

Purgatory, Surgery for the Soul

God is like a great heart surgeon, trying to give us the new hearts we need. But we keep flopping around on the table, moving away from the knife. Death then is like the anesthetic. In purgatory, we're no longer able to resist the healing we need, and he can finish the task he began during our lifetime.

Robert Corzine, St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology.

November is the month the Church dedicates to the holy souls in purgatory, affirming our Catholic belief, not only in the existence of purgatory but in the necessity for it. If there were only heaven or hell, what happens to those who have loved God and die before the Last Judgment but are neither damned nor sufficiently purified to enter into the Presence of God? Logic demands of God's love a place for the necessary final purification to render these souls worthy to enter into His glory. Purgatory is the entrance foyer to heaven. Otherwise the population of heaven would be very small and a contradiction to the infinite goodness of God Who willed the salvation of all. Divine Revelation confirms the existence of purgatory and our holy duty to pray for the dead, for those detained in purgatory can no longer help themselves but depend upon us to hasten their release into heaven. Once there, they will never forget those who have helped them. Such is the beauty of the communion of saints, the interdependence of the Church Triumphant, the Church Suffering and the Church Militant.

Many today deny the reality of sin and its temporal and eternal consequences. Often they deny God, too, and the afterlife, or live in the falsehood that God is too good to send anyone to hell. In truth, God is so good that He gave us free will so we could choose freely to love Him. He loves us so much He honors our choices. If we choose to deny Him and oppose and blaspheme Him in this life, He will not force Himself on us in the next. He deemed this gift so great that He always honors our free will. And sadly, since God created us for Himself and eternal happiness is union with Him, hell is the state of being without God, without light, without love, forever more! Forever!

In a September 18, 2013 article for **Our Sunday Visitor**, Emily Stimpson lists nine things we need to know about purgatory. One, that purgatory exists. Two, that purgatory isn't merely punishment but a testimony to God's love. Three, that the pain of purgatory is not physical, but spiritual. These souls have not yet been reunited with their bodies as will happen in the Last Judgment, but, having caught a glimpse of God, the fire of longing for the full beatific vision burns within them more intense than any fire on earth. Four, the souls in purgatory have joy as well as pain, for they suffer willingly in anticipation of their glory which is secure, unlike the fires of hell which have no hope of anything. Five, they need our prayers. Souls in purgatory can no longer help themselves, so we must, by offering the Eucharist, the highest form of prayer, and Our

Lady's rosary, as well as other sacrifices and prayers on their behalf. Six, they intercede for us even though they cannot help themselves. Seven, the Church's teachings on purgatory are rooted in Scripture. Just one example: Judas Maccabees ordered prayers and sacrifices for his fallen men who had committed idolatry shortly before their death. Eight, purgatory was not a Medieval invention. Although the Church did not define the doctrine until the Second Council of Lyons in 1274, belief in a purgative state and the need for prayers for the dead goes back to the beginning of the Church itself. Burying the dead was seen as a spiritual work of mercy. Money was often left for Masses to be said for the dead. Since those in heaven have no need for our prayers, and those in hell cannot profit from them, this prayer for the dead benefits the souls in purgatory. And lastly, purgatory is like summer school. It is there for those who need it, but purgatory should not be the norm. God gives all of us the necessary grace to enter heaven without delay. Do we use all that grace?

Many may not think of joy in purgatory, but the mystic, St. Catherine of Genoa, had a vision of purgatory and in her treatise on purgatory wrote:

I believe no happiness can be found worthy to be compared with that of a soul in Purgatory except that of the saints in Paradise; and day by day this happiness grows as God flows into these souls, more and more as the hindrance to His entrance is consumed. Sin's rust is the hindrance, and the fire burns the rust away so that more and more the soul opens itself up to the divine inflowing.

St. Catherine describes purgatory as the experience of God's burning love for the soul over that of punishment. It is not a torture chamber but rather the infusion of the fiery love of God into the soul, at once attractive and painful, as it burns away the rust of sin. She speaks of the "beatific instinct," that capacity to love God that was given each of us in varying degrees at creation. Purgatory shows us our sins and how great a distance we are from what we were created to be. Once seen, she says, our focus is away from sin and imperfection and is oriented totally on God. The soul's joy in purgatory is the first profound glimpse of God; its suffering is the agonizing longing for that glory it has seen but does not yet fully possess. The New Testament tells us we can free ourselves of this "rust" already in this life. Being baptized into Christ we can purify our imperfections through faith, love and sacrifice. **"By kindness and piety guilt is expiated, and by fear of the Lord man avoids evil."** (Proverbs 16:6) **"Above all, let your love for one another be intense, because love covers a multitude of sin."** (I Peter 4:8) And to add yet one more passage from the same epistle: **"... whoever suffers in flesh has broken from sin."** (4:1) This is why St. Therese the Little Flower could say that when she dies there would be nothing left for her to burn. Her life of love and sacrifice for the Lord would be the holocaust that would make purgatory unnecessary.

