



Letter to the People of God

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Devotion to the Holy Souls

Lately someone told me how she was granted an answer to her prayer through the intercession of the Holy Souls in purgatory. She explained to me how, after having prayed intensely to some departed family members and friends in order for them to present her petition before the Lord, she received confirmation that he had accepted their intercession! This person's reasoning is very simple: when those who love her finally shut their eyes to the world, after having been purified, they see God face to face, and driven by this same love and care, standing in God's presence, they intercede for us before him.

It often happens that when we want to knock at heaven's doors, we look for the the saints' help. And it is right that we should do so, because as the Church teaches, the saints in heaven live before the Lord and they never cease praying for us before the Father. Their brotherly concern is of great help in our weakness (cf *Lumen Gentium*, 49).

But just as we pray to the saints to intercede for us before God, why do we not also call upon our dear departed so that they may pray for us? No saint knows us as well as our grandparents, our parents and uncles and aunts, and perhaps also our children, whom we might have lost to this world but whom we regain in heaven. It is said that on his deathbed, St Dominic of Guzman told his friends: "Do not weep. I will be more useful to you after my death and I will be better able to help you than while I am alive". Before she died, St Therese of the Child Jesus declared: "I will pass my time in heaven doing good upon earth". And the young St Aloysius Gonzaga, whose Extraordinary Jubilee we are at present celebrating, wrote thus to his mother a few days before he died: "Madam, beware of belittling God's infinite goodness; you would be doing this if you were to grieve over, as if dead, the one who lives before God. From here through his prayers, he can help you much more than if he were still in this life".

Many people are of the opinion that the first reference in the Bible confirming that the Holy Souls pray for us, is to be found in the second book of Maccabees. We read there that the High Priest Onias had a vision of a man surrounded by wonderful majesty, and he had this to say about him: "This is a man who loves his brothers and prays much for the people and the Holy City" (15:14).

St Alphonse Maria de' Liguori was convinced that the Holy Souls could pray for us even while still in Purgatory, undergoing purification: since they are loved by God and are confirmed in grace, there is nothing to stop them from praying for us. God allows these friends of his to be aware of our desires so that they can then pray for us. In this way there is this exchange of acts of love between us and them, since we can pray for them and they can pray for us. When St Catherine of Bologna needed an answer to her prayers, she would pray to the Holy Souls in Purgatory and her prayers would be answered. Not only, but she says she obtained several favours through the intercession of the Holy Souls, which she had not obtained through the intercession of the saints (cf the book by St Alphonse *A Short Treatise on Prayer*).

The fact that we pray to the Holy Souls should not make us forget our duty to pray for them too. Our prayer for the Holy Souls is an act of love and gratitude for all they did for us in this world. Our intercession for the Holy Souls, even through acts of charity, can also constitute a way how to make up for what we may owe them. Above all, when we remember them in our prayers, especially in the Sacrifice of the Mass, we would be giving thanks to God who gave them to us in our lives in the first place.

Now that we have just started the month of November, a time of the year which we also know as 'the month of the Holy Souls', I invite you to pray both for the souls in Purgatory as well as to pray to God through the intercession of those who went before us, whether they are still being purified or especially if they are already in heaven, and see God as he is in himself: One in three Persons, God is the heart of our devotion to the Holy Souls. In fact, through our prayers we help the Holy Souls hasten on their way to union with God, and when we pray to them, they help us experience the salvific strength of Christ. The Christian devotion to the Holy Souls, therefore, is completely unrelated to occult celebrations or practices, in particular those we hear about around this time of the year.

Grant them, O Lord, eternal rest.

Given today at the Bishop's Curia, Rabat, Gozo, Monday 22nd October 2018, on the date of the liturgical commemoration of Pope St John Paul II.

✠ **Mario Grech**
Bishop of Gozo