Columns
Spirituality



A beautifully adorned cemetery in Konankuppam village, Kallakurichi district, Tamil Nadu state, India (Robancy A. Helen)



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We are all pilgrims on earth, a reminder that one day we will return to God, our creator. It also reminds us we don't have dominion over life and death, but God

alone does (2 Timothy 1:10). The reality of death has always been philosophical.

All Souls' Day is celebrated on Nov. 2 in the Catholic Church. We are taught to believe that we will all return to our Heavenly Father, and we will be judged according to our deeds. In each culture, we, as Christians, celebrate All Souls' Day differently.

Tamil Nadu is a state in India where Christianity is believed to have spread in the first century. Here, people also follow the tradition of remembering their loved ones but even among Christians, the cultural practices of faith may vary from North to South.

In northern Tamil Nadu, most places and parishes have holy Mass and people pray for the dead, especially in the cemeteries where their family members, relatives and others are laid to rest. The cemeteries are decorated with flowers, and candles are lit.

When people die, they are relieved of the pains and sufferings of this world, so, life is celebrated — the lives of those who died. In the past, idli and dosa were not a traditional, common breakfast in Tamil Nadu, and people ate them only on feast days. People only ate foods like these on feast days such as village feasts, Christmas, and other important days. People now eat this special breakfast on All Souls' Day to mark the importance of celebrating life.

They enjoy good meals on the feast of All Souls' Day, and they also consume meat once a week, once a month, or on feast days. Additionally, they offer the favorite food and snacks of the deceased in cemeteries. There are different kinds of sweets. The young people light fireworks typically used on festivals like Diwali (festival of lights), and Christians use them on Christmas Day.



Offerings of vada, papad, betel leaves, and grains at the cemetery in northern Tamil Nadu, India (Robancy A. Helen)

In the northern part of Tamil Nadu, Christians light fireworks on All Souls' Day. Thus, from morning until evening, families and all the villagers stay together for a celebration. This event holds Christian value as believers maintain that life does not end in this world. Entering eternal life is a celebration, providing meaning to the Christian faith in the next life before the eternal God.

It is a feast because the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris, which operated in Tamil Nadu and other parts of India, taught people that those who die enter heaven.

All Souls' Day is celebrated in a unique manner, differently than in the southern part of Tamil Nadu.

In the South, All Souls' Day is observed as the Day of Mourning. Holy Mass is celebrated everywhere, but people are found mourning for the dead, lighting candles, decorating cemeteries, and dressed in white, black and blue.

Though the faith is the same, the culture of each festival in India imitates the culture of the place, and missionaries have played a vital role in keeping the faith of the people alive.

I grew up in a Catholic village in southern Tamil Nadu, where this feast brings sadness rather than acceptance of death with strong faith.

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But Jesus encountered death courageously and raised many people from death. Our faith gives us hope that we all come to earth with a purpose. That purpose can be fulfilled if we do what pleases God. Whoever lives a life for God does not fear death.

One of my companions, who is a nurse, is responsible for taking care of the sick and the elderly. When she comes to know their death is near, she whispers the prayer to St. Joseph, as he is the patron of a peaceful or happy death. In her experience, many older people died peacefully after listening to her prayers and receiving the Holy Eucharist.

Death becomes meaningful when anchored in the hope of resurrection. Jesus is our way to reach our destination and remain with our Heavenly Father eternally.

As our lives imitate the life of Christ, our deaths become victorious, for Jesus has conquered death and sin once and for all.