Columns
Spirituality



The graves of a parish cemetery in Ho Chi Minh are decorated with flowers in November. (Nguyen)



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November 24, 2020
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It seems people have always thought of the cemetery as simply a sad place of death. When we see friends or relatives off to their eternal resting place, the cemetery is always full of mourning. That land welcomes the deceased, but there are many tears soaked into its dust and many sad stories around it.

However, because of our belief in the Risen One, a Catholic cemetery is always filled with hope and beauty. This holy land — where so many Christians come to pray for the faithful departed every year in November — appears sacred.

Praying for the dead was mentioned in the Old Testament Bible (2 Maccabees 12:43-46):

> [Judas] then took up a collection among all his soldiers, amounting to two thousand silver drachmas, which he sent to Jerusalem to provide for an expiatory sacrifice. In doing this he acted in a very excellent and noble way, inasmuch as he had the resurrection in mind; for if he were not expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he did this with a view to the splendid reward that awaits those who had gone to rest in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Thus he made atonement for the dead that they might be absolved from their sin.

The Catholic Church has spent the whole month of November asking everyone to pray for the souls of the deceased. They may be our ancestors, or close relatives. This atmosphere of prayer is very visible and vivid in our parish cemetery. Night and day, everyone arranges their work schedule to come to the land where their relatives are resting, to burn incense and pray.

Trusting that our prayers always please God, we ask God to open his merciful heart for the souls in purgatory and forgive their sins, so that they can enjoy heavenly happiness. Catholics also attend daily Mass for this intention, then visit the cemetery or the crypt to pray for the souls in purgatory throughout November.



Parishioners attend Mass at the cemetery to pray for the departed. (Nguyen)

In the church in Vietnam, November is not only designated as a special month for prayers for the souls of the deceased, but is also a time to commemorate the merits of the deceased. Before beginning this month, most Vietnamese families prepared the graves of their deceased loved ones by going to the cemetery to clean, decorate and put flowers on the graves.

Especially during November, there is always a Mass at the cemetery to pray for departed souls. Most of the relatives or children of the deceased go to the Mass at the cemetery, then afterward, they burn incense, light the candles on the grave, and recite prayers for the departed souls.

November is also a good chance for the children of the deceased to express their gratitude for their departed grandparents and parents. Even if they live far away, or work away from home, they arrange their work schedules to return to the cemetery, attending Mass, burning incense, offering flowers, and praying for deceased grandparents, parents, brothers and sisters.

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The beauty of November is a time for human beings to express love for each other — not only by praying for the dead, but also by expressing our solidarity with the living. Family members, friends, relatives and neighbors gather together at the cemetery to offer prayers. This experience helps each of us realize our fragile destiny before we die, and remind us that only God can save us. This encourages us to live better with God and with others. May such sacred beauty always blooms in the cemetery!

Let us always remember the souls of purgatory, not just during the month of November. They need us to visit and pray. Looking at the pictures on their graves helps us remember those persons who were once with us and gives them a chance to speak to us. I hope that you were able to visit a cemetery in November or that you at least prayed God to save the souls in purgatory. Believing in the mercy of God, we entrust all deceased souls to Jesus Christ, who conquered death.

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