

November 2, Commemoration of all the Faithful Departed

Jesus gave his love to us right through to his death so that we would enjoy eternal communion with God, but, as we know, it is our choice whether to accept his offer or to reject it. Yesterday and today we are celebrating the memory, and the continued presence in our lives, of those who accepted his love and lived accordingly. Yesterday, the Feast of All Saints, we thanked God for those who look upon the face of God in perfect love. Today we thank God and we pray for those who died in union with God, but who are being purified by God's love so that they can enjoy full communion with God for eternity.

The doctrine of purgatory has been part of the religious sensibility of Christians since the beginning. It is based on a very simple and obvious truth. Only one who is wholly pure can see God and enjoy God's eternal embrace. The Letter to the Hebrews speaks of 'the holiness without which no one will see God'(Hebrews 12:14). The Apocalypse assures us that 'nothing unclean will enter heaven'(Apocalypse 21:27). The Catholic Catechism has this to say: 'All who die in God's grace and friendship, but who are still not perfectly 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'(n.1030).

Now, without taking it upon ourselves to judge the spiritual state of other people, it is still true that we have seen people die who are so clearly in love with God and have a beautiful purity about them. We speak of them as going straight to heaven. Of course no one is claiming that our judgment is absolutely correct, but the point I am making is that some people at death have so opened their heart to God and their soul to God's grace that we find ourselves speaking of them as saints. They have that 'holiness without which no one will see God'(Hebrews 12:14). For most people who die this seems not to be the case. It is not part of our faith that there has ever been anyone who has absolutely and obstinately rejected God, so we are not required to believe that anyone is in that state of separation from God which we call hell. It *is* part of our faith to accept that such a state is possible. We should do all we can to avoid it for ourselves and to love others in such a way that they will not choose it.

What happens to people who have not absolutely rejected God, who do want to love and want grace and are open to truth, but who die without that 'holiness without which no one will see God'? Christians answer this question with the doctrine of purgatory. It is not a place. It has nothing to do with time. There is no physical, material fire there. These are just images that we use to aid us in speaking about it. If I die with the effects of sin still cluttering my life, if I die only half-purified, then I will experience God's love as a love that causes pain. It does this because I will see my selfishness and self-centredness and I will not be able to hide from the poverty of my loving. I will experience pain because I realise that I cannot enjoy God to the full till his love has purged away all imperfections.

It cannot be any other way and we would not want it to be any other way. Who wants to be in communion with God with a half-pure heart? We will be in the state called purgatory until we are able to concentrate all our energies, with the help of God who awaits us, upon love. What period of truly human growth is ever free from suffering?. To cast off old attitudes is a painful, at times an agonising, experience, even in this present life. In the process of healing the sick soul, the psychiatrist knows the anguish caused by uprooting the knotted resistance to healing that

the illness throws up. But such agony is neither meaningless nor foreign. It is the very source of growth.

We are willing to spend hours in a queue to make sure of a good seat at a football game, even though we are not sure our team will win. Why wouldn't we be willing to await heaven till there is nothing but love in our hearts? In purgatory we experience pain, but it is the pain of love, the pain of unfulfilled longing. At the same time it is pain that is sure of heaven. The last bonds of ego-centredness are purged away, and we know that we will be with God and all those who have learned to love, for all eternity.

Jesus taught us not to fear death. It is organically part of the life-process that begins with conception and is destined for eternal communion with God. Death is a kind of horizon for us who are still living on earth. We cannot see beyond it. But for the person who is dying it is a passing over into another phase of being, one for which we are made and for which we long. In our Creed we say: 'We believe in the communion of saints'. Those in heaven and those on earth and those who are being purified in readiness for heaven - we all belong in love to each other. We are part of the one family. We can help each other by our love and we can reach each other in our prayer, for in prayer we are all united to God and so to each other.

Judas Maccabaeus knew this two hundred years before the death of Jesus when he 'made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin'(2Maccabees 12:45). The Catholic Catechism (n.1032) quotes words spoken by Saint John Chrysostom (4th century):.'Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them.'

Here on earth we know the comfort of being carried by the prayers of others, for in prayer we experience their love at its purest. Let us not think that death changes this. The saints are helping us, as are those in purgatory. They can help us, and they do. We can help them, too. Let this be a comfort for us in our grief, for its truth reminds us of how temporary our life here is and of the unbreakable bonds of love that unite us across death.

I conclude these reflections with a hymn composed by Cardinal Newman:

Jesus, by that shuddering dread which fell on thee
Jesus, by that cold dismay which sickened thee
Jesus, by that pang of heart which thrilled in thee
Jesus, by that mount of sins which crippled thee
Jesus, by that sense of guilt which stifled thee
Jesus, by that innocence which girdled thee
Jesus, by that sanctity which reigned in thee
Jesus, by that Godhead which was one with thee
Jesus, spare these souls which are so dear to thee
Souls who in prison calm and patient wait for thee
Hasten, Lord, their hour and bid them come to thee
To that glorious home where they shall ever gaze on thee.

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The Gospel chosen for this commemoration is taken from the Gospel of Matthew Chapter 11, verses 25 to 30. It is one of the most beautiful passages in Matthew's Gospel. We are given a glimpse into Jesus' heart as from his lips bursts a prayer to his Father of thanksgiving and praise. Jesus heart is heavy, for in the previous scenes he has experienced rejection from the religious leaders. This rejection reminds us of the plea of God expressed by Isaiah chapter 65: 'I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, 'Here I am, here I am,' to a nation that did not call on my name. I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people'.

In rejecting Jesus the religious leaders, who fancy themselves as wise and intelligent, are rejecting the God he is revealing to them, the God who loves them as a Father. They prefer to stay with the God of power, the God of control, a power and control, which, as leaders, they fancy themselves as sharing. This weighs heavily on Jesus' heart, but his prayer is one of profound joy, for the simple, ordinary people who are welcoming his message. Listening to Jesus, they are being freed from the burden of a controlling, punishing God as they learn to share Jesus' own conviction that God is a loving Father.

Jesus invites them, he invites us, to come out from under the heavy yoke of distorted religious teaching and to come to him. Life will still have its burdens, its disappointments, its sufferings, its 'yoke'. But we are not left alone to carry it. We have a God who fills us and surrounds us with love. Jesus himself will share the yoke with us. The God experienced by Jesus and revealed by him is a God who hears the cry of the poor and wants nothing more than to take people into his embrace. In promising his disciples rest for their souls, Jesus is promising them a share in his own intimate communion with God.