in November, I still carry her card in the Advent-Christmas volume. I think of her most at the Christmas season.

In my current prayer book I carry the cards for Father John Delclos, who had a long and productive ministry, and Father Kevin Brooksbank, whose ministry was cut tragically short.

I carry Father Stan Janaites' prayer card and Sister Justa Walton's - Sister Justa was our very own version of Mother Teresa, specializing in ministry to the developmentally disabled and their families. I'm also carrying the card for Cherlein Scharpe and Larry Gahagan. Many other cards float around my cluttered room, or lay piled on desks or dressers.

The final card I currently carry is that of Father Don McMaster. Don was ordained with me in 1971 and died suddenly in 1979. His picture is in black and white, and there is a piece torn from his prayer card. Years ago, I was giving a parish mission at a church in Florida, and the pastor's dog thought my Breviary was a toy and tore it to shreds. I've heard of hungering for the word of God but that was a bit much. When I see Don's card I always smile at the missing piece.

May all the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace!