

PURGATORY (2024)

November is almost upon us, and because November is dedicated to the Poor Souls in Purgatory, I would like to say something about Purgatory today.

In the Apostles' Creed (that prayer which begins the Rosary), we say, "I believe in ... the Communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins ..." Our belief in the Communion of Saints, is a very important doctrine. It refers to the fact that we as Catholics are a family, a family by virtue of our common baptism by which we gain membership in the Church. This membership forges a very special bond with all of us, a bond that doesn't end at death. This bond means that we are united with those who have gone before us and have been judged by God to be worthy of heaven.

This connection between us means that we can talk to and pray to those who have died and gone before us. They may include our parents and grandparents, our uncles and aunts and brothers and sisters and even children who may have died before us. This connection means we are not cut off from them nor are they cut off from us.

Rather, we are united with those in heaven, and we call these saints the Church Triumphant. We are united with our brothers and sisters in Christ here on earth, and together, we are called the Church Militant. Finally, we are united with those in Purgatory, and we call these souls the Church Suffering. We are only truly cut off from those who have died and gone to hell.

Our faith tells us that God made us to be with Him in heaven, but our faith also teaches that we don't necessarily go straight to heaven when we die, and here's the reason. Before a soul can enter into heaven, that soul must be completely pure and holy.

When we sin, we offend God. Now we can be forgiven if we're sorry. However, that is not the end of it because sin leaves a residue or scum on our soul which has to be cleaned up, and that residue is cleaned up when we do penance for our sins. That said, those souls who have not been washed clean in this life will have to do penance for their sins in Purgatory.

So what exactly is Purgatory? Purgatory is a place where the souls of faithful departed, that is, those who have repented of their sins but who have not fully made up for them, go to be purified and cleansed. In Purgatory, they are washed clean of the last stains of impurity and of any remaining selfishness before they can enter into the presence of God.

Now we know of Purgatory from many sources. For example, in the Book of Revelation it says, "**Nothing unclean can enter the Kingdom of Heaven (Rev 21:27).**" From this, it's clear that we must be purified of every stain of sin before we can see God face to face.

In the Old Testament, in the Second Book of Maccabees, it describes how Judas Maccabees had prayers and sacrifices offered for his soldiers who had died in battle. It says,

"[Judas] made atonement for the dead that they might be freed from [their sins]."
It goes on to say that he acted, "**in a very excellent and noble way, inasmuch as he had the resurrection of the dead in view ..."**

In Sacred Tradition, we see that as early as the second century, in a book entitled “The Acts of Paul and Thecla” reference is made to the Christian custom of praying for the dead.

In fact, early Christians wrote prayers for the dead on the walls of the catacombs. These inscriptions date from the first to the third centuries. Over the grave of a man named Abercius there is an inscription which reads, “He who understands this, let every co-religious utter a prayer for Abercius.” Scholars have determined that this man, Abercius, died before the year 216.

Saint Monica died in 387. She was the mother of Saint Augustine. Before she died, she said to her sons, “Bury my body wherever you will; let not care of it cause you any concern. One thing only I ask you, that you remember me at the altar of the Lord wherever you may be.”

From all this, it’s clear that the doctrine on Purgatory has been believed and taught by our ancestors in the faith from the earliest of times.

Now if we consider how this teaching on Purgatory applies to us personally, it makes complete sense. We know that we are not perfect. Furthermore, how many of us can say at this very moment that we have done sufficient penance for our sins? If we were to die in the next five minutes, how many of us could say that we are ready to see God face to face?

If we are totally honest with ourselves, most of us would probably say that we are not quite ready for death and judgment just now. We would probably say that before we see God face to face, we need to take care of a few things. So why would it be any different for our loved ones who have gone before us?

Maybe they did do sufficient penance for their sins before they died. Maybe they did become saints before God called them home, and here let me say that this is not only possible, but, as a priest, I have met quite a few people in my life who fall into that category. However, I would also say that the majority of us are not there yet, and that means some time in Purgatory awaits us after we die.

So what else can we say about Purgatory? One important thing is this. The souls in Purgatory can no longer help themselves; they can no longer gain merit for their good works. That time is over. However, we can help them. By our prayers and sacrifices, by having Masses said for them, our good works can help to shorten their time in Purgatory.

Think about it this way. Suppose a mother tells her sons that before they can go out and play, they have to pick up their rooms and do their chores. Now one brother gets done before the other, and he gets permission to go out and play, but he decides to stay and help his brother so they can both go out and play sooner. It works the same way with our prayers for those who have died.

In His mercy, God allows us to apply the merits of our prayers and sacrifices to those who may still be in Purgatory. In that way, our charity allows them to see God sooner.

Now let me make an important point here. Praying for the dead is a Catholic thing. Our belief in Purgatory is a Catholic thing. None of the various Protestant religions (with the possible exception of the Anglicans) believe in Purgatory or pray for the dead. Rather, their belief is that when you die, you are immediately judged and will then go to either heaven or hell.

This belief can be traced back to the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s. The reformers incorrectly believed that one is saved by faith alone (when the Scriptures say just the opposite – see James 2:24). They believed that one is justified by an act of faith alone and that from that point on, whatever one does or does not do doesn't really matter. They believed that the grace Jesus Christ won for us on the Cross covered our sins like a blanket of snow and that the Father did not look beyond or under that blanket of grace. By their logic, you either accept Jesus as your Savior and then go to heaven or you don't and go to hell. Hence, there was no need for Purgatory and hence no need to pray for the dead. So they rejected this ancient teaching of the Church.

Fast forward 500 plus years to our own times. Now our culture is not only influenced by the Protestant belief that there is no such thing as Purgatory, but it denies the existence of hell as well and so people have been led even further astray.

Most of us don't like hearing things that makes us uncomfortable. So, talking about judgement, as in Jesus is coming to judge the living and the dead is out. Also, talking about punishment, as in dreading the loss of heaven and the pains of hell (as we say in the Act of Contrition) is out.

To mention judgment or punishment or sin is to be negative and to make people feel bad. Consequently, because no one enjoys upsetting people (including priests), we hear very little today about these things and about the fact that our actions have consequences and that these consequences can indeed be eternal – but not hearing about them doesn't make them go away.

Sadly, because many people deny the existence of Purgatory, they no longer think to pray for the dead. After all, if everyone is going to heaven when they die, then there is no need to pray for Uncle Charlie or Cousin Sue. The sad thing is that many souls now languish in Purgatory because no one prays for them.

From our faith, we know of the existence of Purgatory. We also know that we can help the Poor Souls who are in Purgatory. Finally, in charity, we know we are called to pray for the souls in Purgatory who constitute the Church Suffering and who are our brothers and sisters. Through our prayers, we can lessen their sufferings and shorten their time of purification.

The Church reminds us of these things in general during the month of November and in particular on All Souls Day when we come together as the family of God to pray for our loved ones who may still be in Purgatory. Next Saturday, All Souls Day is a day set aside to pray for our departed loved ones – who were not so different from us – and who may still need our prayers to hasten their entry into eternal rest.

We pray for them and wish them rest just as they prayed for their parents and loved ones and just as all Christians have been taught to do since the Church began. Amen.