

An old and genuinely popular tradition in the western Church makes November the month of the dead, or as we used to say, of the 'Holy Souls'. (It is hard to avoid the suspicion that this expression has much the same function as the Irish phrase 'the Good People'—used to refer to potentially dangerous beings who may be *listening*.) Certainly the cult of the dead is intertwined with pagan and primitive beliefs and fears about ghosts, and the modern, progressive Catholic is likely to find it embarrassing or at least quaint. This unease is something different from the forthright rejection of the idea by the Reformers. They held that Chantry-Masses and the like were simply one of the ways in which the clergy exploited the people of God and, more importantly, that the doctrine of purgatory detracted from the completeness of salvation in Christ. Either you are saved or you are not, and that by faith in Christ. '. . . neither let us dream any more that the souls of the dead are anything at all holpen by our prayers; but as the Scripture teacheth, let us think that the soul of man, passing out of the body, goeth straightways either to heaven, or else to hell, whereof the one needeth no prayer, and the other is without redemption.' (*The Book of Homilies*, 1563.) Prayers, fasting and the offering of Masses for the souls in purgatory seemed to them a reversion to the idea of salvation through human works.

But what are we to think of it all? We can simply reject prayer for the dead as a superstition inappropriate to men 'come of age', a hangover from a pre-Christian and pre-scientific world view, but if we do we should recognize how much we are discarding—not merely of popular cults but of the mainstream of the liturgy: are we not left with something more brittle and less humane than the faith of our fathers? Plenty of Christians simply ignore the inconvenient question. They make no protest about the prayers for the dead incorporated, for example, in every Roman Mass, but they cannot pretend to accept the notion of purgatory. It is indeed a bizarre idea that the God of love should allow those who love him to suffer until a sufficient number of Masses have been said for them—though we should not be too confident of our judgment here: after all, the God of love allows a great many people to be tormented before death. But supposing we find that the *mythology* of purgatory no longer says anything to us, that it is merely repulsive rather than mysterious, what sense can we make of praying for the dead?

Because Christ is risen and present to us we are more present to each other. In him we establish a deep and mysterious union with our fellow men. This, basically, is what Christianity is about: that we live together in the Spirit of Christ; this new level of human community is what we express in the sacraments. Prayer for the dead

is first of all an expression of our presence in Christ, not merely to our contemporaries, but to the men and women of the past. Like the tradition of the faith it is one of the ways in which Christians appropriate their history.

Belief in the resurrection entails that we do not think of Christ simply as one to be remembered, as one who is present only to our thoughts, it implies the belief that his body is present to us, that we are somehow in personal contact with him. Because of this, those who have 'died in Christ' are also not merely objects of memory; in him they are really present to us and in him they will share the future we hope for.

It will be objected that this blurs the distinction between saints who are in glory *to* whom we pray, and souls in purgatory *for* whom we pray, for both are dead and both are present to us only in the risen Christ. But this surely is the whole of the distinction: the canonized saint is precisely one whom the Church finds it appropriate to pray *to*—to canonize is imply to authorize a cult. What the nare we praying *for* when we pray for the dead? Not, surely, that a soul may be 'released' from the prison of purgatory, but that we all, our ancestors as well as ourselves, may come to the resurrection. This is well expressed in the excellent prayer recommended by the Archbishops' Commission on Christian Doctrine in their very valuable report on 'Prayer and the Departed'.¹ 'May God in his infinite love and mercy bring the whole Church, living and departed in the Lord Jesus, to a joyful resurrection and the fulfilment of his eternal kingdom.' Nor need this make us squeamish about praying for particular individuals for the paradox of love is that its universality is often most fully expressed in and through the intensity of a particular relationship.

Prayer for the dead then means a living and personal appropriation of the past and we may contrast this with the effort to salvage and preserve the past by a purely external appropriation that is characteristic of the wrong kind of conservatism. I would not want to conform to the theology of the men of the Pilgrimage of Grace, I want to meet the men themselves in Christ. In this encounter differences of theological perspective do not mean any kind of betrayal. We should neither ignore the dead as some progressives do out of a specious concern for the living, nor should we be dominated by their ghosts as some conservatives are; in either case the dead have become mere objects to be used or discarded. To pray for the dead is to recognize them as subjects sharing with us in the life of Christ and destined to share with us in his resurrection.

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¹*Prayer and the Departed*, S.P.C.K., 1971, 60p.