

17 — Facing Death

Objectives

By the end of this lesson students will be able to ...

- state that death is the result of evil.
- understand that Christ defeated death through His Resurrection.
- acknowledge that death, although not of God, is our way to further union with Him.
- state that we look forward to death and our future life with assurance of our life in God.
- realize that we pray for those who have died because we believe our prayers will help them attain their final state of triumph on the Last Day.

For the Catechist

Many people feel that talk about death should be avoided, especially where children are concerned. Psychologists, however, emphasize that when something remains unknown, it inspires more fear than when it is brought to light. Accordingly, this lesson attempts to discuss all aspects of death and dying openly. Negative aspects of pain and suffering, as well as the joyful realization that death brings us closer to our final glory in the Lord are presented. Before teaching this lesson, catechists should examine their own attitudes toward death and be prepared to share them with the group without shame or fear.

Common tradition of the Eastern and Western Churches is to pray for the dead. This reflects the belief that they do not attain their final state of bliss until the Last Day and so can be helped by our prayers. The West has called this intermediate condition purgatory and has seen it as punishment due to past sins, whether forgiven or not. The Eastern tradition has not given this intermediate state a name and prefers to see it as a period of further growth—a growth which is surely purging or cleansing, but not punishing. Catechists must always remember that all the terms given to these states after death, including *heaven* and *hell*, are simply images. They reflect in a very dim way the realities of either a union with God or a progressive separation from Him.

Last week the students were told to bring in for today's class a picture of a relative or friend who died. [Catechists should be prepared to share their own picture also.] It was suggested even pictures of a relative such as a grandmother or grandfather that they never met could be brought to class. These pictures will be used as part of the introduction. Another reason for the pictures is to help the students experience the discussion about death in a very real way by connecting the words to a former relative or friend. Encourage the students to share whenever they wish, but do not make anyone talk if he or she does not volunteer.

Materials Needed

Opening Prayer: Vesper folder

Review: Easel or wall pad markers with the objectives listed

Introduction: Pictures students brought in

Guided Reading: student text, pens, pencils, paper, flashlights (optional)

Vespers: Folders, prayer sheets, tape or glue, scissors

Activity A: "Journal," and Journal folders and pens or pencils

Closing Prayer: Vespers folders

1. Opening Prayer

- Gather in the icon corner and distribute the Vespers folders.
- Ask one student to choose the opening prayer.

2. Review

Review the main points of the previous lesson:

- We have begun our life in Christ at our Baptism, but our Pull triumph in Christ is yet to come.
- The process of becoming "God-like," our theosis or deification, is a life-long process during which we cooperate with God.
- The Feast of the Ascension celebrates Christ's glorification.

3. Introduction

- Ask the students to gather in a circle to share the pictures they brought to class. Ask each one to share the following as they hold up their picture to share:
 1. the name of the person
 2. something about the person's life
 3. the year they died and possibly one thing they remember about the death.
- Ask if anyone would like to share what they remember about the funeral if they attended. Encourage everyone to share, but do not make them talk.
- Hold up the picture you brought in and share what you remember about the person and the death.
- Now tell the students that they are going to learn more about eternal life that Jesus Christ's Resurrection won for all people who have fallen asleep in the Lord.

4. Guided Reading, Pages 85 "Death: A Stage of Growth"

Read this section and ask the students to share at least 3 images they can picture from this section: we leave our body; we move closer to our glory with God; death was like a cavern; Jesus Christ conquered death and made it a tunnel leading to Him.

Background Reading (Death: Disruption of Man's Destiny)

"Since God's purpose from the beginning is that we be one in body and soul and since His recreation of all things in Christ demands that our bodies be refashioned as well, we see how much death is a frustration of the very design of God. Death is not God's will; in itself it is not a progress or improvement in our state of being. Body and soul are not meant to be sundered. And so we can and should mourn death as a disruption of man's destiny....

"Death is truly an evil, a consequence of sin. Yet, God who 'makes all things work together for the good of those who love Him' (Romans 8:28), brings life even out of death. He allows death in order to preserve the universe from man who does not care if his actions bring death or not. And ultimately in the resurrection he makes death harmless again and sin curable" (*With Eyes of Faith* 96-97).

The early Christian tradition does speak of death as a 'dormition' or repose, an image of falling asleep. To this day we use the term Dormition in the title of liturgical feasts remembering the death of a saint. The most prominent, of course, is the Feast of the Dormition or repose of the Theotokos, kept on August 15th. The Greek work *koimisis*, which we translate as dormition also gives rise to the term cemetery or sleeping-place, another indication of the early view of death" (*With Eyes of Faith* 100).

Guided Reading, Pages 85-86, "We Pray for the Dead"

- Read this section aloud.
- Ask if anyone has ever attended an All Souls Saturday Memorial Service. [Ask them to share—some churches have the parishioners hold candles; some have a loaf of bread that is shared at the end of the service; some have a dish of sweetened boiled wheat (kolyva) that is shared.]

Guided Reading, Pages 86, "Funeral Services"

Complete the reading aloud and ask the students to share if they remember this service—possibly for the person whose picture they showed at the beginning of class.

