

Catholic Cemeteries Association honors the March 19th Feast Day of St. Joseph with a series of Masses to lovingly remember the one-year anniversary of the passing of our dearly departed.

<https://www.clecem.org/Events/AnniversaryMass.aspx>

St. Joseph Gives Us the Formula for a Happy Death

November 1, 2021

COMMENTARY: What comes after this life will be the greatest story ever told, for we will see in the Father's eyes the story of our own life and of everyone else's life in the world.



Last November, I traveled back to my home state of Iowa for my youngest nephew's wedding. Unexpectedly, my father's health swiftly declined, and, in God's providence, I was able to be with my father, Nicholas, the last week of his life. He received all that the Church offers for the dying, including a Mass of Viaticum around his hospice bed with my mother and my sister and her husband in my parent's home.

While praying the Rosary, when he was semi-comatose, Dad suddenly opened his eyes, which immediately fixed and followed something. I asked him what he was looking at. He replied, "The Blessed Mother ... the Blessed Mother and the Baby Jesus."

After his death, as I was looking through his little blue Catholic prayer book, which was held together with strapping tape, I found a prayer paper clipped inside that he had cut out of the local Catholic newspaper. It was a "Prayer for a Happy Death" that was brown with age and use. From the wear of the paper, I could tell he had obviously prayed that regularly, probably daily.

"The Church encourages us to prepare ourselves for the hour of our death. In the litany of the saints, for instance, she has us pray: 'From a sudden and unforeseen death, deliver us, O Lord'; to ask the Mother of God to intercede for us 'at the hour of our death' in the Hail Mary; and to entrust ourselves to St. Joseph, the patron of a happy death" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1014).

My father certainly had a happy death since he received the sacraments and had a loving family with him as he went to our true home in heaven. What a blessing that was to him and a great consolation for me and my family!

It is only because Christ died and rose again that we can even speak of "a happy death." Christ conquered death through his own death and resurrection. And "you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead" (Colossians 2:12, RSV).

At my father's grave is found his gravestone, with his name and the dates of his birth, wedding and death. But at the tomb of Jesus, there is no such marker; rather, the women were asked by the angels: "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen" (Luke 24:5). The tomb is empty, and so we can speak of "a happy death" for those "alive in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:5-6).

St. Joseph is the patron of a happy death because it is traditionally held that he died before Jesus began his public life. If, for example, Joseph had been alive when Jesus was crucified, would Jesus have entrusted his mother to his disciple John? Hardly. It seems, too, that once the public ministry of Jesus began, the work that the Heavenly Father had given Joseph to do had been fulfilled, for Joseph's active presence is never mentioned there.

So St. Joseph gives us the “formula” for a happy death: to live a life of loving service to God, to Jesus, to Mary and to others. (“He was a just man,” Matthew 1:19). St. Joseph died, then, as he had lived, with Jesus and Mary. Death for believers who strive to fulfill God’s will in their lives is not a terrifying extinguishing of life and entrance into the unknown, but, rather, is a gentle transition into the fullness of life that has already begun. St. Thérèse, at the end of her short life, said: “I am not dying. I am entering into life.”

When Mother Angelica and the nuns moved from Irondale, Alabama, to their new home at the Shrine of the Most Blessed Sacrament in Hanceville, Sister Raphael, Mother’s vicar and close friend, was close to death. She died on Jan. 9, 2000, a couple of weeks after the shrine’s dedication. Shortly before she died, Sister Raphael wanted to speak individually to each of her sisters, to each of the friars and to each person in EWTN leadership. She seemed to be between heaven and earth, and I still remember what she said to me. One of the vice presidents has often said to me, “I never saw anyone glow before.” Before she died, she said to Mother Angelica: “Mother, what you told us is all true! It’s all true!”

Yes, dear friends, it’s all true. That is why we can speak of such a thing as a happy death.

In this month of November, we are reminded to pray for the blessed repose of the souls of our departed loved ones. Let us also practice the “formula” of St. Joseph, patron of a happy death, by living a life of loving service to God and others, with the names of Jesus and Mary often on our lips, especially at “the hour of our death.” Then our own passage, our *transitus* (as we celebrate of St. Francis of Assisi annually on Oct. 3, the eve of his feast day), will be a gentle transition to the fullness of life that has already begun in us.

Scott Hahn, in his book *Hope to Die*, wrote that the Gospel has been called “the greatest story ever told,” but that it is really only the “introduction” because what comes after this life will be the greatest story ever told, for we will see in the Father’s eyes the story of our own life and of everyone else’s life in the world. We will see that each of our stories is connected to the other and will make sense of all the stories, the story we have been waiting our whole lives to hear. Not one story will be boring because the story of our salvation was written by God, and he orchestrates every detail of every life, working with and through our free will, in order to lead us to him: everlasting life and joy in heaven with him.

Incidentally, I later learned that my father, Nicholas, who had often prayed for a happy death, died on the memorial of St. Nicholas the Great, a pope of the ninth century who was a great defender of marriage in his time. My father bore witness to this, too, in his faithful marriage of 63 years to my mother, Rose, until death. May he rest in peace.



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