

This weekend all three readings proclaim the presence of God's Word and the Holy Spirit in the world, overcoming the power of evil and death. The Jewish martyrs, the prayer of Saint Paul and the testimony of Jesus all challenge us to rethink the priorities in our lives in light of the eternal hope to which we have been called. St. Paul reminds us that the Lord is faithful and will strengthen us and guard us from the evil one.

The Book of Maccabees was written towards the end of the Old Testament period and is one of the Deuterocanonical books accepted by Catholics as the inspired Word of God. It recounts the brave Jewish effort to fight off the Syrian enemies, who were attempting to abolish the Jewish temple and religion.

It was when the core beliefs were most challenged by new Greek ideas that the Jews rallied with courage to hold fast to their ways. The fourth martyr brother specifically mentioned that he died with the hope that God gave to him of being raised again. The brothers would not deny their core beliefs even to save their lives.

This Book, along with other later books in the Old Testament, evidence a developing belief in the afterlife. We have kernels and hints in the Old Testament. Both major schools of Judaism in Jesus' time¹ had notions of eternal punishments for the most wicked souls.

They also had some notion of purification before entering heaven, a precursor to our concept of purgatory. Authoritative interpretations of these texts led to the Church developing a theology proper to what we today call the last things: death, judgment, heaven and hell. Specifically, the doctrine of purgatory is too often misunderstood.

¹ E.G. the Shammai and Hillel schools of thought.

The operative vision of faith is that nothing defiled can enter heaven.² Our souls must first be cleansed before being admitted to the presence of God. Many wrongly assume that the belief in purgatory is solely the domain of the Catholic Church. Eastern Orthodoxy includes historical statements defending prayers for the dead and believes in a certain purification, though different from our understanding of expiation.³

In the communion of saints, “a perennial link of charity exists between the faithful who have already reached their heavenly home, those who are expiating their sins in purgatory and those who are still pilgrims on earth. Between them there is, too, an abundant exchange of all good things.”⁴

The souls in purgatory have not yet paid the temporal penalty due, either for venial sins, or for mortal sins whose guilt was forgiven before death. Our practice of offering prayers and sacrifices for the dead is intended to obtain for them, either partial or total remission of temporal punishment still to be endured. In his encyclical on Christian Hope, Pope Benedict XVI described purgatory in terms quite accessible for us today, highlighting, where our affection for one another continues beyond the limits of death:

No one lives alone. No one sins alone. No one is saved alone... In the interconnectedness of Being, my gratitude to the other—my prayer for him—can play a small part in his purification. And for that there is no need to convert earthly time into God's time: in the communion of souls, simple terrestrial time is superseded.⁵

² Cf. Rev. 21:27

³ Cf. Confession of Dositheus of Jerusalem (1672 A.D.) See Timothy Ware, “The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Eastern Christianity,” Penguin Books, 3rd edition, 2015. But p. 248: “Today most if not all Orthodox theologians reject the idea of Purgatory, at least in this form. The majority...say that the faithful departed do not suffer at all. Another school holds that perhaps they suffer, but, if so, their suffering is of a purificatory but not an expiatory character...”

⁴ See Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph #1475

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, encyclical letter *Spe Salvi*, #48, 30 November 2007

The pope was highlighting beautiful the reality that “our lives are involved with one another, through innumerable interactions they are linked together.”⁶ The end of our earthly pilgrimage is a time of grace and mercy. God desires that we work out our earthly life in keeping with His plan.

We should all pray for the grace to understand death, even our own future death, as a graced moment from God, part of our journey towards our loving Father. Let us embrace these last things, as themselves a part of the journey towards the Father, with whom we hope to spend eternity, offering Him endless praise and thanks.

I close with the prayer of St. Gertrude, a 13th century Benedictine nun and mystic, found on the front of today’s bulletin:

Eternal Father,
I offer You the most Precious Blood of
Your Divine Son, Jesus, in union with the
Masses said throughout the world today,
for all the Holy Souls in Purgatory,
for sinners everywhere, for sinners in the
Universal Church, those in my own home,
and within my family.

Amen

⁶ Ibid.