

# Praying for the dead

*Nicholas Peter Harvey*

## *The basic picture before Vatican II*

**I**T IS A HOLY AND WHOLESOME THOUGHT to pray for the dead, that they may be released from their sins.' My Catholic upbringing in the 1940s emphasized this, and recommended a range of religious practices to this end. Any sense of grieving for a lost loved one was complicated by anxiety about that person's fate in the next world. The purpose of this article is to examine subsequent changes in the approach to death manifested by such anxiety. Theology is inescapably autobiographical, so I make no apology for writing in this vein.

The form of Catholic belief and practice which characterized my childhood was not unusual among British and Irish Catholics at that time. The basic picture was of a struggle to avoid sin, and to pursue appropriate remedies as and when sin was committed. The deathbed practice of confession, extreme unction and viaticum was intended to maximize the person's hope of a not-too-unfavourable outcome of the particular judgement which was thought immediately to follow death. The likelihood, it was supposed, was a period in purgatory, which could be shortened by the prayers of repentant sinners for the one who had died. The souls in purgatory were destined for heaven. That was why they were designated as holy or faithful, as in the prayer commonly said for the recently dead and on anniversaries: 'May their souls, and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God rest in peace.' For the unfaithful departed there was no hope, this tradition being explicit about the ineluctable fate of those who died in mortal sin. More of that anon, but what was not emphasized was the difficulty of committing mortal sin, given the rigorous terms in which it was defined. Our teachers seemed most concerned that we should never at any moment take it for granted that all was well with us, or with the deceased.

On the other hand the judgement at issue was always God's, so that absolute certainty about an individual's destiny was unavailable except in the case of those beatified or canonized by the Church. So it was recommended that all should be prayed for, since any deceased person could be in purgatory and therefore in need of our prayers. Particular prayers and pious practices were judged to be specially efficacious in reducing someone's time in purgatory. A tortuous explanation was

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offered as to how the phrase 'temporal punishment' could apply in an extra-temporal setting. Commended above all other good works was an act of perfect contrition, which would bring about the cancellation of the entire burden of the punishment an individual had incurred. Nevertheless such perfection was deemed to be unlikely in the contrition of most of us most of the time, and in any case only God could judge whether the required standard had been attained. So a host of other practices was recommended with a view to more modest outcomes. The task of doing what we could for the purgatorial state of those who had died remained incumbent on all.

### *Brief historical excursus*

It is curious that this doctrine and practice of indulgences survived so strongly into the Catholic world of my childhood. When Luther raised his battle-cry the Vatican was well aware that the doctrine of indulgences did not rest on the firmest foundations, and so moved the debate on to the question of papal teaching authority. When these disagreements hardened into institutionalized division indulgences survived, and were even perhaps given a new lease of life, by becoming part of a package of things considered intrinsic to Catholic orthodoxy. New thinking in this area, initially not all confined to Luther and his disciples, was in this sense a casualty within Catholicism of Reformation conflict and the resultant aggressive/defensive stance taken by the Roman Catholic Church.

### *A transitional moment*

There is an amusing sequel to this part of the story. When the ARCIC-agreed statement on justification by faith first appeared, some Anglican evangelicals smelt a rat, reasonably enough, because it did not address the question of indulgences. I was present at an official ecumenical gathering at which several Roman Catholics were uncomfortable that this criticism was made. The reason for their discomfort was that they knew the doctrine and practice of indulgences had not gone away, but they did not regard the matter as of crucial importance, and certainly did not relish engaging in the defence. This kind of embarrassment was already a far cry from my childhood world, to which incidentally a somewhat coy throwback was recently provided by diocesan bishops' letters, written presumably under orders, designating certain local churches for obtaining the Jubilee indulgence promulgated by the Pope. I wonder how many English Catholics took up the offer? How many would have noticed if it had not been made?

### *A potentially creative change*

What change in the attitude to the dead is indicated by the waning of concern for the obtaining of indulgences since Vatican II? Whatever might be said of the Council and its liturgical aftermath, the obvious thing to say is that the change in question is part of the distancing of death in western culture: religious thought and observance are not immune to major cultural trends such as the prevalent denial of death. As far as it goes this is a neat explanation, and probably not without some truth. But it begs the prior question as to whether the theory of indulgences still widely practised in the Roman Catholic Church earlier in the twentieth century was an appropriate theological response to the phenomenon of death. Regardless of what has happened since, it is hard to regret the passing of a sin-centred and punishment-fearing theology of death. Those black-bordered cards giving notice of someone's death, and including an indulgenced prayer and the number of days obtainable by reciting it, projected an image of God which now looks distinctly quaint if not sinister. It needs of course to be remembered that indulgences were not about forgiveness: they offered 'remission of the temporal punishment due to sin after its guilt has been forgiven'. Nevertheless the focus was on sin, and on a God who seemed extraordinarily preoccupied with our misdeeds and those of the deceased.

