

Homily: 32nd Sunday: Cycle C: 2013: 2 Mc 7: 1-2, 9-14; Ps. 17; 2 Thes 2:16 – 3:5; Lk
20: 27-38

“**The Reality of Purgatory**”

In the Month of November the Church calls us to focus our attention on what has traditionally been called **the Last Things**: Death, Judgment, Heaven, Hell and Purgatory. Today I would like to offer a brief reflection on the reality of Purgatory and the importance of praying for the dead. See the story from Fr. Benedict Groeschel on the Protestant lady who came to believe in Purgatory based on reflection upon God’s mercy and justice and the state of her relative and friends: *most of them are not good enough to go straight to Heaven, I hope they are not bad enough to go to Hell, and so the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory makes the most sense as it gives me hope for all the people around me to get cleaned up spiritually after death if it doesn’t happen fully in this life.*

To be a bit more theologically precise than that dear lady, in **the Catechism of the Catholic Church** which is the authoritative standard of what we believe and teach as Catholics teaches us the following about Purgatory which is a dogma of the Faith and so is not an optional belief: **1030** 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.

1031 The Church gives the name *Purgatory* to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned.⁶⁰⁶ The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence and Trent. The tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire:⁶⁰⁷ (see 1 Corth 3:15 & 1 Pet 1:7)

As for certain lesser faults, we must believe that, before the Final Judgment, there is a purifying fire. He who is truth says that whoever utters blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will be pardoned neither in this age nor in the age to come. From this sentence we understand that certain offenses can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come.⁶⁰⁸

1032 This teaching is also based on the practice of prayer for the dead, already mentioned in Sacred Scripture: "Therefore [Judas Maccabeus] made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin."⁶⁰⁹ From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God.⁶¹⁰ The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead:

Let us help and commemorate them. If Job's sons were purified by their father's sacrifice, why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them.⁶¹¹

1. We hear in the Second book of Maccabees that **it is an excellent and noble thing to pray for the dead**, with the Resurrection of the dead in view (see 2 Macc 12: 43-46). This is the same book we hear from today concerning the heroic martyrdom of the mother and her seven sons. It is essential spiritual reading. The Catholic Church includes praying for the dead as one of **the Spiritual Works of Mercy**. We can do this in a number of different ways: by offering Masses for the deceased person(s) (which is the best way since the Mass is the most perfect prayer), by daily prayer, by offering our daily sufferings in union with Christ for them, by offering any merit or indulgence (partial or full) we obtain from the Lord's mercy for their spiritual well being.

2. **Why do the dead need prayers?** Well, because they might be in **Purgatory** (the very word mean to be purified). When we die, we go to one of three places: **Heaven, Hell or Purgatory**. To go directly to **Heaven** we must be a saint, meaning that we are perfectly purified and detached from all sin, big and small and that we have made sufficient reparation for the damage our sins caused in this world. **Saints** in their own unique personalities and circumstances are truly an image of Christ, in their heroic love for God and others in **ALL** aspects of their lives. This in reality seems to be a far too rare occurrence (St. Teresa of Avila who often conversed with departed souls said that "*among all the souls I have seen there are **only three** who totally escaped Purgatory after death.*" **Hungry Souls, p. 44**); it is safe to say, just from keen observation, that most people at the moment of death are NOT saints! What a sad reality that is (*the only real tragedy in life as one writer famously put it*), for the grace is there for all of us to become a saint, but it often doesn't occur in this life, and we can't blame God for that but only ourselves! **Why is it that most people do not die as saints?** Well, because it is hard work to become a saint! It's one thing to know **what is good** in our minds; it's another thing to consistency choose it in our wills, day in and day out, in an often heroic way, within all the obstacles that this life throws at us. This is why Jesus says in the Gospel, "*By your perseverance you will save your lives.*"