Guided Reading, Pages 86, "Our Home"

- Read aloud the first paragraph and have all the students read aloud together the Scripture.
- Ask the students to explain what they think it means "we would rather leave the body and go home to the Lord"? Suggest they recall the story of Creation and God's original plan for us.

5. Ancient Wisdom for Today

Ask for a volunteer to read aloud the information on this page. Have the students write their answers to the questions and share them with the class.

[Suggestions: People mourn the dead because they miss them; he sees them lifeless in their tombs; St. John is wondering why must we die; we believe God's command that He gives rest to the dead—God is with them.]

6. Icon Study

- Have the students read the commentary on the Dormition of the Mother of God icon.
- If possible go into your church to find this icon. Ask the students to picture the person whose picture they shared at the beginning of class sitting in the arms of Jesus Christ. Ask them if the image of Jesus holding the person would help someone who really misses the relative or friend who died.

Background Reading (Praying for the Dead)

"Another tradition dating from the earliest days of the Church is to pray for the dead. Those who have reposed are mentioned in every Divine Liturgy. In addition, prayers for the departed are part of the daily offices every Saturday and especially those days called Saturdays of the Dead. Memorial services are held not only at funerals but at stated intervals, such as the third or fortieth day or on the annual anniversary. In this way we emphasize that the dead in Christ are still part of His body and that we still share with them a bond of mutual love. If we have been joined to His body and keep ourselves as temples of His Spirit, that relationship endures beyond the grave and so we continue to pray for one another in faith.

"Prayer for the dead also recognizes that, at least for those who have died in faith, the departed continue to progress to the Lord as was mentioned earlier. And so we pray for the forgiveness of the sins of the dead. Yet we know that these prayers would not profit one already apart from the Spirit.... So when we pray for the dead we are praying that the Lord bring those who are His own to the fullest union with Him. We know this is His desire and His promise, and so our prayers do not 'change His mind,' but confirm it" (*With Eyes of Faith* 101-102).

7. Vespers

- Have the students read the information about the Cantic of Simeon.
- Distribute the Vespers folder.
- Give each student one copy of the Cantic of Simeon (see page 132 where 3 copies are on one page).
- Ask the students to tape or glue this hymn onto a new page in their Vespers folder.

8. Activity A: My Personal Journal

Distribute Worksheet A along with pens or pencils. Have the students complete the worksheet in silence (or you can play religious music if available) and place it in their folder. Plan accordingly, but they should need no more than 5 minutes to complete the journal entry.

9. Activity B: We Pray for Our Family and Friends

Have the students make a collage with the pictures they shared in class. Use tape for pictures (available in craft stores) to attach the pictures. Ask the students to write the name of the person under their picture. Place the collage in the icon corner so that the students can pray for these people for the rest of the year.

[If someone does not want to leave their picture, ask if you may photocopy the picture so that the copy can be placed on the collage.]

10. Summary

Review the lesson. Ask if they are any further comments or questions about today's topics.

11. Closing Prayer

- Gather in the icon corner.
- Pray the Cantic of Simeon.
- Ask the student to go to the first page in their folder and pray from "Holy God" to the "Lord's Prayer."
- Ask them to memorize "O Most Holy Trinity" by next week. [If the students need a copy for home, photocopy these prayers that can be found in the second lesson in this instructional manual—pages 29-33.]

Canticle of Saint Simeon

Now You may dismiss Your servant, O Lord,
according to Your word, in peace.

Because my eyes have seen Your salvation,
which You have prepared in the sight of all people.

A light of revelation to the Gentiles
and the glory of Your people, Israel.

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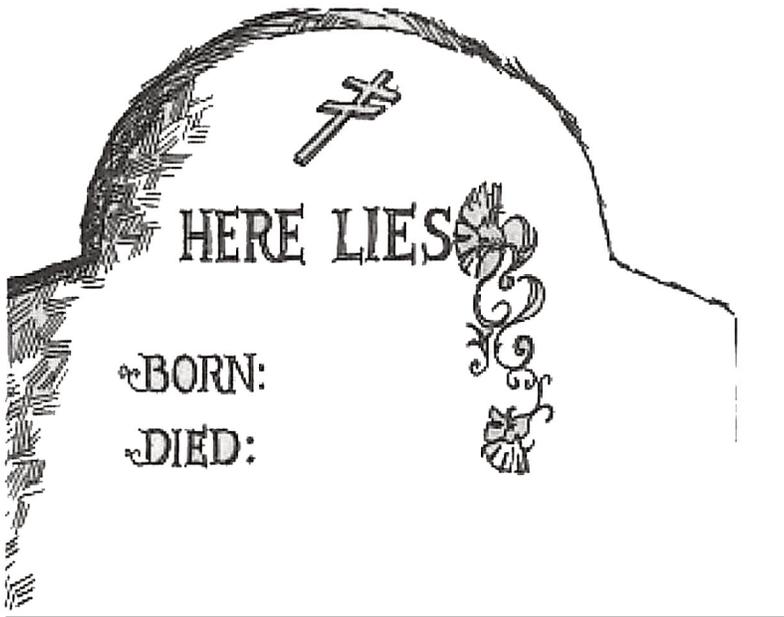
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My Personal Journal

Think of a close friend or relative who died. Write an epitaph (words written on the tombstone) in memory of him or her.



Think about your own death. Write your epitaph.

