

The Holy Souls in Purgatory: A Reflection

November is the month the Church devotes to the Holy Souls in Purgatory. While we begin the month with the Solemnity of All Saints, a Holy Day of Obligation to honor all those who have attained heaven, the next day we follow with All Souls, in which we commemorate all the faithful departed who have not yet attained the joys of heaven, who are in purgatory.

Purgatory is "a state of final purification after death and before entrance into heaven for those who died in God's friendship, but were only imperfectly purified; a final cleansing of human imperfection before one is able to enter the joy of heaven."¹ The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence and Trent. The tradition of the Church, by references to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire.² To help our understanding of purgatory, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger offers these words:

With regard to turning out right, which is what we all hope for despite all our failures, purgatory plays an important part here. There will be few people whose lives are pure and fulfilled in all respects. And, we would hope, there will be few people whose lives have become an irredeemable and total No. For the most part, the longing for good has remained, despite many breakdowns, in some sense determinative. God can pick up the broken pieces and make something of them. In any case, we need a final cleansing, a cleansing by fire, to be exact, in which the gaze of Christ, so to say, burns us free from everything, and only under this purifying gaze are we, as it were, fit to be with God and able, then, to make our home with him... I think it is something very human. I would go so far as to say that if there was no purgatory, then we would have to invent it, for who would dare say of himself that he was able to stand directly before God. And yet we don't want to be, to use an image from Scripture, "a pot that turned out wrong," that has to be thrown away; we want to be able to be put right. Purgatory basically means that God can put the pieces back together again. That he can cleanse us in such a way that we are able to be with him and can stand there in the fullness of life. Purgatory strips off from one person what is unbearable and from another the inability to bear certain things, so that in each of them a pure heart is revealed, and we can see that we all belong together in one enormous symphony of being.³

Catholics are a people of hope. Hope is a virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit.⁴ As Christians, we desire this not only for ourselves but for others as well, living and deceased. And, so, from the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead, offering prayers for them...so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God.⁵

This month of November, the Committee on Ethics and Spirituality invite you to join in prayer for the Holy Souls in Purgatory, especially the souls of patients who have died and in particular for those who have no one to pray for them.

Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. And may the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.



Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope
-1 Peter 3:15

1. Catechism of the Catholic Church, <http://ccc.usccb.org/flipbooks/catechism/files/assets/basic-html/page-896.html>

2. Ibid, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P2N.HTM

3. Ratzinger, Joseph, Carl: *God and the World*, Ignatius, 2000, (pp. 129-130), as found in *Benedictus*, Magnificat, 2006, (p. 333).

4. Catechism of the Catholic Church, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P66.HTM

5. Ibid, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P2N.HTM