

All Souls Day Commentary 2025



All Souls' Day | Jakub Schikaneder, 1888 | National Gallery Prague | PD-US

As it sometimes does, in the year 2025, The Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed - otherwise known as “All Souls” falls on a Sunday. This affects the liturgical calendar in two ways: All Saints falls on a Saturday and remains a Holy Day, but not one of obligation. All Souls replaces the 31st Sunday of Ordinary Time and is celebrated in its stead.

Historical Roots

From the earliest centuries, Christians prayed for the dead. Inscriptions in the Roman catacombs bear witness to intercessory prayers offered for the repose of departed souls. The Eucharist especially was celebrated in memory of the faithful departed. As time passed the monastic communities, particularly Benedictines, played a major role in shaping the Commemoration. Monks would set aside days to remember and pray for confreres who had died. A well-known example is Cluny Abbey in the 10th century, where Abbot Odilo established a commemoration of all the faithful departed, a practice that gradually spread throughout Europe. As the practice moved from monasteries to parishes, local churches and chapels, it developed into a universal observance, deeply tied to the life of ordinary Christian families, who saw it as a time to pray for deceased relatives and friends.

Prayer for the Dead

The Catholic Church teaches that prayers for the dead are an important aspect of the faith, rooted in the belief in the communion of saints and the hope of salvation. This practice is supported by the understanding that the dead can benefit from the prayers of the living, specifically those who are in a state of purification - that is in Purgatory.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church addresses this topic in several paragraphs. Specifically, it notes that the faithful can assist those who have died through their prayers. This is particularly relevant for the souls

in Purgatory, who are undergoing purification before entering Heaven. The Church encourages the faithful to pray for these souls, as it is believed that such prayers can aid in their purification process and hasten their entrance into eternal life. The Catechism states: "This teaching is also based on the practice of the early Church. From the beginning, the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God." (CCC 1032)

This paragraph highlights the tradition of praying for the dead, emphasizing the role of the Eucharist as a powerful form of intercession. The Church sees these prayers as an expression of love and solidarity within the communion of saints, which connects the living and the deceased in the mystical body of Christ. Additionally, the Catechism underscores the belief that the prayers of the living can be effective for the dead, reflecting the interconnectedness of the Church on earth (the Church Militant), the Church in Purgatory (the Church Suffering), and the Church in Heaven (the Church Triumphant).

Holiness

A good place to begin our exploration of All Souls is to start with the concept of Holiness. If you'd like to take a 6-minute detour, take a moment to watch this [video on Holiness](#) which traces the scriptural roots of holiness, explaining how "becoming holy" is more than living a moral life, but a process of preparation for entering into the presence of God in the eternal Temple of Heaven. In speaking of the heavenly city and its eternal Temple, Scripture tells us that "nothing unclean will enter it" (Rev 21:27). In the biblical tradition, "unclean" (or impure) is not limited to sin. The Old Testament lists non-sinful things that can cause one to become ritually impure. What is common to the list is that they are things of "death" that reflect the incompleteness of the world and of people. When St. Matthew writes, "*So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Mt 5:48) he is speaking of a wholeness, a completeness that carries no trace of corruption or death; a state ready to enter into the heavenly Temple. The Catholic Church teaches that Purgatory is a state/"process" of purification to become truly holy by ridding oneself of the last impure vestiges of our temporal life. If you are 99% generous, there remains 1% selfish which you need to let go.

This belief is rooted in the understanding of God's holiness and the necessity of being fully purified to enter into the beatific vision of God. It is a concept that can be seen in [Leviticus 11:44-45](#): God instructs the Israelites to be holy because He is holy, linking their holiness to His divine nature and separating them from the unclean/impure. Also in [1 Peter 1:15-16](#): calling believers to be holy in all their conduct because God is holy. It is a call and instruction to live a life that reflects the inherent holiness and character of God. In essence, it means to be set apart from sin and the world, dedicating oneself to God and living according to His will.

As the Creator and Redeemer, God is distinct, set apart, and perfect. His people are called to reflect this character in their own lives. This involves a degree of separation from the world in its corruption, worldly patterns of thought and behavior that are sinful. Being holy isn't just a state of being but requires a consistent effort to live according to God's standards in all aspects of life. This includes thoughts, conduct, and relationships. For Christians, the ability to live a holy life comes from faith in Jesus Christ. God calls people to a holy life: "*He saved us and called us to a holy life, not according to our works but according to his own design and the grace bestowed on us in Christ Jesus before time began*" (2 Tim 1:9) The call to holiness is a command given to the entire community, not just individuals. It involves striving for moral purity and dedicating oneself to God's purpose and will, individually and as a people

Purgatory

I suspect that how people imagine Purgatory is mostly formed by images from the Italian poet Dante's description in his work *Purgatorio*, the second part of his work *The Divine Comedy*. Whether one has read the work or not, the result is the idea that Purgatory is a place of punishment for sin because redemption and salvation are somehow incomplete. Many people carry the idea of a fiery, but temporary punishment because of their reading of 1 Cor 3:13-15. It is a misreading of the passage, but nonetheless, the images endure in the imagination.

