

## **Feast of All Souls**

Today is the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed, more commonly known as All Souls' Day. Unlike the Feast of All Saints, a day focused on the Church in Heaven, this is a day of holy opportunity to remember the souls of some of the departed, the Church in Purgatory.

The custom of remembering the faithful departed goes back to the early days of the church, when their names were posted in the church so they could be remembered. As early as the sixth century, monasteries held special days of remembrance for the dead from their community and by the ninth century they were commemorating all the faithful departed.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, citing Pope St Gregory the Great, explains: "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."

"The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned. ( Cf. 1 Cor 3:15; 1 Pet 1:7).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:

"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." (Pope St. Gregory the Great) (CCC#1030, 1031)

This day of commemoration was celebrated at varied times throughout the year, over time November 2<sup>nd</sup> became the popular choice of date.

In the fifteenth century, the Dominicans began offering three Masses on the Feast of All Souls. Then, in 1748, Pope Benedict XIV approved this practice, which caused it to quickly spread throughout Spain, Portugal and into Latin America.

The outbreak of World War I provided Pope Benedict XV with a strong incentive to further define this feast day and he gave his priests permission to offer three Masses that day. He saw that it was hard to remember all the war dead, especially due to the number of churches that had been destroyed. The Pope instructed his clergy that the three Masses should be offered as follows: one for the particular intention of the day, one for the faithful departed and one for the intentions of the Holy Father.

Mexico, other Latin American countries and even other cultures observe the Day of the Dead (*Día de los Muertos*), covering both All Saints and All Souls. On November 1 they honor departed children and adults are remembered on November 2. Spending the entire day at cemeteries, people build small shrines, with food, beverages, photos and other keepsakes of loved ones.

While it is good to remember the departed faithful as they were in this life during the Feast of All Souls, we must be sure that our main focus remains on their time of preparation for heaven in purgatory.

Purgatory - what a strange and scary sounding word to some. Unfortunately, there has been a lot of misunderstanding concerning this doctrine and what it means for us as Christians. Some have thought that we "go" to purgatory and then we are judged whether we go to heaven or hell. Others see this as a mini-hell for those who didn't quite make it all the way into heaven. Still others see purgatory as a second chance after death.

Along with other misinterpretations, these have been used by Protestants and others over the years as a reason to wonder about those of us who are Catholic.

So what about purgatory? Why, on this day, should we focus on the dead?

To begin with, let's look at the word "purgatory." It comes from the Latin word "purgare," which means "to cleanse" or "to purge." So you can think of purgatory as a time of cleansing or final purification in preparation to spend eternity in the presence of God. In purgatory, as the Catechism explains, the faithful - those who are destined for heaven - "achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven." (CCC 1030)

As I previously mentioned the tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire. And so, St. Paul writes of this in his first letter to the Corinthians.

"For we are God's co-workers; you are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But each one must be careful how he builds upon it, for no one can lay a foundation other than the one that is there, namely, Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, the work of each will come to light, for the Day will disclose it. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire [itself] will test the quality of each one's work." (I Cor. 3:9-13)

In his book on "Eschatology," Pope Benedict XVI (then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) further clarifies the church's teaching in this area: "Purgatory is not, as Tertullian

thought, some kind of supra-worldly concentration camp where one is forced to undergo punishments in a more or less arbitrary fashion. Rather it is the inwardly necessary process of transformation in which a person becomes capable of Christ, capable of God [i.e., capable of full unity with Christ and God] and thus capable of unity with the whole communion of saints.

"Simply to look at people with any degree of realism at all is to grasp the necessity of such a process. It does not replace grace by works, but allows the former to achieve its full victory precisely as grace. What actually saves is the full assent of faith. But in most of us, that basic option is buried under a great deal of wood, hay and straw. Only with difficulty can it peer out from behind the latticework of an egoism we are powerless to pull down with our own hands."

"Man is the recipient of the divine mercy, yet this does not exonerate him from the need to be transformed. Encounter with the Lord (is) this transformation. It is the fire that burns away our dross and re-forms us to be vessels of eternal joy."

Catholic lay apologist James Akin calls purgatory the "boot camp of heaven." No matter what your physical condition prior to entering the military, boot camp is to bring everyone to the same level of physical and mental fitness for service. The same can be said for heaven. To enter into the beatific vision, that immediate and intimate knowledge of God which the angelic spirits and the souls of the just enjoy in Heaven, one must be prepared.

My dear brothers and sisters, I offer you these thoughts to consider on this Feast of All Souls. Amen.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella