

A Catechesis on the Tradition of All Souls Saturday

One of the most venerable traditions of our Church is the commemoration of the departed in our liturgical prayers. It is the constant teaching of the Church since Apostolic times that the departed can be helped by our prayers, offerings and good deeds. Our Holy Father among the Saints, John Chrysostom (+407), reminded us in speaking of the faithful departed:

Let us assist them according to our power. Let us think of some advantage for them, small though it be, but let us assist them. How and in what way? By praying for them, by asking others to pray for them, and by constantly giving alms to the poor in their behalf! (*Homily on Philipians 3, 4*)

He also told us: Not in vain did the Apostles order that remembrance should be made of the dead in the awesome Mysteries [i.e. the Liturgy]. They knew that great gain resulted to them (the deceased), and great benefit. For when the whole assembly [of the people] stands with uplifted hands and that awesome Sacrifice lies displayed, how shall we not prevail with God by our entreaty for them? And this we do for those who have departed in faith! (*Homily on Philipians 3, 4*)

The custom of offering prayers and sacrifices for the departed comes to us from the Old Testament. Holy Scripture praises the custom as holy and wholesome or pious, as is written in the II Book of Maccabees, ch. 12, v. 45: "It is therefore, a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from sins." In the Catholic Church, the commemoration of the dead is considered as one of the main works of mercy. St. Paul prayed for his devoted friend Onesiphorus that the Lord "grant him mercy" as he stands before God's judgment seat. (II Tim. 1:18)

All the early Liturgies of the Church, including the most ancient one, the Liturgy of St. James, contain a prayer for the departed. In the Liturgies of St. Basil the Great (+379) and St. John Chrysostom prayers for the deceased are also included. The *Apostolic Constitutions* (4th century) prescribed that during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, the deacon should remind the faithful to pray for the deceased. Therefore, the Fathers of Vatican II rightly decreed that the Church "from the very first centuries of Christianity has cultivated the memory of the dead with great piety" and "offered prayers for them." (*Constitution on the Church*, n. 50.)

In the Byzantine Rite, we commemorate the deceased every day at the Divine Liturgy immediately after the Consecration with the petition: "Remember, O Lord,

all those who have departed in the hope of resurrection unto eternal life, and grant them rest where the light of Your face shines.” (*Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*)

From the beginning of Christianity, local churches kept registers of their living members as well as those who departed. These registers, known as *diptychs*, were folding tablets made of wood, ivory, or precious metals artistically decorated with carvings and bound together by rings. These were used in Church to commemorate the living and the dead at the Divine Liturgy since the fourth century.

This venerable custom was transmitted to us by our ancestors as a part of our beautiful spiritual Byzantine heritage. On Meat-Fare Sunday we liturgically commemorate the Last Judgment (Mt. 25:31-46). Therefore, on the previous day, we, in our charity, intercede with the merciful Judge for the deceased that they be placed at His right hand when He will come to judge the living and the dead. Every year, then, before Meat-Fare Saturday the families give the lists of their departed loved ones to the church with an offering so that they are mentioned at the services held for the deceased on the *All Souls Saturday*.

In the burial service according to the Byzantine Rite, the Church places the following words on the lips of the deceased, as we sing the hymns prescribed in bidding our departed loved one our final farewell:

Come all you that love me and bid me farewell, for I shall no longer walk with you nor talk with you, since I am going to my Judge, Who shows no favors and rewards or punishes everyone according to his deeds. Therefore, I beg and implore all of you, pray for me continually to Christ our God that, on account of my sins, I may not be doomed into the place of affliction, but rather be granted a place where the light of life is shining!

The custom of announcing the names of the deceased during the liturgical services, as stated above, can be traced back to the first centuries of Christianity. Already in the fourth century, the practice was strongly defended by St. Epiphanius (+403) as a “firmly established tradition” in the Church. In his *Panarios*, he writes: Concerning the ritual of reading the names of the deceased, what can be more useful or suitable; what can be more worthy of admiration? (*Panarios* 75, 8).

St. Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 390), after celebrating the funeral services for his brother Caesarius, concluded his eulogy with the following words: "Part of my funeral gift is now completed. The remainder we will pay by offering every year, as long as we live, our honours and memorials for him!" (*Oration VII*, 17)

We also should emulate St. Gregory by remembering our departed loved ones, especially during the All Souls Saturdays, as long as we live, and point out to those coming after us the wholesomeness of this beautiful and praiseworthy custom of praying for and remembering our departed loved ones.

Eternal Memory! Blessed Repose and Eternal Memory!

In Christ and the Theotokos,
Fr. Steven
Fr. Deacon James, Fr. Deacon Michael
Deacon Candidates John and George

Epiphany of Our Lord Byzantine Catholic Church
2030 Old Alabama Road
Roswell GA 30076