None of that is the teaching of the Catholic Church. The Church teaches that Redemption was accomplished once, for all, by Jesus' death on the Cross. One's salvation depends on one accepting the gift of Redemption and placing one's faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. At the moment of one's death, "particular judgment" is rendered, where each person receives a judgment based on their life choices and relationship with God during their earthly life. This is distinct from the final judgment, which will occur at the end of time when all souls will be resurrected and judged collectively, not individually. That was done at the moment of death in the particular judgement. The particular judgment determines the soul's eternal destiny: heaven or hell. Notice that purgatory is not one of the eternal destinations. Purgatory has been described as "the mud room of heaven," that place where your mom made you take off your muddy clothes, your snow boots and parka (*growing up in Florida this analogy was somewhat lost on me...*), or anything that would track things into the house. In other words, the mud room (purgatory) is already inside the house (Heaven) but there are a few small things to take care of first.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church provides a more detailed and theological explanation of Purgatory, particularly in Paragraphs 1030-1032. "All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven." (1030) This paragraph establishes that those who die in God's grace are ultimately destined for Heaven, but they may need to undergo purification to attain the holiness required to enter into God's presence fully in the heavenly Temple.

The next paragraph elaborates: "The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned." (1031) Here, the Catechism distinguishes Purgatory from Hell, emphasizing that Purgatory is a state for the elect—those who are saved—and is not a place of eternal damnation. The Catechism continues: "This teaching is also based on the practice of the early Church. From the beginning, the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God." (1032)

It is this last paragraph that connects all that we have been discussing: holiness, salvation, purgatory, prayers for the faithful departed and our celebration of All Souls. It brings into focus the Church's belief in the communion of saints and the intercessory power of the living on behalf of the deceased.

In summary, the Church teaches that Purgatory is a necessary and merciful process for the purification of the souls of the faithful who have died in grace but still require cleansing from the effects of sin. It is a state of hope and assurance, as those in Purgatory are ultimately destined for Heaven, and the living can assist them through prayers and sacrifices. The understanding of Purgatory reflects the Church's commitment to the belief in the communion of saints and the transformative power of God's grace.

So far so good, but most people still have questions about two other connected ideas: "temporal punishment" and "indulgences."

Temporal Punishment

The phrase “temporal punishment” sits at the heart of indulgences and purgatory, but it is often poorly understood. In Catholic theology, “temporal punishment” refers to the consequences of sin that remain even after the guilt of the sin has been forgiven. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 1472) offers that sin has a double effect: separation from God but also the disorder that sin leaves in its wake.

By analogy, this can be seen in your having broken a window in the family house (the sin). You confess your sin and the parents “forgive” you - but there is still the matter of the broken window that needs to be fixed, to make the window whole again (or to borrow from Leviticus, to be made pure). The “punishment” is that you have to fix the window. I am sure that a modern communications specialist or public affairs professional would find a different term than “temporal punishment,” but we have what we have. Fixing the window is only “temporary” in that it will take a limited amount of time, but it will be time away from being with friends or family or doing something enjoyable. In that sense it can seem like a punishment. But hopefully the youthful you will not just remedy the broken window, but take the time to reflect and find true sorrow for the “sin” and a deeper appreciation and love for all that the parents provide for you, at no cost to you. This last part is the “purification” and helps you to take a more full place in the family. The window is just a window. When will the “temporal punishment” be over? When you have processed the whole event (and hopefully the window is fixed.)

Temporal punishment is understood as the necessary purification for the disorder caused by sin, which can be addressed either in this life through acts of penance, prayer, and good works, or in the afterlife in the purifying process in Purgatory where one “lets go” of the last vestiges of a life not fully given over to love. Like in life, we might need help.

If you are 10 years old and break a window, I doubt you know how to replace the pane of glass (or even the whole window!). You’re going to need a little help. That is where mom or dad (...and these days YouTube) step in. In our analogy, this is where the prayers of the living for the faithful departed come in.

Indulgences

Let’s be clear: an indulgence is not a permission to commit sin. It is not a permission to indulge in some behavior that would ordinarily be considered sinful. It is not something that you pay for to get forgiveness. The Catholic Church teaches that indulgences are a means by which the faithful can obtain the remission of the temporal punishment due to sin, the guilt of which has already been forgiven. This teaching is rooted in the Church's understanding of the interconnectedness of sin, repentance, and the effects of sin on the soul and the community. The Catechism of the Catholic Church provides a thorough explanation of indulgences, particularly in Paragraphs 1471-1479.