The suggestion of this article is that the present marginalizing within the Catholic Church of an indulgence-based approach to praying for the dead makes room for a much healthier sense of our continuing involvement with them. Release from the supposed penal consequences of sin is not the only reason why it might seem appropriate to pray for or, perhaps better, with the dead. The fading of the concern about indulgences does not necessarily indicate a more shallow or evasive attitude to death than what went before.

### *A complicating factor*

The issue is often confused by uneasiness about attitudes to the dead which have undoubtedly grown since Vatican II. The predominant tendency at funerals is to 'accentuate the positive', to eulogize the deceased if at all possible, giving uncritical thanks and praise for this person's life. While not in itself undesirable, this trend risks leaving no place for the grief, the sense of loss and the often profoundly conflicting memories and feelings which commonly characterize bereavement. The lack of adequate acknowledgement of these dimensions can seriously hinder the process of appropriating and moving on from

someone's death. What is at issue here is the fact that our relationships do not end with death, and the need for fitting liturgical and devotional recognition of this.

Contemporary funeral practice too often assumes that the departed one is already with the Lord in a way which places him or her above or beyond the ongoing struggle in which we are all involved. There can be gross insensitivity in a liturgical and pastoral practice which offers a bland image of resurrection in the face of the complex spectrum of emotions and reflections undergone by bereaved people. In particular the appeal to resurrection-faith in an attempt to transcend the ongoing negotiation of our relationships with those closest to us among the dead begs all the questions. From this point of view the notion of purgatory as purification might still find a place, no longer in penal terms but as an attempt to recognize unfinished business between the living and the dead. Some people imagine that with the death of a difficult parent or an estranged spouse they will be free. The subsequent realization that this is not so can be chastening, but is a step out of unreality.

### *Prayer in, of and for communion*

Since the context of a significant death is always one of relationship, it is nonsense to suppose that anything in need of resolution between two people can be fully dealt with in one while remaining unresolved in the other. To think thus is to reduce the whole transaction to a kind of atomized individualism. A healthy corrective is provided by a prayer in the Greek Orthodox liturgy for which I no longer have the reference. It is a prayer *for* the Virgin Mary, doubly remarkable since it comes from a tradition which exalts her as the Theotokos and All-Holy One. Discomforted by the prayer, some scholars have argued that this version is a mistranslation, but that view has not prevailed. The underlying sense is that no individual, not even the Theotokos, is completely fulfilled until all are fulfilled. It follows that all are in need of prayer until the consummation. Western devotion to Mary has idealized her, giving her so privileged an intercessory role on our behalf that her solidarity with us in unfinished business is not usually considered. Such an exalted intercessor, it is supposed, cannot herself be in need of prayer. This misses the crucial point that no individual can be holier than his or her community.

The exaltation of Mary in a way which sets her apart from the vulnerability of people continuously related to one another exemplifies a wider point about attitudes to the dead. We tend either to idealize (Mary) or to demonize (Judas Iscariot) those who have died. It is

convenient to do one or other of these, with a view to covering up the complexities and ambiguities of the actual networks of connectedness that are at stake. Such a cover-up is not necessarily conscious, but there is a price to be paid, for repression is entailed. Anything which is merely repressed is always likely to return to threaten our stability. It is impossible to relate healthily to an idealized or demonized person. It is thus fitting to pray in some form for the dead, simply because our relationship with them, and therefore and indivisibly theirs with us, continues. Otherwise, by way of idealization, demonization or oblivion, the relationship becomes fixed at the time of the person's death. Such static involvements are beyond the reach of true prayer, whatever rituals and devotions may or may not be performed on behalf of the deceased. Insistently reverential attitudes and practices in connection with our dead may themselves be no more than forms of avoidance or denial.

