Columns



A nun takes children to the holy land, or cemetery, at Thai Xuan Parish in Xuan Loc Diocese to pray for the souls after Mass. (Photo courtesy of Mary Nguyen Lan)

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The church dedicates the whole month of November to pray for the souls who passed away in God's grace but must still spend time in purgatory. Catholics and some other Christian denominations believe a period of final purification may be needed after death as an expiation for sin. Since the deceased can no longer gain merit on their own, they really need the prayers of those who are still alive.

Praying for souls is not only an act of charity but also a duty for each of us, the ones who are still living on this earth. As St. John Vianney reminds us, "We must say many prayers for the souls of the faithful departed, for one must be so pure to enter heaven. … We must, therefore, pray much for them, that they may pray much for us."

Being aware of the duty of the living to the deceased, the parish priests in Vietnam invite the parishioners to attend daily Mass during November to pray for their deceased loved ones, in addition to following their custom of decorating the graves of their loved ones in the holy land (cemetery).

Praying for the souls in purgatory is also an opportunity for us to remember our own identity. In the future, when it is our turn to close our eyes and leave the earth, we might also enter purgatory to undergo God's purification. Every time we pray for souls, it reminds us that we ourselves are called to live better lives and to be more holy in our present Christian life, so that later when we die, we will also soon enjoy the happiness of heaven with God.

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Not only do they call on the adult parishioners to pray for the holy souls, pastors encourage and guide the younger generation in the parish to have reverence for those who have passed away. For example, they encourage the youth to do acts of charity or make sacrifices as prayers for the dead. When the Mass is celebrated in the holy land, young people are assigned to prepare for Mass by such actions as clearing the cemetery, setting up the altar, arranging liturgical items, or setting up for the sound or lights. Doing this work as a sacrifice reminds them to pray for souls. If our sacrifices are combined with deeds, our prayers will surely bring the souls to enjoy happiness with God in heaven soon.

The parish priest also reminds the sisters and catechists to guide the children to have filial hearts for the deceased, by helping them to confess their sins, attend Mass, receive Holy Communion every day to earn indulgences and give the indulgences to the departed souls, and — especially in November — to encourage the children to fervently recite the rosary and visit the holy land after Mass or catechism to pray that the souls in purgatory will be released soon.

In addition to the activities in the parish, parents have the duty of reminding their children at home to be respectful to their ancestors. Parents can remind the children weekly, monthly or many times a year — according to their ability — to always offer daily Mass for the souls in purgatory.

When we give something to someone, we always get it back, because nothing is ever lost. Likewise, when we pray for the souls of the dead, those who are in purgatory always remember us on earth and intercede before God for us.

Indeed, when praying for the souls, we not only help them quickly enjoy the happiness of heaven, but we also get more benefits! For example, we will have a closer relationship with God, feel God's love and grace in our lives. We will better know how to love and care about others, learning how to live generously, forgive readily and live unselfishly.

We also feel that what we are doing here on earth will be blessed by God to benefit the living as well as the dead.