

Straight to heaven?/ Responsibility for grandchildren

Q. What does the church teach about what happens after someone dies? The reason I bring it up is that often when I attend a Catholic funeral, I hear the priest say in a homily that the deceased is now in heaven and suffering no more. But how does that fit in with the church's teaching on purgatory? (Chesapeake, Virginia)

A. The primary purpose of a funeral Mass is, of course, to pray for the salvation of the deceased — that God will bring the person quickly and gently into the joy of heaven. The liturgy also serves to remind mourners of Christ's offer of eternal redemption and to lift the spirits of the bereaved in the glory of that hope.

In praying for those who have died, we are building upon the ancient Jewish practice, according to which Judas Maccabeus made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sins (2 Mc 12:46).

In answer to a frequently asked question, the Catholic Church does still believe in purgatory, a purification after death before entrance into heaven, as stated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (No. 1030).

True, the church does not teach that everyone who dies must necessarily pass through this cleansing and admits the possibility that certain of the deceased may have practiced such fervent charity on earth that, at the point of death, no temporal punishment would remain (No. 1472).

But I think that it's safer to assume, along with Chapter 24 of the Book of Proverbs, that even the good person falls seven times and that many of us will have some "make up work" to do after we die.

Like you, I, too, have heard funeral homilies which seemed to consider it a certainty that the deceased had already passed into paradise. But I, for one, would much prefer at my own funeral that the priest ask people to pray for me — in case I am still en route. (Thus, the wisdom of the Catholic funeral ritual, which prays that the deceased will be cleansed of any sin and granted "the fullness of redemption.")

Q. Our daughter has moved back to our area after a divorce, along with her two children — now ages 8 and 10. The children are baptized; the older one has made her first Communion and the younger one will do so next month. My daughter is the product of Catholic grade school, high school and college, but she does not attend church with them except for Christmas and Easter.

Is it my husband's and my responsibility to get these children to Mass each Sunday? (We have taken them at times, but now they are coming up with any excuse not to go. We took our own four children to Mass every Sunday.) (City of origin withheld)

A. I do not think that you are under any strict moral obligation to get your grandchildren to Mass each Sunday. It was your daughter who chose to have her children baptized.

Presumably, in the baptismal preparation class, she was reminded that she was accepting the responsibility of raising her children as regularly practicing Catholics. (And hopefully, during the first Communion preparation, that point was made once more.) If your daughter has chosen to default on this agreement, the burden is on her conscience, not yours.

At the same time, though, you and your husband are grateful for your Catholic faith and practice, consider it the preferred way of Christ and feel that it offers the clearest path to salvation. Because of that, you naturally desire to pass it on to your grandchildren.

Perhaps, when the opportunity presents itself, you and your husband could convey to your daughter how much your religion means to you and why you would like your grandchildren to share in that same benefit. Your daughter might even have thought (as some people erroneously do) that the fact of her divorce itself has made her ineligible to participate in the sacraments.

On occasion, without overpowering them, you might also let the little children know of the satisfaction and peace you feel from your faith. And would it be possible that there is another young family in your neighborhood, whose children your grandchildren like and enjoy, who might be willing to bring your grandchildren with them to Mass?

In answer to your question, then, I believe that you are presented not with an obligation but with an opportunity.

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