Another way of looking at this theme is to note the contrast between the language of praying for the dead and the language of praying to the saints. In our old religion, the dead were thus neatly divided into those who needed our prayers and those whose prayers we needed. There were those dead who were in effect dependent on us, and those on whose patronage we were dependent. This categorization now seems at odds with that sense of mutual dependence in relationship which characterizes the modern western outlook. It would be easy to mistake this move away from a hierarchial way of seeing the matter for lack of interest in or concern about those who have died.

Could it be that the language of praying for or to the dead has proved too constricting? My suggestion here is that the waning of these practices may indicate a creative dissatisfaction with the forms of relationship implied by them. Our involvement with the dead is not primarily about needs, whether theirs or ours. It is about an ongoing communion which looks to the consummation of all things. Intense concentration on what is proceeding in this world does not distract from or compete with attention to those who have died once it is realized that these relationships continue in the form of a hopeful remembering. To avoid any suspicion of a one-way process here it is worth reflecting on the arresting statement of some postmodernists that 'the past remembers us'. This hint of a disturbingly unfamiliar perspective may help to break down a narrowly linear view of time which otherwise may dominate and impoverish our awareness of connections with the dead. Be that as it may, the processes of this remembering, which change the relationships involved, do not require the positing of some other world

in which the departed may or may not be flourishing. There is quite enough going on here, where awareness of the dead can change dramatically as our own lives proceed. By contrast, the preoccupation with the states of life of individuals in some other world which they are supposed to have entered by death is hardly life-enhancing, whether in spiritualism or Catholicism.

### ***Remembering***

Considerations of this kind suggest the conclusion that the key notion in relation to the dead is remembering rather than praying. Instead of vestigial regret for ideas and practices that now look fustian, it is worth asking what devotional forms might help to interiorize the sense of our communion with the dead which this article is commending. I am not arguing that prayer is beside the point, but asking what kind of prayer best fits the dynamic of remembrance which constitutes our continuing engagement with the dead. If it is true that we shall be saved together or not at all, then the prayer must be for and with everybody, for no individual's flourishing is separable from that of the others. Looked at like this, a prayer for another or others is indivisibly a prayer for myself. It is a prayer of and for the communion which is in the making.

Remembering, then, is central. But there are pitfalls here, for our culture tends to think of memory as rather like the contents of a video or tape-recorder. What really happened? What was actually said, or not said? But a living memory does not work like that. It necessarily selects, interprets, reinterprets according to what is of present significance. Frank McCourt has been accused of making up the conversations in his memoir of childhood, *Angela's ashes*. In some sense the charge must be true, for there is in the book a great deal of direct speech which he could not have remembered verbatim. But does anyone seriously think that McCourt's version is less truthful than that of a tape-recorder? The writing is so vivid and immediate that someone was led to comment that you can almost smell the particulars of the tale. No tape or video-recorder could match such communication. The great narrative historian C. V. Wedgwood has pointed out that there is no such thing as the bare facts. We need to be aware of this when considering those memories which constitute our present connection with those who have died. The dead need to be allowed to be who they are. Only living memories can ensure that those who have died are not consigned to idealization, demonization or oblivion. This is a contemplative remembering which is prior to and more foundational than any petitionary activity.

*Jesus the significant ancestor*

In traditional African religions there is a strong sense of the presence and power of the ancestors. To try to imitate this in any direct or immediate way would be to decontextualize these religions and thus to romanticize them. But it seems odd that Christians do not connect with Jesus in some similar way, as a supremely significant ancestor whose presence remains potent among us. My childhood catechism asked the question, 'Where is Jesus Christ?', and gave the answer that as God he is everywhere, but as man he is in heaven and in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. We were not told where heaven was, although the implication was that it was a long way from where we were, or from anything within our experience. Elsewhere it was said that heaven is not a place but a state, an observation that seems to come from a different universe of discourse. The point for our present purposes is that the catechism was extremely cagey about the presence of Jesus among us.

This nervous insistence that Jesus was only to be found in one hallowed and rigorously controlled sacramental practice suggests an underlying uneasiness about our communication with the dead, which is not allowed to provide a natural and even obvious context for his presence with us. Of course I shall be told that modern theology and catechesis have moved on, and that in any case the resurrection of Jesus makes him available to us in a way quite different from and superior to that of other ancestors. Such christological considerations are inescapable in any serious discussion of praying for the dead, but they are not in themselves my allotted topic. Perhaps it is enough to point out here that the fashionable kenotic Christology, whatever its merits, does no more than what preceded it to promote a lively awareness of our involvement with the dead. It makes of Jesus such an omniscient co-sufferer as to de-humanize him, demonstrating that the attempt to make him everything succeeds in making him nothing very much. Again, the claim to divinity as conventionally made on his behalf overwhelms any real sense of his humanness. Formal allegiance to Chalcedonian christological formulae does not in practice bring him any nearer to us.

