A couple of August’s ago, I was traveling with a good friend to several sports venues in western Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio. That summer there was going to be an eclipse of the sun able to be seen over much of our country. The afternoon of the eclipse, we were on a sightseeing boat on one of the rivers that run through the city of Pittsburgh. As the brilliant blue summer sky grew dark and the shadows lengthened, perfect strangers aboard ship who had come prepared shared their special viewing glasses with us schleps who had none so we could gaze upon the wonders of this celestial happening. It was awesome to be able to behold the corona around the sun as if God were placing a ring on the hand of beloved Mother Earth, but without the glasses, we would have been blinded by the intensity of the unfiltered light and would have seen nothing.

Jesus, in St. Matthew’s gospel tells us, His followers, that we must care for the bodily needs of one another in the Corporal Works of Mercy:

1. Feed the hungry
2. Give drink to the thirsty
3. Clothe the naked
4. Shelter the homeless
5. Visit the sick
6. Visit the imprisoned
7. Bury the dead

And, just so, the teaching of Jesus and the ancient practice of the Church has been to also care for the non-physical needs of people in the Spiritual Works of Mercy:

1. Counsel the doubtful
2. Instruct the ignorant
3. Admonish the sinner
4. Comfort the sorrowful
5. Forgive injuries
6. Bear wrongs patiently
7. Pray for the living and the dead.

This last, to pray for the dead, is especially brought to our minds and hearts during this month of November, the month of the Holy Souls.

But, why ... why should Catholics pray for the dead ... have Masses said ... send spiritual bouquets ... light candles? After all, aren't the dead already with God in heaven? And even if that weren't true, isn't it too late for prayer to do any good? They've lived their lives. They've made their choices. There's no undoing or changing any of that now. So, why bother to pray for those who can't be affected by our prayers anymore?

At the dawn of Creation, the very first words God spoke into the cold, dark abyss were, "Let there be light!" Light. And, many, many generations later, after people had run from God's light over and over again, the Father's only begotten Son came into the world, the Light of the World at the dawn of a New Creation.
To see, to look upon the sun during an eclipse, we need special eyewear, special sunglasses. The same is true to look upon God. Some choose darkness often in this life, but still, choose goodness and God overall. When they die, they need to get accustomed to the Light of God, the Light of the Son, Jesus Christ. That’s what Purgatory is: a state of being where the souls of the just who may have chosen darkness many times in their earthly lives are given the grace to see the error of their ways, grace to accept the warmth of God’s merciful love, and, at last, grace to gaze upon the light of God’s beautiful countenance in heavenly joy where there are no more tears, where there is no more sorrow, no more darkness.

We pray for them, simply, that they might soon see God. And, if we pray for the soul of someone we have loved and they are already in heaven dwelling in unapproachable light, are our prayers wasted? Prayer is never wasted in God’s economy. Our prayers for our beloved dead now surround those we do not know, that their souls might soon be sped to heaven’s light.

Archbishop Fulton Sheen, rest his soul, used to have a vision of what the end would be like for the faithful who pray for the souls in Purgatory, who pray for those who have died. When our immortal souls stand at the entrance of heaven, a multitude will come to us, surround us with love, welcome us. “Who are you?” we will ask this throng of heavenly strangers, and each blessed soul will answer us, “You prayed for me; you prayed for me though you knew me not; you helped me see the Light; and I prayed for you and now you are here. Come, see the Light. God has been waiting for you. Come, look ... isn’t He beautiful!??”