

## WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH PURGATORY?

Today I am going to do something a little different. I am going to give a sermon rather than a homily. A homily is designed to focus on the Scripture passages assigned for this particular Sunday and to open up the inner meaning of the passages and then apply them to ordinary life. A sermon is not based so much on certain Scripture passages but rather on a spiritual topic or on a dimension of God or an exposition of the Ten Commandments or the Seven Sacraments or the Corporal or Spiritual Works of Mercy. So today I am going to preach about Purgatory and not on today's readings.

Recently my brother was in the hospital. He was scheduled for release and I am speaking with him on the phone. He is okay but he has had some issues and now is on a new medication. He has been told that he is not allowed to drive for a time. He tells me, from his hospital bed, that he will get out that night and he'll be into work the next day. I say: "I don't think so, Ned." His name isn't Ned. I mention to him that he can't drive. He tells me his wife will drive him. Again, "I don't think so Ned." He really wants to get right back into the swing of things but he is not ready. He will not be able to handle it—yet.

That's purgatory. We want in. We want into heaven but we're not ready yet. He has this yearning. He is full of anticipation. He has gotten relatively good news from his doctors and he just wants to get in right away—but he is not fully ready. It would be overwhelming if he came back too soon. And he can do little himself to get himself ready. It has to happen within him but not by him. That's the way it is in purgatory. Purgatory is not some mini-hell. What about the burning? Think yearning more than burning. My brother is yearning to get back in and is assured but he is not there yet. It has to be done unto him. Same in purgatory. It is purification and healing. God's love and forgiveness wraps us and slowly transforms us and purifies us so we are completely ready to enter into the kingdom of God full of light.

We really do have to be ready for that or it will overwhelm us. God will not allow that to happen. And so God invites us on earth to join with Him in heaven to surround the person who has died with love—cleansing, healing, consoling, merciful love. A love that bathes in sweetness and light and a love that clothes us in that same sweetness and light. Our task? Let it be done unto us as the Lord deigns.

If it isn't mentioned in the Scriptures where did purgatory come from? Well it isn't mentioned directly but rather indirectly. Let me explain. It came out of the Church's reflection on certain Bible passages and from its experience of how believers live the way of Jesus in this world.

2Maccabees 12: 39-46. A holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead.

Matthew 12: 32. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks a word against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

1Corinthians 3: 14-15. If what has been built on a foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss. But the builder will be saved but only as through fire.

Revelation 21:27 Nothing unclean will enter heaven.

Where will we be made clean? How will we be made clean? Purgatory. Consider what sin does to the soul. Selfishness. Lack of care for the other. Lack of obedience to God or life in harmony with God's design of love. Like gold to be purified in fire. To lose the cross, the lingering effect of sin in my life. Like the hangover, like the remorse, like the shame. Mother Teresa or Hugh Hefner.

Some and perhaps many of our fellow Christians die but without having taken the gospel too seriously. Some and many of our fellow human beings die without taking seriously all the signs in nature of a loving and forgiving God. What happens to them? Do they go to hell? Do they go to heaven anyway? Though imperfect, in our heart of hearts, we sense they do not deserve to be damned forever but they don't simply deserve to go to heaven because of the way they lived. Jesus spoke often of those who are going to get into heaven (The narrow door. The rich. Lord; Lord. I came that all might be saved.)

In the early days of the Church words about the need for purification. Why pray for the dead? If in heaven, they don't need our prayer. If in hell, our prayers won't make a difference.

1Corinthians 15: 29ff. Having oneself baptized on behalf of those who had already died. Purgatory spoken about by the Fathers of the Church but it took 1200 years to be defined as true. Council of Lyon, 1274. Council of Florence 1439. Council of Trent 1563. In the Eastern Church purgatory was viewed as necessary because some people die immature in their faith, a kind of continuing maturation process. In the West, the focus was more on God completing the application of his atonement for our sin. Purgatory language is metaphorical language.

Let me conclude with yet another metaphor. Christmas is coming. Seven weeks. Already little ones have begun assembling their list. They start deciding on what they want for Christmas and once they decide they communicate it. They use all the channels to make sure that Santa gets the message so that there will be no slip-ups. They become relentless. They nag. They whine. They really desire. They yearn. Then their anticipation builds and their expectations build and their yearning builds and it is this burning inside of them. They can't wait. But they have to wait. But they know that the day is coming when they will burst forth into that place where the real presents are.

And in Purgatory they too will burst forth into that place where the Real Presence is. To live there forever by God's goodness and design—when they are ready and when God has clothed them fully in his healing love. That is the reality of the purification process. The name Purgatory you can take or leave. But the reality of being clothed for entry into the kingdom that is scriptural. Remember the guy without his wedding garment we read a couple of weeks back? Whether you believe it or not—it is real. And if we let ourselves be clothed here in God's mercy and love then there will be no hesitation at the gate. This part really is up to us. God's grace is in place.