



The Sunday of Deceased Priests

*This month's article is a slight adaptation of a sermon given at the Monastery for the Maronite "Sunday of Deceased Priests". In addition to the main topic of the article, we hope to inspire the reader to seek out in the prayers of the Church's Liturgy the **wealth of teaching** contained in it. This applies to all the Liturgical traditions of the Catholic Communion of Churches.*

In the Maronite Church, the Season of Epiphany focuses on the Baptism of the Lord and on the great Trinitarian revelation which occurred at that moment. The season also leads us to consider our own Baptism. In the first weeks of the season, our Maronite Liturgy has in its opening prayer a statement of Baptism's goal. The Church speaks to her Spouse and says: *"...the righteous will enter...Your garden of delights...with resplendent garments and shining faces."* This is the ultimate end of Baptism, a description of eternal salvation. Eternal salvation, our full incorporation into the life of the Most Holy Trinity after death, is the goal of Baptism. It is equally the goal of faith, because baptism is the inauguration of the life of faith, the "Sacrament of Faith".

So this season of Baptism and Trinity with good reason concludes with three weeks commemorating those who have been faithful to their Baptism, those who have "achieved faith's

goal, [their] salvation" (1Peter 1:9): those who have already entered, or who are guaranteed entrance into that "garden of delights..."

In the second of these three weeks which conclude the Season of Epiphany, we celebrate All Saints. In the first and third weeks, the Church commemorates those who have indeed "achieved faith's goal" but are still in need of purification. The Liturgy says that Christ *"taught us purification at the waters of the Jordan and traced a path of life before us to purify us from sin."* He "taught us", but we are slow learners; free will often hinders the work of Christ the Purifier, so some of the deceased, though saved forever, must undergo purification for the residue of sin which remains on their souls. And in the first week we pray for all deceased priests. And rightly do we mention them first, for we all owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to priests, to the sacramental priesthood.

“It is not possible to speak of the Church without the priesthood”. This is what St. Ignatius of Antioch said. He was a disciple of St. John, the Beloved Apostle—no little authority here! Our Liturgy calls Christ the “High Priest”. But the Church is identified with Christ. It is Jesus Christ living down through history. Therefore if you remove the priesthood from the Church, you delete Christ from the Church: Jesus Christ, High Priest and Head of His Body. “It is not possible to speak of the Church without the priesthood.”

The Liturgy further describes Jesus as “*the Good Shepherd who tends His Church,...the Careful Provider, who sees to the needs of His people and never lets them stray from the eye of His loving care.*”

But how has this Good Shepherd decreed to “*tend his Church,...to see to the needs of His people and never let them stray from the eye of His loving care*” after His Ascension? Through His priests. So, the Liturgy not surprisingly describes the role of the Priesthood – or part of the role of the Priesthood – in terms like those we just read of Christ, the One Priest-Shepherd. She prays to Christ and says: “[*You have*] *sent [priests] to shepherd Your Church; they are the guardians of Your Church, ...Your people.*” In other words, Jesus Christ the Priest lives and acts in His human ministers. The priesthood is profoundly conformed to Jesus Christ. And so what does the praying Church say? “*O Christ our Lord and God, you have chosen priests in Your likeness.*”

How great is the sacramental priesthood; it is like the divine Priest Himself! In the very first prayer of the Sunday of Deceased Priests, the Church spoke of priests as those who “*bless, forgive and grant life to [God’s] people.*” In fact, by means of the sacramental priesthood, our Lord has made Himself the Great, Visible Priest who strides down through the centuries “*blessing, forgiving, and granting life*” to those who seek these things. Again St. Ignatius: “It is not possible to speak of the Church without the priesthood.”

What a debt of gratitude we all owe! And even if the weakness of a few priests and bishops is always being thrown before our eyes, that changes nothing of the glory of the priesthood. Christ, the One Priest, is the Source and Font of all blessings coming to us through His ordained ministers, whom He has deigned to make participants in His One Only Priesthood. Hear St. Augustine: “as for the proud minister, he is to be ranked with the devil. (But) Christ is not thereby profaned: what flows through Him keeps it’s purity and what passes through Him remains clear and reaches the fertile earth.” And St. John Vianney says “ If we understand the priest on earth, we should die not of fright, but of love. The priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus.”

Yet these men whom we call priests are earthen vessels bearing such treasures. So the Church invites us not to get revenge on the Priesthood--that is almost suicide, or even “**attempted Deicide**” may be a more correct appraisal--but to love the priesthood and to pray for these great, yet “mere”, men whom we call “priests.” Consider **writing out** the names of all **your** “deceased priests”, who now can benefit by your prayers, your charity, your paying a debt of gratitude. And may Jesus Christ our Great Priest be praised!

