Burying the Dead and Praying for the Living and the Dead

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In wrapping up the works of mercy, I wanted to begin with a quick review of why we undertake corporal and spiritual works of mercy. The primary reason is because we are all in need of mercy. And we are all in need of mercy because we are all sinners. It is only through God’s mercy that our sins are forgiven.

When Jesus was asked which commandment was the most important, he said that you should love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. But he added a second commandment: to love your neighbor as yourself. It is not enough for us to live in piety, we need to reach out and help our neighbors. It is helpful to revisit the image of the cross. Our relationship with God works in two directions. The vertical beam represents our individual relationship with God. And the horizontal beam represents our connection to our neighbors (the Mystical Body). In the words of Fr. John Riccardo, when we join our lives to Jesus, his love (or his thirst) flows through us. His thirst becomes our thirst. And what are we to do about it? We are to satisfy His thirst. So not only are we supposed to revel in God’s mercy, we are supposed to actively share it by performing works of mercy for others. And intention matters. We are not called to do these works so that we can check them off our list. We are called to act and pray with love and intention so that we are doing God’s will.

Today we’re going to discuss the final corporal work of mercy: burying the dead. It is the only corporal work that is not specified in Matthew 25. In fact, Jesus seems to contradict this work of mercy by telling his would-be followers in both Luke (9:60) and in Matthew (8:21) to “let the dead bury the dead.” What did he mean by that?

In both gospels, Jesus makes the point that when we are called by him, his work for us is more important than our worldly concerns. Even though in the Old Testament and during Jesus’s lifetime it was an important practice to bury the dead, Jesus calls us to prioritize the work He has in store for us.

The Church made burying the dead a work of mercy for two reasons. First, in the act of burial we honor the dignity and sacredness of each person. A body is sacred because it is created by God, made holy by Him, and is destined to God through the resurrection. Further, through baptism we are made members of Christ and become part of the Mystical Body. When we bury someone we are protecting the integrity of their body from the elements and from wild animals. The second reason is to assist family and friends during their time of mourning and farewell. In the case of a prolonged illness we can care for the family during that time by offering them friendship, food, support, and prayers.

Which leads nicely to our final work of spiritual mercy: praying for the living and the dead. We are told to pray and Jesus leads by example. In Thessalonians (5: 16-18) we read: Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

As members of the Mystical Body, we are called to pray for the living and the dead. And when we pray, we must engage the heart, otherwise, the prayers are just words. Again, intention matters.

The Church takes seriously its responsibility to pray for the dead. In the month of November we have All Souls Day and All Saints Day specifically designated to pray for the souls of the deceased. All Souls day is devoted to prayers for those who are in purgatory. All Saints Day is devoted to prayers for the souls already in heaven. We can also ask the saints to intercede for our intentions or for those of others. Our Lady of Fatima taught the shepherd children about the importance of praying for souls in purgatory and told about the many people who have no one to pray for them. We pray for them so that they can be released from purgatory into heaven.

I had a significant prayer opportunity recently. When I was on my way to Eucharistic Adoration on January 1, I got a phone call from a friend’s husband. He told me that his wife Monica (who had suffered with pancreatic cancer for almost 8 years) was in the hospital. He didn’t say, “This is the end.” But the fact that he called told me that it was. So that made my intentions at adoration clear—I would pray the Divine Mercy chaplet for Monica. I found out the next day that she had died.

She had been a lifelong faithful Catholic, and such a great example of the faith that she not only inspired my return to the Church, she was also my confirmation sponsor. Her brother, a priest, was at her bedside. I knew that she was well-covered on the spiritual front. And still, I was so thankful for the phone call the night before so that I could help to prepare others and to offer Monica a powerful prayer.

One of the simplest prayers given to us by St. Faustina is, “Jesus, I trust in you.” You can add to it by saying, and I pray for the intentions of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”

We also pray for the living and for their intentions. There are a number of conditions including illness, financial distress, and emotional challenges that people need assistance with—a wide range of messiness that comes with living in a fallen world.

Our service is intended for the good of others. However it often ends up benefitting us as well. I have had several opportunities in recent months to visit the sick. And in each situation I honestly feel that I benefited more than the person I was trying to help. It gave me a chance to spend time with people I love and to deepen my relationships with them. At the end of our lives we all long to hear the words “Well done, good and faithful servant…” (Mt 25:21). Practicing the corporal and spiritual works of mercy is an important first step.

Resources for Burying the Dead and Praying for the Living and the Dead

*Catechism of the Catholic Church.* Part Four: Christian Prayer.

Divine Mercy Novena and Chaplet. (booklet by Marian Press)

*The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas A Kempis

*The Manual of Prayers* by The Reverend James D. Watkins

Fr. John Riccardo Radio Podcast <http://podbay.fm/show/161405928/e/1449762747?autostart=1>

Additional resources for Prayer

Information on the Cloistered Nuns of St. Dominic’s Monastery in Linden, VA

Fr. Hathaway and Fr. Scalia both refer to these fourteen cloistered nuns as a "nuclear power plant of prayer" for the parishioners of the Arlington Diocese.

If you have any special intentions that you would like them to pray for, please reach out to them at the following email address: intentions@lindenopnuns.org

To learn more about them or to donate, please go to: http://www.lindenopnuns.org