

When listening to all three readings today, each proclaiming the presence of God's Word and the Holy Spirit overcoming the power of evil and death, it is impossible to avoid thinking about death. The Jewish martyrs, the prayer of Saint Paul and the testimony of Jesus all challenge us to rethink the priorities in our lives in light of the eternal hope to which we have been called. During November, dedicated to the Holy Souls, it is appropriate to discuss death in its Christian context. Whether we speak of the peaceful death of a great-grandmother or the horrific destruction resulting from the Typhoon in the Philippines, we must face this reality in faith.

The first reading from Maccabees was written towards the end of the Old Testament period and is one of the so-called deuterocanonical books,¹ accepted by Catholics as the inspired Word of God. It tells the account of the Jews who were bravely fighting off the Syrian enemies, who themselves were attempting to abolish the Jewish temple and religion. It was when the core beliefs were most challenged by new Greek ideas that the Jews rallied with courage to hold fast to their ways.

The account from Maccabees is all about hope; the fourth martyr brother specifically mentioned that he died with the hope that God gave to him of being raised again. The brothers would not deny their core beliefs even in order to save their lives. They believed that the King of the world would raise them up so as to live forever. This Book, along with other later books in the Old Testament period, showed evidence of a developing belief in the afterlife.

¹ The deuterocanon (i.e. "second canon") is a set of seven books—Sirach, Tobit, Wisdom, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, and Baruch, as well as longer versions of Daniel and Esther are not in Protestants, who usually refer to these books as the Apocrypha.

We have kernels and hints in the Old Testament. Both major schools of Judaism in Jesus' time² had notions of eternal punishments in hell for the wicked souls. They also had a notion of *purgation* before entering heaven (precursor to purgatory). Jesus, the Apostles and the Church gave to these texts authoritative interpretations, and developed theology proper to what we call the Four Last Things: death, judgment, heaven and hell.

During this month dedicated to the Holy Souls, we would all do well to reflect upon the Four Last Things, and in particular the bodily resurrection. The Church's liturgy reflects this as the readings towards the end of the liturgical year take on these themes. She gives us these readings because all the mysteries of the Faith are worthy of our contemplation, including those that we would prefer to avoid, as we recite in the Nicene creed: "I look forward to the resurrection of the dead."

Our bodies will return to the earth, dust unto dust, ashes to ashes. But Christ will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body. "In death, the separation of the soul from the body, the human body decays and the soul goes to meet God, while awaiting its reunion with its glorified body. God, in his almighty power, will definitively grant incorruptible life to our bodies by reuniting them with our souls, through the power of Jesus' Resurrection."³

The Church has a clear interest in maintaining the dignity proper to humans by means of respect for the body, even after our earthly life is complete. This is why "the Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burying the bodies of the deceased be observed."⁴

² Shammai and Hillel

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, para. #997

⁴ Code of Canon Law, (No. 1176, 3)

Granted, the Church permits cremation, provided that it does not demonstrate a denial of faith in the resurrection of the body.⁵ But it must be stressed that “the Church strongly prefers that the body of the deceased be present for its funeral rites since the presence of the body clearly recalls the life and death of the person.”⁶

Death is the end of our earthly pilgrimage, a time of grace and mercy that God offers to man so that we might work out our earthly life in keeping with His plan. I have been privileged to visit people in their final hours- some have told me that they are at peace- clearly visible in their faces and their voice- and that they are ready to be with Jesus. Ostensibly, I went to minister to them, and the exact opposite happened instead- they enlivened my faith! I could hope for nothing more in life than to be able to utter these same words one day. Let us pray for this gift to see our own future death as a graced moment from God, part of our journey towards our loving Father. Saint Francis of Assisi, when he lay on his deathbed in 1228 added to the Canticle of the Creatures:

Praised are you, my Lord, for our sister bodily Death,
from whom no living man can escape.
Woe on those who will die in mortal sin!
Blessed are they who will be found
in your most holy will,
for the second death will not harm them.⁷

Let us pray for the grace to be willing to embrace these last things, as themselves a part of the journey towards the Father, with whom we hope to spend eternity, offering Him endless praise and thanks.

⁵ cf. Catechism # 2301, CIC #1176.3

⁶ Order of Christian Funerals, para. #5.

⁷ Our first death is the death to sin through Baptism. The second death, of a bodily nature, will not harm the person of faith.