It may be that the resistance to allowing Jesus to take his place as a very significant ancestor springs from a fear that to categorize him thus would threaten the distinctiveness of our beliefs about him. But to call him an ancestor is to name the very least that he is. If he is not even this he has no human context, and can play no part in our remembering of

those who have died. Whatever else we may be inclined to say about him, this at least must be said.

### *Afterlife and other world?*

Does serious remembering of the dead depend on belief in some sort of life after death, and in a world other than this one? Some Christians, perhaps the majority, would answer yes, and go on to insist that only some such belief can give point and purpose to our life now, and in particular to our hope for one another. But as Karl Marx among others saw so clearly, such convictions can easily be escapist, in that the pious hope of a world other than this may well serve as a device to avoid taking responsibility in the world as it is. Meanwhile Freud said that the human unconscious lives as if it is immortal, a statement which leaves open the possibility that the notion of another world which we enter on death is a fantasy. Instead of rushing to the defence of traditional formulations against these so-called masters of suspicion, we need to ask what place the idea of life in another world after death really has in our lives, what urgent claim if any it makes on us, and how it plays out in our relations with the dead.

I can only say that a recent brush with a potentially terminal illness and the major surgery that followed gave me a much-heightened consciousness of the preciousness of the present, while leaving me agnostic about any sort of afterlife. It was not that I came consciously to disbelieve in it. I discovered that it had no purchase on me. Against all my religious upbringing, in particular its sacramental aspect, and to my own quiet surprise, I felt no need to prepare except in a practical sense. A friend has pointed out that as it was the pressing thought of imminent judgement which had ruled my tradition, the key thing was the lifting of that anxiety. Yet my conviction about our involvement with the dead is unchanged. I am in no doubt that we are all, living and dead, bound up together in a communion which is in process of formation and transformation, and that if remembering the dead does not feature in our lives, we need to wonder whether something vital has atrophied in us.

Yet none of this, it seems to me, need point in the direction of a world other than this one. When I was taught, as mentioned above, that heaven is not a place but a state, it was strongly implied that heaven is not here. But why not? Whether the ecstasies that have come your way are mystical, aesthetic, sexual, political or whatever, they qualify for the language of heaven much more vibrantly than artistic and literary efforts to offer images of heaven in another world. Aquinas' high talk



of the beatific vision which awaits us does not make it inviting. And if you find no ecstatic experience here why should you suppose that it will be available to you elsewhere? This world, I should prefer to say, is heaven in the making. If the language of process is taken seriously there is no need to posit two worlds, but to those who think only in terms of states this assertion will be meaningless or even unbelieving.

Strong interest in life after death is not a notable feature of contemporary Christianity. The considerations just advanced militate against the notion that this has to do with avoiding the thought of death. I have already told how in the face of a newly sharp and immediate sense of my own mortality I found myself with a more vivid and uncluttered grasp of the present as sheer gift than I had ever had. A diminished concern about the afterlife may well be the accompaniment of a much richer awareness of the wonder of this universe and its possibilities. The role of the dead, far from being distanced or forgotten, is enhanced, for anxiety about their fate has no place. They have their part in the emerging communion, and there is of course communication with them, unless we have become amnesiac.

### *New ways of praying*

Devotional developments do not happen tidily, nor yet in immediate and obvious sequence with what went before. We have to live with a certain insecurity in this as in other matters, refusing to take too seriously the claustrophobic, restorationist control-freakery of the most recent Vatican pronouncements on both liturgy and doctrine. There is of course a danger, as in all human things, of first playing the tune badly and then, by way of reaction, ceasing to play it all. If the practices resulting from the doctrine of indulgences now seem a radically inadequate way of commemorating the dead, it would be lamentable if their disappearance were to be succeeded by nothing. But this seems improbable, given the depths of our involvement with those who have died. There is no reason to suppose that we lack the resource to find new ways of praying, just as those who still prefer the old ways sustain them regardless of what liturgical purists say. Candles are still lit at side altars during the celebration of mass. It is doctrinaire, especially in things which touch us so intimately, to insist that there is only one right way of praying for the dead.

