

“MONTH OF THE HOLY SOULS” THE MEANING OF PURGATORY

Since perhaps as early as the 16th century, Catholic piety has linked particular months with popular devotions, such as May as the month of Mary, or June as the month of the Sacred Heart. November has traditionally been called the “month of the Holy Souls,” a phrase that I believe merits (pun intended) some serious attention in these pages. The basis for the practice of praying for the dead is as ancient as it is misunderstood, and I hope to clarify, not confuse, the situation in these next weeks. The doctrine of the **Communion of Saints**, especially highlighted this month, is a significant tenet of our faith. For me certainly, one of the most comforting. It links us on earth, both with those in heaven and those in purgatory, namely those who are expiating their sins on the way to heaven. The Communion of Saints reveals a “perennial link of charity” among these three groups and reminds us that the Church includes so much more than us on earth. *Deo gratias* for that!

It is a divinely revealed truth that sins carry with them punishments which, on account of God’s justice, must be expiated in some way. Saint Augustine wrote: “Every sin, whether small or great, must be punished, either by man himself doing penance, or by God chastising him.” (*Exposition on Psalm 58, 1,13*) Our sins affect not only our souls, but produce effects in the world around us. Enter **Purgatory**, the name given to the final purification of the elect, those who are counted among the saved, but who undergo a purification after death, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of God. Purgatory is a state of cleansing (from *Lat. purgare*, to make clean) from the *temporal punishment* due for sins whose guilt has been forgiven, but in which satisfaction for the effects of those sins is still being offered. Think of the sins as being like nails removed from a wooden 2x4. The nail holes remain (i.e. the effects) from the sin whose guilt has already been removed. Following our earthly lives, there exists a period of purgation by which the effects from our sins are expiated (to “smooth out” the holes) allowing a soul to be in a state most pleasing to God *sine macula et ruga*, “without stain or wrinkle.”

It is the need for this purification that has given rise to prayers and works that may result in receiving an indulgence. The basis for the granting of indulgences, whereby some temporal punishment for sin is removed, may be found in the Church’s **treasury of merit**, consisting both of the superabundant merits of Christ, as well as the prayers and merits of the saints. The Catechism clarifies that the *treasury of the Church* is “the infinite value, which can never be exhausted, which Christ’s merits have before God. They were offered so that the whole of mankind could be set free from sin and attain communion with the Father.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church CCC # 1476). An Indulgence is a remission (a “taking away”) of the temporal punishment due to sin, and with the help of the Church, may be obtained by a member of the faithful who fulfills certain specific conditions. Contrary to what some think, an indulgence is **not** a prayer, act of charity or almsgiving that removes **guilt itself**, but some (or all) of the *temporal punishment* due to sin, after the guilt has been expiated.

The connection with the Church is critical, as the treasury of the merits of Christ and the saints is freely opened to those who desire forgiveness (cf. Matt. 28:18). Each time you go to confession, prior to granting absolution, the priest assigns a penance, a prayer or work that helps to “make up” for the effects of sin. “Such penances help configure us to Christ, who alone expiated our sins once for all.” (CCC, #1460). Luther believed that the practice of indulgences damaged Christian spirituality. He questioned whether they could free the penitents from penalties imposed by God and expressed serious concern about some preaching regarding indulgences. Thesis #27: “They preach only human doctrines who say that as soon as the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory.”

The Church gives the name Purgatory to what is described as a final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of those who definitively separate themselves from God. The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence and Trent (cf. CCC # 1031). The **Council of Florence** (1439 A.D.) was held 44 years before Luther’s birth. It taught: “Also, if truly penitent people die in the love of God before they have made satisfaction for acts and omissions by worthy fruits of repentance, their souls are cleansed after death by cleansing pains...” Purgatory is a state of cleansing.

On January 12, 2011, Pope Benedict XVI spoke at his Wednesday Audience about purgatory in the context of the life of **St. Catherine of Genoa** (b. 1447 A.D.). While she did not receive a specific vision of purgatory, her writings certainly highlight it in an original way. The pope said: “In particular, we find an image typical of Dionysius the Areopagite: the thread of gold that links the human heart to God himself. When God purified man, he bound him with the finest golden thread, that is, his love, and draws him toward himself with such strong affection that man is as it were ‘overcome and won over and completely beside himself.’” I love the gentle image of the gold thread, symbolic of God’s drawing souls towards himself, even as they are being purified. We are wrapped in God’s mantle of love and the Lord never tires of drawing us to himself, so that we might enjoy eternal happiness in His presence. (Next Week: Suffrages for the Deceased)

- It should come as no surprise that it is **expensive to heat the Cathedral**. Your assistance with periodic collections to alleviate the costs of heating the building has been tremendously helpful. Our first collection will take place next weekend. Envelopes are available in the pews. I sincerely thank you in advance for your help.
- I woke suddenly last Sunday at 2:15 a.m., immediately realizing I goofed! Perhaps I was having bad dream! While **Lucas Cranach the Younger** had painted nearly identical earlier versions, the crucifixion scene on last week’s bulletin (1571 A.D.) was in fact painted **after** Luther’s death, and then placed in his residence. Luther would indeed have gazed upon similar images, just not that exact one. Mea culpa! But even the artist goofed, as I noticed some misspelled Latin words.
- An English translation of the poem on last week’s cover may be found on the tables by the entrances. It is the work of parishioner **Kathleen Kirsch**, a doctoral candidate in Classics at Catholic University of America in Washington D.C. I struggled mightily with this poem– her translation is smooth and readable. Bravo!
- Our Cathedral Choir is participating in a Choir exchange with the **Cathedral of Saint Joseph the Workman in La Crosse, WI** over the next two weeks. Today, I’ll be present as our choir sings in La Crosse, and next Sunday, Brian Luckner will conduct the combined Cathedral choirs here at the 10:00 a.m. Mass.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector