

Holy souls in Purgatory

by *Fr. Robert Voigt*

In 998 St. Odilo, Cluny's most distinguished abbot, introduced All Souls' Day to be celebrated on the second day of November. From Cluny the feast spread to other Cluniac monasteries, and then to the entire Catholic Church.

All Souls' Day is celebrated at the end of the liturgical year when the Church examines the fruits of the redemption. The first fruits are the saints in heaven, honored yesterday. Next are the holy souls who have gone through the battle of life, are confirmed in the state of grace, and are certain of eventual beatitude.

NATURE OF PURGATORY

These holy souls are detained in purgatory (a term in use since the eleventh century). This place is defined as a "holy hell" or a "sad heaven." Some like to locate it close to hell and fill it with red-hot fire. But it is enough to have radiant heat. Others, with better reasons, place it close to heaven; for them it is the vestibule of heaven, or, to change the figure, it is the side-door through which many enter heaven, who are not qualified to come in through the spotless Pearly Gates. Purgatory is much more like heaven than hell, for the souls detained there are not in Satan's clutches, but ready for God's loving embrace. They have their pains, but they also have their joys. They have their pains, because they cannot see God, though they are so close to Him. Their knowledge that their sentence is terminating builds up the desire for heaven to such a pitch that the pain of privation is most intense. But there is a mixed feeling. They also have their joy. Pertinently St. Catherine of Genoa wrote: "Apart from the happiness of the saints in heaven, I think there is no joy comparable to that of the souls in purgatory." Their state is such that it is more correct to call them holy souls than poor souls.

The holy souls know in advance how long they must stay in purgatory, and they can do nothing to shorten that stay. They are at the mercy of others. They are like the poor man at the football stadium—without a ticket. He sees the crowd and hears them cheer, but he cannot join until someone gives him a ticket. So the holy souls are dependent on others to get them to heaven.

HOW TO HELP THE HOLY SOULS

The faithful left behind can do just that, and they want to do it. The holy souls are their friends who have gone ahead into eternity. The faithful still love them and want to do something for them. They can—through their prayers. This is certain from the clear statement (Macc. 12:46): "It is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from sins." The prayer used may be the one suggested by Cardinal Newman in his hymn for the dead:

Help, Lord, the souls which Thou hast made,
The souls to Thee so dear, In prison for the debt
unpaid Of sins committed here.

The faithful can also help these holy souls through the Sacrifice of the Mass. They make an offering on All Souls' Day that Masses be said. These Masses help the holy souls, both because the Mass is so powerful in itself and because the faithful have coupled their sacrifice (this offering) with the Sublime Sacrifice. That these sacrifices are helpful is no guess, but a fact known from the same book of Macchabees (12:43) where Judas Macchabeus had his soldiers send drachmas to Jerusalem to offer up a sacrifice for the soldiers who had fallen in battle.

The practice of remembering the departed at the altar was widespread already in the early Church. St. Monica, to give one example, was familiar with it. When she lay on her deathbed at Ostia, she made a lyrical request of her son, Augustine (*Confessions*, IX, 11) : "Bury my body wherever you please. Let that not be your concern. Only one thing I beg of you: at the Lord's altar, wherever you may be, remember me."

The faithful can help the holy souls through sacred indulgences. They visit their parish church and say six Paters, Aves, and Glorias. Each time they make a separate visit and say this list of prayers they can gain a plenary indulgence for some holy soul. Of course, the prayer must be said thoughtfully. A prayer such as Shakespeare described in *Hamlet* is useless: " My words fly up, my thoughts remain below: words, without thoughts, never to heaven go."

BLEND OF GOD'S JUSTICE AND MERCY

Purgatory is a place where the justice and the mercy of God blend. Justice demands that sin be punished. Mercy limits the severity of the punishment. Our Lord says through His beloved evangelist: "The night comes when no man can work," but in His mercy He lets others work for that holy soul.

Many souls, because supported by Extreme Unction coupled with Viaticum and the Apostolic Blessing, go directly to heaven. Others—many others—not so supported must enter purgatory and go into heaven by the side door. In His mercy God allows us to pray for the holy souls, and we do this best on All Souls' Day.

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