A Pastoral Letter

'At the Hour of Our Death'

To be read at all Masses on Sunday 29th October 2023

My dear brothers and sisters,

The shortening days of November naturally turn our minds to the mystery of death and all that is to follow. In the unfading light of Christ's Cross and Resurrection we are called to pray for all who have gone before us. In this way, we live the second of the commandments: *"You must love your neighbour as yourself"* [i] The first days of November – the Solemnity of All Saints and the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed - invite us to lift our sights to the Church in glory and pray for the souls in purification. The Church teaches that *"our prayer for them is capable of helping them, but also of making their intercession effective for us"*.[ii] We pray and ask the prayers of those gone before us because the bond between us is not broken by death. The Church desires to show this same care for the departed in all her funeral rites, interceding on their behalf and ministering to the sorrowing.

In my early years as a priest, I sometimes prayed the last prayers at a graveside where no one was left to mourn. The funeral directors out of charity, would join me to form a congregation and respond to those prayers. Sadly, we are now seeing funerals being promoted commercially at which no one is to be present, and no prayer is to be offered. 'No fuss' funerals seem devised to prevent participation by family, friend or community. The recent secularisation and even trivialisation of funerals may have led people to abandon the thought of having a funeral, as they see no purpose. We must surely be concerned for the human impact of these developments and recognise the loss of the Christian vision of what should mark our passing from this world. For a Christian funeral is not the disposing of a body, but a calling together in prayer and in hope.[iii] November reminds us of this final duty of charity we owe to each other.

The Church commends at the end of our earthly pilgrimage that we should be fortified by the grace of the Sacraments of Penance, Anointing and the Holy Eucharist.[iv] We should never hesitate to call the priest to assist those who are dying so that in this most decisive hour we may be supported in the beautiful words of Saint John Henry Newman *"In the strong arms of the Sacraments"*.[v]

Nor does this duty of care and charity end in the hour of death, rather we are called to pray for those who have died. In her funeral rites the Church desires to commend our souls to God's merciful love and plead for our forgiveness[vi] just as in every Mass, we pray and intercede for all the faithful departed. It would be a mistake to think of a funeral merely as the celebration of a life now ended. As I wrote to you a decade ago, the dead do not need our praises, but they do need our prayers.

This is why the community is called together in prayer and in hope, and in offering the Eucharistic Sacrifice for the one who has died. The Mass is the principal celebration of a Christian funeral because the Mass is the greatest of all prayers, the prayer of Christ Himself *"the very body which he gave up for us on the cross, the very blood which he 'poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'"*.[vii] In the light of Christ's victory over sin and death we come together recognising the spiritual bond which endures between the living and the departed. This is surely the greatest consolation of those who mourn.

November calls us to such renewed prayer for all who have gone before us. We trust many will also pray for us as the Rites of Holy Mother Church accompany us in our final hour. In the confidence expressed in those words we so often repeat *"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen."*

United with you in this prayer,

+ Mark

Bishop of Shrewsbury

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[i] Mt. 22: 39
[ii] Catechism of the Catholic Church No. 499
[iii] Cf. General Introduction to the Order of Christian Funerals
[iv] Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church 1523-1525
[v] Prayer for a Happy Death, John Henry Newman
[vi] Cf. Order of Christian Funeral No. 6
[vii] Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church 1364 & 1365