

The Faithful Departed



Commemorating the Faithful
Departed in Prayer

ZION TRACT SERIES



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THE REV. FR. MARK P. BRADEN
serves as Pastor of Zion Evangelical-Lutheran
Church of Detroit since 2009.

Zion Evangelical-Lutheran Church
4305 Military Avenue
Detroit, MI 48210

www.ZionDetroit.org
313.894.7450

ZionDetroit

Introduction

“Wait a minute, did he just pray for dead people?” Some visitors to Zion are surprised that during the Mass we commemorate the faithful departed before God in prayer. To help you understand this ancient Christian, Lutheran practice, and that you rightly say “Amen!” to the prayers of the Mass, the following will explain the historic Lutheran practice, as well as the intercessions you heard today:

History

In his *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Martin Chemnitz, also one of the authors of the Book of Concord of 1580 A.✠D., writes “...in the history of antiquity remembrance was made in the prayers of the church also of the departed, whose souls the godly commend to God in their prayers...”. Chemnitz’s reference to the “history of antiquity” is no doubt a reference to the δίπτυχον or *Diptych*, a two-leaved folder that contained the lists of the names of those counted as members of the Church, the living as well as the faithful departed. Both Sts. Cyprian and Chrysostom provide early (3rd and 4th century A.✠D.) attestation to the use of the *Diptych*.

While the ancient usage lacked uniformity, during the Mass the *Diptychs*, both of the living and the dead, were at times laid on the altar, and were often read either from the altar, or from the Ambo. This was done by either a Priest or a Deacon. The reading of the *Diptychs* served as a liturgical confession of the doctrine of the Communion of the Saints. By the 5th century the usage was fixed in the Western Church, and continued into the 12th century in the west, and the 14th century in the east.

¹Chemnitz, Martin, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, trans. F. Kramer, vol. III. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007, pg 259.

²*The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, pg. 487. Maere, R. (1909). “Diptych”. In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company)

It is good and right to give thanks to God for His grace shown to those who have gone before us with the sign of faith, and it brings great comfort to the Christian to remember during the Divine Service the joy and bliss that God has promised in Christ to all those whose souls are now with Christ, awaiting the resurrection of all flesh, when in their transformed, glorified bodies they will be united with us in heavenly glory for eternity.

From the General Intercessions of Zion:

Let us commemorate the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints, that we may follow them in godly faith:

In communion with the Church of all times and all places, we commemorate the blessed patriarchs, prophets, evangelists, apostles, confessors, martyrs, and all Your saints, especially blessed Mary ever virgin, the mother of sJesus Christ, our God and Lord. And although we are undeserving sinners, be pleased to grant us communion and fellowship with those in heaven whose victory we celebrate on earth. Into their company we implore You to admit us, not weighing our merits, but freely pardoning our offenses. Lord, in Your mercy;

Let us commend to Our Lord all those who have gone before us in the Faith, especially (*Nn.*):

We also pray that You remember (*Nn.*) and all our loved ones who have gone before us with the sign of Faith and now sleep the sleep of peace (pause for private remembrances). Grant to these, and all who rest in Christ, as You have promised, a place of refreshment, light, and peace. Lord, in Your mercy;

(A fuller explanation of this topic can be found in *Gottesdienst* magazine, the Pentecost, 2015 issue, where Father Braden elaborates on the practice of commemorating the faithful departed in the Divine Service.)

In the west, the ancient reading of the names of the faithful living and the faithful departed soon facilitated the creation and observance of the sanctoral calendar, including many of the saints we commemorate today. Years later, it developed into the *Memento* of the Roman Canon, said to be drawn from the words of Vulgate Psalm 131, "*Memento Domine*" (Psalm 132 in the *Authorized Version*).

