

Purgatory

A Homily



I love the autumn but I must confess finding November the dreariest and most depressing month of the year. The days are short and often overcast. The temperature can be cold and the wind chills to the bone. With the trees bare and the sky gray everything has the appearances of death. In our part of the world it is easy to see why the Church might have designated November as the month to remember the Souls of the Faithful Departed.

While autumn confirms to us that summer is gone, yet, we know that somewhere else in the world it is now summer and one day we see it again. Likewise, even though death confirms to us that someone has gone, yet, we believe that their soul lives on beyond this physical dimension and that one-day, God willing, we shall see them again. We also believe that even though we will not see them again in this life yet we are in some mysterious way still united to them. We are part of a great spiritual communion that stretches across the great divide of death. This is possible because it has its origins not in us but in God. We affirm this belief every time we pray the Apostles Creed and say: "I believe...in the Communion of Saints."

What do we mean by "the Communion of Saints"? The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches us: "We believe in the communion of all the faithful of Christ, those who are pilgrims on earth, the dead who are being purified, and the blessed in heaven, all together forming one Church; and we believe that in this communion, the merciful love of God and his saints is always attentive to our prayers" (no. 962). We are all united with each other by the grace of Christ: those of us still on earth; those who have died and are being purified in Purgatory before entering Heaven; and those already in Heaven who see God face to face. Together we form one Church, one family, one Body in Christ.

On November 1st we honor all the Saints who are with God in Heaven. The Church has set aside particular dates on which it honours individual saints whose presence in Heaven has

been discerned through the official canonization process of the Church. But on this day we honour the vast number of souls in Heaven who are known to God alone. There they enjoy the direct vision of God and intercede for us – assisting us by their prayers (cf. Rev 5:8; 8:3). For the prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective (James 5:16), and whose more so than “the spirits of the righteous made perfect” (Heb 12:23) in Heaven. For our needs are not unknown to them for we are “compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12:1).

On November 2nd we remember the souls of the Faithful Departed who have died, and are saved, but are undergoing a final preparation for their entrance into everlasting glory. We read in the Catechism: “All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of Heaven. The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned” (nos. 1030, 1031). Referring to the 2nd Book of Maccabees (12:45) the Catechism says: “Because it is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins” we can be assured that “our prayer now for them is capable ...of helping them” (no. 958).

It is out of our common spiritual bond and love of neighbour that we pray for one another. We not only pray for the living but for the departed who have left this earthly life but who may still be undergoing a final purification before entering into Heaven. We pray for their release from the temporary sufferings they now undergo because of their previous bondage to sin, and have the masses offered up on their behalf. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is a powerful spiritual tool since in it Jesus Christ offers Himself in supplication to the Father on behalf of sinners.

Some find the teaching on Purgatory difficult, even strange. One of those persons was James Boswell. Boswell was the 18th century biographer and friend of the great literary critic and essayist Dr. Samuel Johnson. In his diary Boswell recorded a conversation he had one day with Dr Johnson on this very subject.

Boswell said to Johnson: "What do you think, Sir, of Purgatory, as believed by the Roman Catholics?"

Johnson replied: "Why, Sir, it is a very harmless doctrine. They are of the opinion that the generality of mankind are neither so obstinately wicked as to deserve everlasting punishment, nor so good as to merit being admitted into the society of blessed spirits; and therefore that God is graciously pleased to allow a middle state, where they may be purified by certain degrees of suffering. You see, Sir, there is nothing unreasonable in this."

Boswell: "But then, Sir, their Masses for the dead?"

Johnson: "Why, Sir, if it be at once established that there are souls in Purgatory, it is as proper to pray for them, as for our brethren of mankind who are yet in this life."

Although Johnson was not Catholic he recognized the reasonableness of the doctrine of Purgatory and that it was not at odds with other tenets of Christianity.

In fact, while Scripture does not use the term “Purgatory” (just as it does not use the term “Trinity” or “Incarnation”) it does contain the reality. For example, in Saint Matthew’s Gospel there is a confrontation between Christ and the Pharisees, in which they accuse Jesus of exercising authority over demons by the power of Beelzebul, the “prince of demons” (Mt. 12:24). Jesus warns them of the sin against the Holy Spirit and states: “Whoever says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” (Mt. 12:31-32). Notice how Our Lord implies some sins can be forgiven “in the age to come;” that is to say in the next life.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians Saint Paul addressed the issue of sin within the Christian community itself — that is, among those who were believers and had accepted the Lordship of Jesus Christ into their lives. St. Paul writes:

“For no other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any one builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble—each man’s work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire” (1 Cor 3:11-15).

The “Day” St Paul speaks of is the Day of the Lord or the Judgement Day. But the “fire” he is referring to can’t be the fires of Hell, because he makes it clear that the people who undergo this fire will be saved, while we know those who are in Hell are lost forever (Mt 25:41,46). And yet St Paul cannot be referring to Heaven either because he mentions they must undergo suffering, but there is no suffering in Heaven for it is where every tear will be wiped away (Rev. 21:4). Therefore he must be referring to a state in the next life where the saved can be purified of any attachment to sin but there will be suffering involved for it is as through fire (i.e. Purgatory).

While not all sin leads to Hell (1 Jn 5:16-17) yet still the book of Revelation does warn us that nothing unclean – that is tainted by sin – shall enter Heaven (Rev. 21:27). It appears that with this same truth in mind St Paul is telling us that after death there is a process of cleansing from sin that some of the saved need to undergo before they can enter into God’s holy presence. And this cleansing or purification can be compared to fire. In fact the Letter to the Hebrews refers to God as a “consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29). God Himself will completely cleanse from us any inner attachment to sin, manifested in our sinful deeds, that is born out of an unfit love – what St Paul compares to wood, hay, and stubble. And that which is in us that is born out of a more perfect love will be like the gold and silver St Paul speaks of – it will survive and be purified.

So let us take comfort in the fact that an imperfect love of God and neighbour may not exclude us from Heaven. For if our love has not been brought to perfection before we die (cf. Mt 5:48) in His great mercy God will bring it to perfection afterward, if we are counted among those who are saved. So let us pray for the souls of the faithful departed during this

month of November. Let us also unite our prayers for them with Christ's atoning sacrifice made present at Holy Mass (cf. 1 Cor 11:23-27). For it is "a holy and pious thought to make atonement for the dead that they might be freed from this sin" (2 Macc 12:46). The bonds of love and grace that still unite us require that we pray for them. They are part of the extended family to which we belong – the family of God.

Relevant Biblical References

1 John 5:14-17 ... Not all sins lead to death (i.e. not all are mortal sins, some are venial)

Luke 12:59; Mt 5:25-26 ... After the judgment there may be temporary punishment.

Matthew 12:32 ... Forgiveness in this life and next.

Revelation 21:27 ... Nothing unclean shall enter heaven.

Hebrews 12:23 ... Souls in heaven are perfect.

Hebrews 12:6-11 ... God's painful discipline.

Colossians 1:24 ... Our sufferings added unto Christ's.

1 Corinthians 3:15 ... Purification as by fire

2 Maccabees 12:43-46 ... Sacrifice and prayer offered for the dead.