

Seventh spiritual work of mercy: pray for living, dead

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |



Prayer is the act of focusing our hearts and minds on God. It is a foundational part of all religious practice. Praying for others, both the living and the dead, is at the heart of the Catholic faith. We pray not only for ourselves and our needs, but also for the needs of others.

We believe that God hears and responds to our prayers. We believe that we can assist those in need by praying for them. This is why praying for the living and the dead is considered a spiritual work of mercy.

Throughout the Gospel accounts, Jesus sets the example for us by praying continually, including praying for his disciples. He is known as a person of great prayer. The importance of prayer was certainly picked up by his disciples, as is seen in the writings of the New Testament.

St. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-17 that the task of the Christian is to “rejoice always” and to “pray without ceasing.”

We hear of many accounts in the Bible in which communities are encouraged to pray for those sick and suffering and how “the prayer of faith will save the sick person” (James 5:15) and that if they have committed sins, those will be forgiven because “fervent prayer of a righteous person is very powerful” (James 5:16).

The story of Elijah praying for the young man who has stopped breathing in 1 Kings 17:21-22 shows us an example of how praying for others can bring about amazing results: “The Lord

heard the prayer of Elijah; the life breath returned to the child's body and he lived."

Another example of the power of praying for others is found in Acts 12. Peter has been put into prison by King Herod. While in prison, Peter is being supported by the Christian community through prayer: "Prayer by the church was fervently being made to God on his behalf" (Acts 12:5).

Peter is then rescued by the angel of the Lord, who leads him safely back to the prayerful community, who are astounded at his rescue.

The belief in the power of prayer on behalf of others is seen most clearly in Exodus. God is angry with the Hebrew people because they have chosen to worship a golden calf and threatens to cleanse them with fire. Moses intervenes on their behalf and asks God to have mercy, and "so the Lord changed his mind about the punishment he had threatened to inflict on his people" (Exodus 32:14).

Praying for the dead reflects the Catholic belief in the communion of saints, the idea that we belong to a community of believers that stretches back throughout history.

We are surrounded, according to the Letter to the Hebrews, by "so great a cloud of witnesses" who will support us as we run the "race that lies before us" (Hebrews 12:1).

Romans 8:34-39 makes the point that death does not separate us from the love of God, because Jesus continues to intercede on our behalf.

Indeed, praying for others, whether living or dead, is an act of mercy.