An indulgence is a “remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins *whose guilt has already been forgiven* [emphasis added], which the faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains under certain prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints.” (CCC 1471) An important point is that an indulgence does not apply to an eternal punishment (perdition; hell) but only to the temporal punishment for sins that have already been forgiven. And you may have noticed that indulgences are not limited to being applied to the faithful departed, but can be received by the living if disposed under the prescribed conditions.

At the root of indulgences is the understanding that sin has a double consequence. Sin entails a guilt that must be forgiven, and it also causes a disorder that must be repaired. In Scripture, sin is forgiven by God, yet its consequences may remain. Earlier we considered the analogy of the “broken window” but the idea

is also rooted in the Bible. Consider the story of David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:13–14). The prophet Nathan tells David that God has forgiven his sin of adultery, yet the child born of their infidelity will still die. In *Exodus*, Moses is God’s friend, yet because of his failure at Meribah, he is barred from entering the promised land. (Numbers 20:12). These are just examples of double consequences. Prayers for the dead presumes that there remains some liability for sin beyond death. (cf. 2 Maccabees 12:44–46) That liability might be in the lack of wholeness (completion or perfection, *telios*) in the person that needs to be made perfect before entering the Temple of Heaven and into the presence of God.

Public penance in the first centuries reflected this distinction. Even after absolution from guilt through sacramental confession or episcopal reconciliation, penitents often had to perform extended works of penance (fasting, pilgrimage, exclusion from the Eucharist) — not to “earn” forgiveness, but to heal the damage caused by sin and to satisfy the justice of God and the Church.

This teaching emphasizes that while the guilt of sin can be absolved through confession, the consequences of sin—specifically, the disorder it creates—may still require reparation, which can be addressed through indulgences.

At this point you might be thinking of the 16th century sale of indulgences. Some might argue it was a rogue cardinal and not the Church as a whole. Rogue cardinal, for sure. The whole church? I don’t think that view is well supported in history. But either way, it was the “straw that broke the camel’s back” and tipped the Church into the Protestant Reformation. The sale of indulgences was a serious abuse and had long lasting effects on a long-held tradition of the Church associated with prayers for the faithful departed. By and large the tradition was removed from reformed and protestant theology.

But Indulgences remained - and the Church undertook efforts to make clear the theology of Indulgences to priests and laity alike.

Treasury of Merit

The Church teaches that it offers the grace of Indulgences from the “treasury of merit,” also called the “treasury of the Church.” This refers to the spiritual reservoir of merit accumulated through the infinite merits of Jesus Christ, especially through His Passion, Death, and Resurrection; the superabundant merits of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is considered sinless and full of grace; and the merits of the saints, who lived lives of heroic virtue that manifested God’s grace into the world. These “merits” are not material or monetary, but spiritual benefits—graces that can be applied to others by the Church.

What gives the Church the “authority” to dispense the merits to others?

- Christ promised his Church the power to bind and loose on earth, saying, “*Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven*” (Matt. 18:18). As the context makes clear, binding and loosing cover Church discipline, and Church discipline involves administering and removing temporal penalties.
- One could also look to Matthew 16:19 where Peter is told by Jesus, “*I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*”

Most would look at those two verses and offer, “...OK, but that applies just to Sacramental Confession, right?” Sacramental Confession is the priest (the Church) acting as “sacramental steward” for God’s forgiveness. Let’s be clear. The priest does not forgive sins. He absolves which is the earthly action, the announcement, of the grace of God’s forgiveness. Indulgences operate on the same principle. The Church sees itself as a steward of these spiritual goods, able to apply them for the benefit of souls.

“OK, but when did Jesus bless one person based on the merits of another? *“And there people brought to him a paralytic lying on a stretcher. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Courage, child, your sins are forgiven.”* (Mt 9:2) It wasn’t the faith of the paralytic, it was the faith of his friends. The merits of others were a gift to the paralytic. The “treasury of merit” is a gift by which God uses the Church when He removes temporal penalties. This is the essence of the doctrine of indulgences.

Time and Indulgences

Growing up in the mid-20th century I clearly remember the nuns leading us in prayers and rosaries for “the poor souls in purgatory who have no one to pray for them.” Which is actually a quite lovely idea and really addresses the idea of the communion of saints, living and deceased. But I also clearly remember being told “this rosary will shorten the sentence in purgatory by 30 days.” As a third grader I thought “OK.” Seemed like a pretty good bargain. When one begins to understand all the above, you have to wonder, where and when did indulgences begin to be described in terms of “days” or “years” and such?