3. If we die, and are not in the state serious sin (which would separate us from God forever by sending us to **Hell**), but are still involved in some venial sins and/or have not been sufficiently purified of the remnants of our past forgiven sins (*since sin damages our souls and our relationship with God and others*), be they mortal and venial, we will go to **Purgatory**, which is the final purification of the elect (see *the Catechism of the Catholic Church: on Purgatory*, par 1030-32; and on **Indulgences and the temporal punishment due to sin**, par 1471-73). Remember we can be purified in this life of the temporal punishments due to our sins and avoid Purgatory all together: if we truly embrace our daily Cross in love, die to self, live a life of daily charity toward others, do daily mortification to make amends for our past sins (infidelity to God), and cooperate sufficiently with God's own initiatives to purify us, which Catholic spiritual theology calls "the passive purifications" of the senses and of the spirit (which St. John of the Cross calls the two "dark nights"). If this doesn't occur, in this life, to the degree necessary to mold us into a saint, we are off to Purgatory after death. And the great saint of Purgatory, St. Catherine of Genoa says the soul "*wants to go to Purgatory, once it encounters God in His magnificent holiness at the moment of death, and, yes, all people, not just Catholics, if they are saved by the mercy of Christ go to Purgatory, if they need to be purified of sin and its effects.* **Purgatory is the state of the cleansing or purifying fire of God's love.** St. Catherine of Genoa says it is connected to Heaven- like a room - and there is no lock on the door - but the souls will not enter Heaven until they are spiritually ready. Once in Purgatory, the souls know they eventually will enter into Heaven once they work through whatever they need to in order to be full of God's love, so they are full of the supernatural virtue of **hope and joy**. But Purgatory is also **painful** in the sense that we will finally see sin for what it is, in all its awful effects: how it truly hurt us, others, and our relationship with God. **It is much better to be purified in this life because we can still gain merit and grow in charity; that cannot occur in Purgatory.** Once in Purgatory the souls (called the Church **Suffering**) rely totally on the prayers and good works of others, the Church in Heaven (**Triumphant**) and especially on the Church on earth (**Militant**), to help them get to Heaven. It is

God's way of showing the souls in Purgatory the error of their ways in this earthly life - thinking they were self-sufficient (a sad fruit of sin), and forgetting that we depend on God's grace for everything, and that everything we do effects others, either for **good** by virtuous acts, or **evil** by sinful acts. **Now they, the souls in Purgatory, depend TOTALLY on others to help them get to Heaven.** What a powerful spiritual lesson of our merciful but also just Lord. Hence for those of us still living on earth, it should motivate us to change our lives and be willing to embrace heroic virtue, so we can avoid Purgatory all together, hopefully! And it should also motivate us to pray for the suffering souls there with a special love and concern. It is always a good thing to pray for the dead, and to remember if we are praying for a certain person in particular, and they are by God's grace already in Heaven, the Lord will use *our prayers, sacrifices, and good works* to help some other soul(s) in Purgatory, so it is **a no lose situation!** Also it is part of the pious Catholic spiritual Tradition that if you see one of your departed loved ones, or friends, or someone else who has died in **your dreams** that you should pray and offer Masses for their soul as they may be in Purgatory, and it should again remind us to turn away from all sin and live a holier life. And please **remember** each day to offer prayers for the **dying**, esp. those in the state of serious sin, throughout the world, that they accept the grace of final repentance from our merciful Lord, so they may be saved from the eternal separation of Hell. It's their last chance at salvation! And so it's a good idea to offer the chaplet of Divine Mercy for this intention and also the last decade of our Rosary each day for it as well. What an act of spiritual charity, and a way to gain many friends in Purgatory and Heaven who will then pray for us as well. God bless you.

Recommended Reading:

Catechism of the Catholic Church, esp. paragraphs 1030-32, 1471-73.

Hungry Souls: Supernatural Visits, Messages, and Warnings from Purgatory. Gerard J.M. Van Den Aardweg. Tan Books. 2009. (This is a new excellent book- please read it).

The Second book of Maccabees from the Bible.

Life Everlasting. Fr. Reginald Garrigou La-Grange. Tan Books. 1991.

Catherine of Genoa: Purgation and Purgatory, the Spiritual Dialog. By Serge Hughes, Benedict J. Groeschel, and Catherine de Hueck Doherty. Paulist Press. 1979.