



Prayers for the Dead?

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I'll never forget that bleak January day when my father died. It was very hard to believe in the resurrection as I watched the undertakers carry his lifeless corpse away in a body bag.

But imagine this scene. You are an unborn child who has lived in cozy but cramped quarters with your twin for nine months. But now you both are experiencing tremendous pressure, and your twin is squeezed through a narrow opening leaving you alone in the darkness.

Now think of it from the point of view of little one who just was squeezed through the bottleneck of the womb. He has to learn to breathe the air of this new world. His eyes now must adjust to blinding light and his skin to much cooler temperatures.

But what if he was born premature? What if his body was not ready for this new, challenging environment? What if he emerged from the womb with a dangerous infection? Would he not have to stay in an incubator in the hospital for a while until he was infection-free and strong enough to endure the challenges of life on planet earth?



On the first two days of November, as daylight shrinks in the Northern Hemisphere and frost turns vegetation brown, the Church leads us to confront the mystery of death.

These days remind us that love is stronger than death, that Christ's death for us means that our beloved deceased who believed in Christ are very much alive. They may be among those whose lungs breathe the exhilarating air of heaven and whose eyes gaze upon the glory of God. In this case, they help us through their prayers.

Yet they may also be among those whose lungs were not ready for breathing and whose eyes were not ready for the brilliance of the beatific vision, whose body carried an infection that needed to be eliminated. In which case, we must help



them through our prayers. Our loving intercession can hasten the purification and preparation necessary for the full enjoyment of their inheritance.

The Catholic Church has always been very reserved in its teaching about the mystery of life after death, including the mystery of purgatory. Here's what we know. Christ's death and resurrection won eternal life for everyone. Yet the fruit of his redeeming work needs to be personally appropriated. Each person must say yes to Christ, and yield to the liberating power of his grace which progressively breaks the sin's power and heals sin's wounds. Everyone is obliged to actively participate in this process and to renounce all sin, great or small. God, through his church, provides all the means of grace necessary to facilitate this purification and healing.

Yet what about people who say a fundamental yes to Christ, but drag their feet, clinging to some "small" sins, nursing some attachments to the evil that they've supposedly renounced? Purgatory is the process after death where these attachments, the umbilical cord which binds people to the old world, are cut so that people can be free to enter into the life to come. It is the hospital where the infection of sin is eliminated. It is the incubator where heart, lungs, and vision is made ready for a much larger life.

Purgatory is not a temporary hell. The Church does not teach that there is physical fire there (how could fire hurt spirits, anyway?) or that people spend a certain number of years or months there (after death, how do we measure time?) or that everyone but the greatest saints must go there after death (all the means are provided for it to happen here!).



We can't know for sure where our beloved deceased are, unless they happen to be canonized saints. So when in doubt, we pray for them. If they happen to need our help, our act of kindness can have great impact on them. If not, this kind act still has great impact on us, exercising our love muscles so that we will be ready to enter directly into the wedding feast of the Lamb when our own time inevitably comes.

This article was originally published in *Our Sunday Visitor* and is republished by permission. For information on bringing Dr. D'Ambrosio to your parish for a retreat, or parish mission, please contact:

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