

# The Feast of All Souls

The Feast of All Souls, which we celebrate in the Western Church on 2 November, made a relatively late entry into the liturgical calendar. It was instituted in 998 by Odilo, abbot of Cluny (France), a monastery which, at that time, was hugely influential and in effect 'controlled' many of the abbeys of western Europe. These were all Benedictine since, before the Cistercian Order was established in the late eleventh century – then to be followed by several other new Orders – this was western Christendom's only monastic Order. Benedictine houses had always commemorated the dead from within their own communities or otherwise associated with them: each monastery kept an ever-extending list of names, called the *Liber Vitae*, or Book of Life, reflecting the theological understanding that those being prayed for had passed to the life eternal. What Odilo did was to extend this to all other unnamed souls who had died, this in turn reflecting a theological understanding that the saying of masses for the dead would benefit those who, because of their venial sins, were in purgatory. The church generally, even beyond the monastic context, had always had a regular practice of praying for the dead: all that Odilo did was give the practice a special day, when three masses would be said; and he fixed on 2 November to associate it with the already well-established feast of All Saints on 1 November.

Odilo's new feast-day caught on quite quickly, but not quickly enough to be reflected in the Anglo-Saxon liturgy. However, it spread to England soon after the Norman Conquest, and continued through to the Reformation. Throughout this period masses for the dead and the establishment of chantry chapels for this purpose increased considerably. But the whole idea of purgatory, and in particular the notion that the actions of those on earth could buy relief from purgatory, whether through masses or indulgences, became a major bone of contention in the Reformation. Protestants were firmly against all of this, and so it's not surprising that when the Church of England's Book of Common Prayer was compiled, there was no reference to a Feast of All Souls (although All Saints was retained on 1 November as an act of commemoration).

All Souls came back into the Anglican tradition as a result of the Oxford Movement in the nineteenth century which, in developing what we now know as High Church practices, introduced liturgical and ritual customs that in varying degrees looked to pre-Reformation times. Of course, the theology of All Souls remained rather problematic in reformation terms, and so the new – or restored – feast-day was officially called the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed. Although it is not in the BCP, it was listed in the Church of England's Alternative Service Book, published in 1980, and it appears in Common Worship, published in 2000, where it is named in the Calendar as 'Commemoration of the Faithful Departed (All Souls' Day)'. However, while All Saints' Day, on 1 November, is listed in Common Worship in bold-red, meaning that it is a major holy day, All Souls (which is given in parenthesis as the unofficial but common name for the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed) is printed in ordinary black type, signifying that it is a lesser festival. The careful treatment of the name of the day in the Common Worship calendar reflects the impact of the Reformation on our understanding of what this festival is about or, to put it another way, how it actually works, theologically speaking.

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