### *Possibilities of transformation*

There is much to be said for the view that only in coming to terms with one's own mortality is it possible to be fully alive in the present.

This article has laboured to persuade the reader that the mistake is to suppose that such coming to terms equates with belief in an afterlife. Clearly some form of self-transcendence is desirable, and such experiences seem not uncommon. But it may well be alienating rather than life-enhancing to tie this aspiration too tightly to the notion of some other world which we enter by way of death, and to locate the consummation there. How many of us can say, hand on heart, that we are stirred or inspired by such a belief? The answer we give to this question has important consequences for how we think about and pray for, to or with the dead. Any view of death that takes the edge off life in the present is to be resisted as a flight from reality. Christians are ready enough to criticize reincarnation as an escapist idea, but are often reluctant to apply comparable critical rigour to their own convictions.

The cautionary note I want to emphasize is that taken-for-granted ideas about afterlife in another world are just as likely to be in denial of the reality of death as is a refusal to think about it at all. If there is unreality here, so will there be in every aspect of our involvement with the dead, however much we conscientiously call them to mind, praying for some and to others according to long-standing Catholic custom. Equally unreal is an insistence that this world is all there is, when by that is meant a world in which possibilities of transformation are not taken seriously. That, too, leaves no room for recognition that a developing engagement with those who have died is crucial to our identity. Anything which breaks or distorts that vital connection is destabilizing. This is a deprivation suffered in the first instance by the living.

### *The risen Jesus*

Mention needs to be made of the fact that traditional Christian prayers for the dead are made in the name of the risen Jesus, on whose behalf the claim is made that he did not remain 'among the dead'. To labour a point that is less obvious than it might first seem, that is very different from any suggestion that he did not die. It is also very different from the suggestion that at some point after death he resumed the previous form of his companionship with his own, for that would mean that he had not really died. His death meant that that chapter in their relationship with him was over, and for ever. There is no going back, as is made clear by the wonderful story of the angel with a flaming sword guarding the gate of Eden against the possibility of re-entry. That prohibition of regression, painful at times though it is, is in our best interests. This point was missed, *pace* Augustine's worries about nail-

clippings and so forth, by a parish priest who rebuked a widow for having her husband cremated. His grounds were that she had thus prevented her husband's resurrection. On the other hand there is no reason to suppose that the resurrection is a statement about an afterlife in another world. The image of bodily resurrection, it seems to me, has to do with a rearrangement of the furniture of this world. As such it is a sign of hope indivisibly for the living and the dead, not a glib or shadowy assurance that everything that is out of order here will be put right elsewhere.

### ***Hell***

It is also worth noting that the idea that everything would be put right elsewhere, when it was most strongly held, was accompanied by a highly coloured picture of an eternal hell which did not lack inhabitants. The satisfaction which even the most sophisticated medieval minds appear to have taken in contemplation of this, as a vindication of divine justice, is not something we readily share. It may be that our age, with good reason, is newly aware of the abiding ambiguities in all our lives. Within the kind of innocence that stops short of this awareness hell may have served as somewhere to put those people, or even those aspects of ourselves, with which we could not cope. As such it does not work, for they do not cease to be part of us. Belief in an eternal hell, however passionately held, resolves nothing in our relations with the dead. To see hell as the ultimate destiny of people like Hitler and Stalin or, as Dante did, of bad popes, is an attempt to vindicate a sense of justice, but it is on our terms. It is in one sense a relief, though an illusory one, not to have to think about such people, still less to pray for them.

### ***Conclusion***

In summary, the argument of this article is that placatory prayer for the dead, along with its accompanying practices, is no longer apposite. It reflected a fearful, sin-centred image of God and his relations with us, including those who had died. It imaged two worlds, rather than one world in process of transformation, thus promoting a dualistic understanding of what it is to be human and therefore of the state of the dead. It was individualistic, focusing on each in an unrelated way, as if the well-being of our dead could be secured in an atomized piecemeal manner and regardless of what was happening to us. Finally, placatory prayer does not reflect a proper sense of our involvement with the dead in a developing communion, fostered by creative remembering and

looking to an unimaginable consummation. This is what now seeks devotional expression, and it remains to be seen what will emerge. It is no use waiting for the Vatican – but devotional life has never found obstructive officialdom an insuperable obstacle.

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