<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/column/st-catherine-of-genoas-vision-of-purgatory-2349>

Padre Pio, the mystic priest with the stigmata, was canonized on June 16, 2002. He was known to have battles with the devil, to have seen his guardian angel since infancy, and to be familiar with the souls in purgatory. In 1943 Gerardo DeCaro conversed with this priest known to be able to read souls in the confessional, and noted: **"Padre Pio had an exact knowledge of the state of a soul after death, including the duration of the pain until it reached total purification."** Padre Pio told him more souls from purgatory climb the mountain to attend his masses and seek prayer than do the living, and that most of the saved pass through purgatory before reaching the fullness of beatitude, and that we may be surprised to find souls in Paradise that we never expected to be there. When Pope Pius XII died in Castelgandolfo on October 9, 1958, Padre Pio told a friar he saw the Pope in heaven during his Mass.

Padre Pio related to Padre Anastasio di Roio how one night, alone in the choir, he saw a friar cleaning the altar. When he questioned him, the friar said he had made his novitiate here and was assigned the care of the altar but passed many times in front of the Tabernacle without making the proper reverence. He was in purgatory for this sin and the Lord sent him to Padre Pio to decide how much longer he must remain there. Padre Pio told him until Mass in the morning. The friar responded, "Cruel!" and disappeared. Later Padre Pio said he had a wound in his heart for not sending the friar immediately to Paradise.

Is there hope for even the greatest of sinners to be saved? In conversation with John McCaffery, Padre Pio stated his belief that God loves us beyond understanding and that when we pass from the consciousness of the world and stand before God for judgment, He gives us a chance to see and understand what sin really is. He says that if we understand it properly, how could we fail to repent? <http://caccioppoli.com/Close%20encounters%20of%20Padre%20Pio%20with%20deceased%20souls%20in%20Purgatory,%20Guardian%20Angel,%20devil,%20His%20own%20words%20on%20temptation.%20>

In this regard Our Lady of America appeared to Sister Mildred Mary Neuzil holding the world in her hands as she wept over it, lamenting the ingratitude of our sinful generation. She begged us to cleanse our souls in the Precious Blood of Jesus and to fight to the death to preserve the purity of our souls. She has come to America as a last resort, seeking relief from her sorrow over so many of her children who are lost.

Be my faithful children as I have been your faithful Mother. [In January of 1957] Help me save those who will not save themselves. Help me bring once again the sunshine of God's peace upon the world...Pray and do penance, my sweet child, that this may come to pass. Trust me and love me; I so desire it. Do not forget your poor Mother, who weeps over the loss of so many of her children.

(Sister Mildred Mary Neuzil, The Diary, OUR LADY OF AMERICA, Fostoria, Ohio, Pgs. 12 and 15.)

My child, nothing is accomplished without pain. Prepare to suffer much. You see the sword in the Heart of your Mother. Suffering completed the work of divine grace in my soul. He who refuses to suffer will never abide in the Spirit of Christ, will never be formed into His image. (Diary, Pg. 23.)

Nothing speaks more clearly to the need for atonement for sin and for all of us to pray and sacrifice for the salvation of others than Jesus' invitation to Sister Mildred to suffer for souls. In the August 6, 1956 letter to her spiritual director she recounts that invitation. It suggests that she, too, bore the wounds of Christ, but interiorly.

Jesus came to me holding a large cross and a crown of thorns. He said to me smiling, as though He knew what the answer would be (He did of course.) "I come with My cross and My crown of thorns, will you accept Me My spouse?" You know the only answer I could give, Father. Who could refuse Jesus anything? During the night I awoke and Jesus said to me, and He said it with a profound emphasis: "I have placed you upon the Altar of Sacrifice."

On June 14th, anniversary of my perpetual union with Jesus, He asked me again: "Bride of My Heart, do you still wish to suffer all things to give Me to souls?" I answered: "Yes, yes dear Lord, I am poor and wretched, and unworthy, but you know what is in my heart." He said, "My little white dove, will you then continue to wear the Crown of Thorns, and permit yourself to be nailed to the Cross?" I told him in the best way I could, how much I desired Him to do with me just as He desired. So in this way my desires are wholly united to His.

Venerable Servant of God Bishop Fulton J. Sheen spoke to this issue.

What He [Jesus] has done with His human nature, we must do with ours—plant it in the soil of the cross and await the Resurrection of the Eternal Easter.... The cross is the condition; we must be nailed to it. Our Lord loved His Cross so much that He keeps its scars even in His glory. He who had won victory over death, kept the record of its wounds. If so precious to Him, they cannot be meaningless for us. In their preservation is the reminder that we too must be signed with those signs and sealed with those seals. On Judgment Day He will say to each of us: "Show Me your hands and feet. Where are your scars of victory?" ... But woe to us who come down from the Calvary of this earthly pilgrimage with hands unscarred and white!

(Fulton J. Sheen, THE SEVEN CAPITAL SINS, Alba House/St. Pauls, Pgs. 69-70.)

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