

Q&A

October 16, 2011

*“I thought that we had to work hard to be ‘closer to God’ while we were alive, because once we died there wasn’t anything we could do to change our acts or hearts. But I know that we pray for people who have died. Are we praying for God to have mercy on them? Can they still make choices that will affect them going to Heaven or Hell?”*

The scriptures and tradition of the Church teach that this life is the time and place for repentance, for turning to God, and for keeping Christ’s commandments, and that, after death there is not an opportunity for repentance leading to salvation.

[S]omeone said to him, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” And he said to them, “Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then he will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ (Luke 13:23-25, ESV)

Why, then, do we pray for those who have departed? It seems logical, some would say, that if they are “saved” we do not need to pray for them, and if they are not then our prayers cannot help them anyway.

The problem with this way of thinking is not that it is logical, but that it is founded on the wrong premise: namely, that prayer for the departed is only about getting them “from Hell to Heaven” and if we cannot do that we shouldn’t bother. But prayer flows out of love and mercy toward those for whom we pray. And this is precisely what God wants from us and for us: that we be merciful as He is merciful (Luke 6:36). On one hand, then, praying for the departed benefits those who pray, the living who offer their prayers for the departed.

But what about the departed themselves? They are benefited, too, by prayers on their behalf. Even if they are not “transferred” from Hell to Heaven, it is still possible that they can experience some consolation. St John Chrysostom, St Gregory the Theologian and St John of Damascus are among the many Fathers of the Church who explicitly teach that prayers and alms should be offered for the departed and that through these they may find some comfort and consolation. St John also states that prayers offered for the faithful departed at the Divine Liturgy, especially after the mystical sacrifice is offered, are especially beneficial to the departed. This is the reason, after the offering/anaphora at every Divine Liturgy while the choir and faithful sing “It is truly meet...”, the priest prays: “Remember all those who have fallen asleep before us in the hope of resurrection to eternal life, especially \_\_\_; grant them rest, O God, where the light of Thy countenance shines on them.”

In general, the custom of observing prayers for the dead has been held by the Orthodox Church since earliest times. The Divine Liturgy has always been celebrated in memory of the departed and, on these days, many have increased and continue to increase their offerings in the Church, assisting the poor and needy brethren out of love for their departed loved ones. (From *These Truths We Hold*)