



# The Holy See

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**LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
FOR THE CELEBRATION OF THE MILLENNIUM  
OF THE COMMEMORATION OF ALL THE FAITHFUL DEPARTED**

*To The Most Reverend Raymond Séguy  
Bishop of Autun, Châlon and Mâcon Abbot of Cluny*

1. This year, when we are celebrating the millennium of the *Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed*, established by St Odilo, fifth Abbot of Cluny, the centenary of the foundation of the *Archconfraternity of Our Lady of Cluny*, committed to praying for the souls in purgatory, and the 40th anniversary of the bulletin *Lumière et vie*, which promotes prayer for the dead, I gladly join in spirit all those who will take part this year in the celebrations offered for those who have gone before us. Indeed, on the day after the feast of All Saints, when the Church joyfully celebrates the communion of saints and human salvation, St Odilo urged his monks to say special prayers for all the dead, thus mysteriously contributing to their entry into beatitude; the custom of solemnly interceding for the dead in a celebration which St Odilo called All Souls Day gradually spread from the Abbey of Cluny and is now the practice throughout the universal Church.

2. In praying for the dead, the Church above all contemplates the mystery of the Resurrection of Christ, who obtains salvation and eternal life for us through his Cross. Thus with St Odilo we can ceaselessly repeat: "The Cross is my refuge, my way and my life The Cross is my invincible weapon. The Cross repels all evil. The Cross dispels the darkness". The Lord's Cross reminds us that all life is illumined by the light of Easter and that no situation is totally lost, for Christ conquered death and opened the way for us to true life. Redemption "is brought about in the sacrifice of Christ, by which man redeems the debt of sin and is reconciled to God" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 7).

3. Our hope is founded on Christ's sacrifice. His Resurrection inaugurates the "end of the times" (1 Pt 1:20; cf. Heb 1:2). The belief in eternal life which we profess in the Creed is an invitation to the

joyful hope of seeing God face to face. To believe in the resurrection of the flesh is to recognize that there is a final end, an ultimate goal for all human life, “which so satisfies man’s appetite that nothing else is left for him to desire” (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 1, a. 5; St Paulinus of Nola, *Letters*, 1, 2). This same desire is wonderfully expressed by St Augustine: “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you” (*Confessions*, I, 1). Thus, we are all called to live with Christ, seated at the right hand of the Father, and to contemplate the Holy Trinity, for “God is the principal object of Christian hope” (Alphonsus Liguori, *Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ*, 16, 2); we can say with Job: “I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold and not another” (Jb 19:25-27).

4. Let us also remember that the Mystical Body of Christ is waiting to be reunited at the end of history, when all its members will be in perfect beatitude and God will be all in all (cf. Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus*, n. 7). In fact, the Church hopes for the eternal salvation of all her children and of all mankind. “We believe that the Church is necessary to salvation, for Christ is the one mediator and way of salvation and he becomes present to us in his Body which is the Church, but the divine design of salvation embraces all men. Those indeed who are in ignorance of Christ’s Gospel and of his Church through no fault of their own, who search for God in sincerity of heart, and who, acting according to conscience, strive under the influence of grace to fulfil his will, belong to his people, even though in a way we cannot see, and can obtain eternal salvation. Their number is known only to God” (Paul VI, *Credo of the People of God*, 30 June 1968).

While waiting for death to be overcome once and for all, “some of the disciples are pilgrims on earth. Others have died and are being purified, while still others are in glory”, contemplating the Trinity in full light (Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, n. 49; cf. Eugene IV, *Bull Laetantur coeli*). Joined to the merits of the saints, our fraternal prayer comes to the aid of those who await the beatific vision. Intercession for the dead, just as the life of those living according to the divine commandments, obtains the merits that serve the full attainment of salvation. It is an expression of the fraternal charity of the one family of God, by which “we are faithful to the Church’s deepest vocation” (*Lumen gentium*, n. 51): “to save souls who will love God eternally” (Thérèse of Lisieux, *Prayers*, 6; cf. *Manuscript A 77r<sup>o</sup>*). For the souls in purgatory, waiting for eternal happiness and for meeting the Beloved is a source of suffering, because of the punishment due to sin which separates them from God. But there is also the certitude that once the time of purification is over, the soul will go to meet the One it desires (cf. Ps 42; 62).

5. Contemplation of the lives of those who have followed Christ encourages us to lead a good, upright Christian life which makes us “worthy of the kingdom of God” (2 Thes 1:5). Thus we are called to “supernatural vigilance”, in the words of Cardinal Perraud (*Lettre à l’occasion du neuvième centenaire de la fête pour les morts*), so that we can prepare ourselves each day for eternal life. As Cardinal John Henry Newman emphasized: “We are not simply to believe, but to watch; not simply to love, but to watch; not simply to obey, but to watch; ... and thus it happens

that watching is a suitable test of a Christian". This is because to watch is "to be detached from what is present, and to live in what is unseen; to live in the thought of Christ as he came once, and as he will come again; to desire his second coming" (*Parochial and Plain Sermons*, IV, 22).

6. The prayers of intercession and petition which the Church never ceases to raise to God have great value. They are "characteristic of a heart attuned to God's mercy" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2635). The Lord always lets himself be moved by his children's supplications, for he is the God of the living. During the Eucharist, through the general intercessions and the *Memento* for the dead, the assembled community presents to the Father of all mercies those who have died, so that through the trial of purgatory they will be purified, if necessary, and attain eternal joy. In entrusting them to the Lord, we recognize our solidarity with them and share in their salvation in this wondrous mystery of the communion of saints. The Church believes that the souls detained in purgatory "are helped by the prayers of the faithful and most of all by the acceptable sacrifice of the altar" (Council of Trent, *Decree on Purgatory*), as well as by "alms and other works of piety" (Eugene IV, *Bull Laetantur coeli*). "In fact, that same holiness, which is derived simply from their participation in the Church's holiness, represents their first and fundamental contribution to the holiness of the Church herself, which is the 'communion of saints'" (*Christifideles laici*, n. 17).

7. I therefore encourage Catholics to pray fervently for the dead, for their family members and for all our brothers and sisters who have died, that they may obtain the remission of the punishments due to their sins and may hear the Lord's call: "Come, O my dear soul, to eternal repose in the arms of my goodness, which has prepared eternal delights for you" (Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 17, 4).

As I entrust the faithful who will pray for the dead to the intercession of Our Lady, of St Odilo and of St Joseph, patron of a happy death, I cordially grant my Apostolic Blessing to them and to the members of the diocesan community of Autun, to the members of the *Archconfraternity of Our Lady of Cluny* and to the readers of the bulletin *Lumière et vie*. I willingly extend it during the millennial year to all who pray for the intention of the souls in purgatory, who take part in the Eucharist and who offer sacrifices for the dead.

From the Vatican, 2 June 1998.

**IOANNES PAULUS PP. II**