Martin Chemnitz discusses the commemoration of the faithful departed at some length: "Therefore the prayers of the ancients for the dead were not satisfactions for the sins of the dead, not redemptions of their souls from the fire of purgatory, but public celebrations, applications, and sealings of the divine promises about the forgiveness of sins, the repose, and the salvation of those who died piously; they were instructions and exhortations for the living; there were consolations and strengthening of the grieving; and they were declarations of kindly affections of the mind toward the departed. For it would be animalistic apathy not to be touched by the death of one's own, to erase the memory of departed friends immediately from the mind, not to wish them well and to pray for their welfare – all of which, however, are to be kept in bounds according to the Word. In this way and in this sense also the Apology of the [Augsburg] Confession says 'We do not forbid prayers for the dead.'" ³

In light of Luther's piercing criticism of the Canon and its parts, and his willingness to excise it completely from the Divine Service, it might surprise the reader of Chemnitz's *Examen* (which began to be published in 1565) to find statements in support of the commemoration of the faithful departed during the Mass: "...because our Apology says that we do not prohibit

³*Ibid*, pgs. 268-269.

prayers for the dead, and because also Luther in his confession permits this.”⁴

The section of the *Apology* that Chemnitz cites occurs in Article XXIV in paragraph 94: “...we know that the ancients speak of prayer for the dead, which we do not prohibit; but we disapprove of the application *ex opere operato* of the Lord’s Supper on behalf of the dead.”

Luther states his position on commemorating the faithful departed in his great *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper*. There Luther, writing against indulgences, asserts “As for the dead, since Scripture gives us no information on the subject, I regard it as no sin to pray with free devotion in this or some similar fashion: ‘Dear God, if this soul is in a condition accessible to mercy, be Thou gracious to it.’ And when this has been done once or twice, let it suffice. For vigils and requiem masses and yearly celebrations of requiems are useless, and are merely the devil’s annual fair.”⁵

Today

From the practice of our father’s in the faith, and Chemnitz’s explanation and from Luther’s comments, it is clear that it is completely appropriate for us to commemorate the faithful departed during the Divine Service. Of course, the prayers offered can seek no change in the status of the faithful departed, rather they should simply commemorate the faithful departed in thanksgiving to God, and ask only what God has clearly promised in His Word. Chemnitz further comments, “However all sane people know that it does not follow by any kind of necessity.”

This type of prayer is common to our funeral rite, as is seen in the *The Lutheran Agenda* (82-83). By this prayer and others like it, we are reminded of the eternal unity of the Communion of the Saints as confessed in the Creed. The

⁴*ibid*, 259-260.

⁵*Luther’s Works, The American Edition*, Vol. 37, pg. 369, see also the note on pg. 293.

commemoration of the faithful departed can also bring great comfort to the bereaved as they remember in thanksgiving before God the lives of their loved ones and give thanks to God for the sure promise of heaven for those who depart this life in the faith. In the Divine Service we are united to the Church Victorious in our worship of the Lamb they now behold.

Our Liturgical Observance

For these reasons, among Lutherans (typically attributed to those of Prussian heritage) *Totenfest* is celebrated. This Feast, which falls on the last Sunday of the church year, commemorates the faithful departed of the parish.⁶ The paraments for *Totenfest* are black.

The Feast of All Saints (November 1) commemorates the Christian departed of all times and places, as does the Feast of the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed (of old called the Feast of All Souls, observed on November 2, which, if it falls on a Sunday, is transferred to November 3). The celebration of both of these Feasts among Lutherans is described in *The Lutheran Cyclopedia*.

The Feast of All Saints focuses on the joy and bliss of the Church in Glory. The paraments for All Saints are either white or red. The Feast of All Souls reminds us that physical death is for the Christian the “last enemy” (1 *Corinthians* 15:26), for us but the portal to life eternal. The paraments for All Souls can be either white or black.

The historic sequence hymn for the Feast of All Souls is *Dies Irae*, a 13th century hymn that may find its origins in Gregory the Great. The hymn is paraphrased for us in the hymn “Day of Wrath, O Day of Mourning”, *TLH* 607. It is common during the prayers of the Mass on *Totenfest* or All Saints to read the names of the parish faithful departed, and to toll the church bell after the reading of each name.

⁶*The Lutheran Cyclopedia*, rev. ed., ed. E. Lueker. 1975, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House. “Church Year”, 180.16-17; see also “Departed, Commemoration of”, pg. 232; and “Totenfest”, pg. 773)