One needs to remember that in the early Church, penances were very public and were prescribed for a set period of time. For example, spend Sunday morning outside the church dressed in sack cloth and ashes for 1 year. An indulgence, even then an act of piety, could reduce the penance by (e.g.) 30 days. It wasn’t a reduction of the time in purgatory (as if that even had a meaning), but a reduction of time in this life when the penitent was “apart” from the believing community. As the Sacrament of Confession moved to a private setting, so too did the penances, and yet the language of time endured. Slowly the connection to penance was lost and starting in the early medieval period, indulgences began to be described in terms of “days,” “quarantines,” or “years” and slowly, misguided priests and religious began to connect indulgences with chronological time in purgatory.

By the late Middle Ages and into the modern era, people began thinking that saying a certain prayer automatically subtracted X days from purgatory. This contributed to superstition and misunderstanding — and was a factor in the abuses that provoked the Protestant Reformation. The Council of Trent strongly condemned the abuses surrounding indulgences, corrected abuses, but the language was embedded in the popular imagination as was the connection to purgatory.

The 20th-Century brought reform. Pope St. Paul VI, in 1967, issued the apostolic constitution [*Indulgentiarum Doctrina*](#), a watershed in indulgence theology but really just a reaffirmation of what it was always meant to be. The Pope abolished the “days and years” system, noting that it was misunderstood and misused and left the faithful thinking it was some kind of “works salvation” by which they could earn (or worse be owed) the grace of purification. It was at that time that the Church reduced all indulgences to two categories: Plenary (full remission) and Partial (remission in part). It was done hoping that an emphasis shift away from “measuring time” to encouraging the faithful to perform works of devotion, penance, and charity with sincere faith would return indulgences to their original meaning and purpose.

Plenary and Partial Indulgences

What’s the distinction? A plenary indulgence removes all temporal punishment due to sin. It is a complete cleansing, as though the disorder caused by sin were fully healed. This means that if a person fulfills the necessary conditions for a plenary indulgence, they can be completely freed from the consequences of their sins, assuming they are in a state of grace and have the intention to receive the indulgence. The conditions typically include sacramental confession, Eucharistic communion, and prayer for the intentions of the Pope, along with performing the specific work to which the indulgence is attached (Catechism, 1471)

A partial indulgence removes part of the temporal punishment. It is a real but incomplete purification, lessening the burden but not entirely eliminating it. The degree of temporal punishment removed is not specified and can vary based on the individual's disposition and the nature of the act performed. The Church encourages the faithful to seek partial indulgences through various prayers and acts of charity, as these can contribute to one's spiritual growth and sanctification (Catechism, 1472).

Both types of indulgences require that the person be baptized and in the state of grace with the intention of seeking the indulgence. Both types require the carrying out the specified actions, e.g., praying the Rosary, reading Scripture, visiting a cemetery. There are additional conditions for plenary indulgence: Sacramental confession (within about 20 days before or after), Eucharistic Communion, prayer for the intentions of the Pope, and a complete detachment from all sin, even venial sin. This last condition is the hardest, and it is the real dividing line: if there is no total detachment, the indulgence becomes partial.

The essential difference is not the type of spiritual practice performed but the interior disposition of the soul: only a heart totally detached from sin can receive the full grace of a plenary indulgence.

Have we made progress? Depends on the meaning of “we.” The Church has taken steps to clarify its teaching and in so doing highlights the importance of the intention behind the actions taken to receive indulgences, noting that true contrition and a desire for holiness are essential components. The Church encourages the faithful not to obsess over the “math” of indulgences but to see them as acts of love: uniting prayer, penance, and charity with the merits of Christ and the saints.

Have the faithful made progress? That is a question each person must ask of themselves. As a priest my concern is that when people ask about specific indulgences the questions and the language used strikes me as transactional: “if I do these things, I get...” What is going on in one’s heart? I can only explain the teachings of the Church as best I can. Beyond that I am not the gate keeper of indulgences. That is between Christ and the person.

The Language of Gift

Language is important. Faithful Catholics do not “get” the Eucharist - they receive the Eucharist. Catholic marriage ceremonies do not say “take this ring,” our language is the lover saying to the beloved, “receive this ring.” The language of “receive” reflects a disposition that in the Eucharist, in marriage, or indulgences, what is received is gift - unmerited, unearned, not for sale - pure gift. We are called to receive such gifts with open, grateful hearts.

All Souls Day

There is a whole lot of theology carried in the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed. It is meant to be more than a day to fondly remember someone close to you who has passed away. It is a day to be in communion with them. Hopefully their particular judgment was Heaven and eternal glory. We love them and know their flaws, so perhaps they are undergoing the purification of the elect - and we can help them on All Souls with prayers and Eucharist celebrated as acts of love because of the merits of Christ.