

The Book of the Names of the Dead

REMEMBERING THE DEAD

Christian communities remember the names of their dead. These names are heard in the Prayer of the Faithful during Mass and in the chanting of the Litany of the Saints at the Easter Vigil. The names of the deceased are seen on holy cards, memorial cards, and grave markers. Masses are prayed for the repose of souls. These rituals and practices serve to keep the memory of those who have gone before us in faith present in our minds and hearts.

MONTH OF ALL SOULS

The origins of the solemnity of All Saints (November 1) and the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed (All Souls Day, November 2) are connected. Honoring the dead dates to prehistoric times and finds expression in various parts of the world, with tributes given to deceased loved ones and veneration of those most worthy offered on the day of their birth. In the pre-Christian Celtic religion, November 1 and 2 were the celebration of their new year, when dead souls would return for a visit.

From the beginnings of the Church, Christians have cherished the memory of those martyred for the faith as icons of Jesus Christ. The small shrines built where the martyrs' remains were buried became places of prayer and pilgrimage. On the anniversary of a martyr's death, the *dies natales*, or birth into the new and heavenly Jerusalem, was commemorated at the tomb, with Eucharist celebrated at dawn on their graves. The martyrs became venerated as disciples and imitators of Christ.

All the saints are celebrated each year on November 1; however, most Christian traditions of honoring the dead are linked with All Souls Day on November 2. On this day, we remember our own loved ones who have gone before us in faith. These tributes extend beyond the day itself and last through the month of November, the Month of All Souls. The days are now at their darkest; crops have been harvested;



leaves have changed colors and are falling to the ground; the weather turns cold and bitter, while the readings of the liturgy direct our thoughts to the end times, when Christ will return in his full glory restoring the fullness of salvation to all of creation. What a perfect time to remember our beloved dead!

THE BOOK OF THE NAMES OF THE DEAD

During the Month of All Souls, many parishes have the custom of giving a place of honor to a book in which community members and visitors write the names of their beloved dead. *The Book of the Names of the Dead* was inspired by the ancient practice of recording the dates of the deaths of loved ones in a necrology, a public record or registry of death. This practice provides the living with an opportunity for healing and consolation in the face of grief.

The Book of the Names of the Dead is usually displayed from the solemnity of All Saints until the beginning of Advent. It is left open for people to write the names of their deceased loved ones and for others to read the names, remember, and pray for the repose of their souls. Some parishes place *The Book of the Names of the Dead* near the vestibule or gathering space. Others display the book near the baptismal font with the lighted Paschal candle nearby, symbolizing that the deceased have shared in the waters of Baptism, dying with Christ and rising to new life. Placing the book by these waters gives us hope that our beloved dead now share in Christ's Resurrection.

Parishioners may be invited to bring framed pictures of those who have died to be displayed near or around *The Book of the Names of the Dead*. Votive candles can be lit. Holy cards, icons, or art images of favorite saints can also be placed there, as well as autumn leaves and fall flowers.

Remembering all of these men and women who have gone before us, "marked with the sign of faith," helps us better understand and appreciate our faith in the Christ our risen Lord who conquers sin and death and brings new life to all.