



Purgatory – paying back the debt

The souls being purified after death are called holy because they are saved and will be saints. But these persons are also referred to as 'poor souls' because they cannot help themselves yet must undergo a painful purification to become perfect.

Being cleansed from every venial sin, unhealthy attachment to evil, imperfections and temporal punishment, these souls in purgatory cannot help themselves and thus we are compelled out of charity to assist them. So during

the month of November the entire Church prays for the dead, for those who have died in God's grace but remain imperfect and are awaiting heaven.

Since the faithful departed now being purified are also members of the same communion of saints, one way we can help them is to obtain indulgences for them, so that the temporal punishments due for their sins may be remitted (CCC 1479).

Treasury of Indulgences

Pilgrims capable of acts of mercy seek to alleviate the anguish of deceased family members, the poor souls, by obtaining indulgences for them in November. The Church, our spiritual Mother, indulges her children, by granting them remission of their temporal punishment. Please note, however, we are not making reference to the forgiveness of sins but the cleansing of the 'damage' owing on sins by means of the Church treasury of merits.

In the *Enchiridion of Indulgences* (1968) the Church stipulated that special indulgences can be obtained for the deceased in November. A plenary (full) indulgence remits all temporal punishment while a partial indulgence cleanses to a lesser degree.

An indulgence, applicable only to the Souls in Purgatory, is granted to the faithful, who devoutly visit a cemetery and pray, even if only mentally, for the departed. The indulgence is plenary each day from the 1st to the 8th of November; on other days of the year it is partial (no. 13).

In addition to this work of mercy, a visit to a cemetery, one needs to fulfill the following conditions:

1. Sacramental Confession,
2. Holy Communion, and
3. Prayer for the intention of the Holy Father (e.g. Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be), all to be performed within days (max. eight days for Confession) of each other if not at the same time.

The Word Purgatory

The notion or doctrine of purgatory is clearly biblical though the word itself is not. The term purgatory is not to be found in the Bible but that should not be a matter of concern. For the word Trinity is likewise foreign to the sacred text though the concept is not. Every Christian accepts the word Trinity otherwise they could not call themselves a follower of Christ. Yet this word was given to us by the Church, as were the terms Incarnation and purgatory.

One classic Scripture text that compels much purgatorial contemplation is the story told by Christ about Lazarus and the rich man (Lk 16: 19-31). The man who remains nameless because he may represent us all, was very selfish before his death. The next life is one of immense suffering (the word *hades* does not infer hell) to be cleansed of his sins. In order to alleviate his torments he prays and seeks help from others, as do the poor souls!

In defending Church teaching we must be ever mindful that Christ never left us a Bible but a Church. This divine edifice was built upon living apostles who taught orally this tradition of purgatory.

Purgatory and Tradition

The early Church Fathers, such as Augustine, Ambrose and Cyril all make numerous references to the custom of praying for the dead. One particular text that I find most convincing is the following comment concerning Christian practices of the third century that still endure in most Church bulletins to this very day.

The polemical writer Tertullian wrote in A.D. 213 regarding Catholic norms that: "A woman after the death of her husband ... she prays for his soul and asks that he may, while waiting, find rest; and that he may share in the first resurrection. And each year, on the anniversary of his death, she offers the Sacrifice (Mass)" (*Monogamy* 10:1-2).

Prayer and Purity

Never forget the dead in your prayers. One does not appreciate in this life how holy one needs to become to enter into heaven. Are we not called to serve Our Lord in "holiness and justice" (Lk 1:75) and does not this holiness denote a certain purity? Saint Thomas Aquinas claimed that sanctity implies purity because is it derived from the Greek word *agios* meaning unsoiled or, better put, uncontaminated.

Silver requires purification from dross and impurities. In the past a silversmith would heat his silver with much care to purify it. Being careful not to burn the silver, he knew it was pure only when he could see his own reflection in it.

In like manner, somehow between now and then, between time and eternity, we need to become pure, so that God sees himself in us: "He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver" (Mal 3:3). Every year this theme is repeated on the Solemnity of All Saints when the Church reminds us of purity and its inseparable link with holiness when we hear the words: "Blessed are the pure for they shall see God" (Mt 5:6).

So pray often for the dead. Every time you pass a cemetery pray for the faithful departed. Also, have the Sacrifice of the Mass said for their souls on their anniversary. As we loved them on earth let us not forget them in death. Always remember as you pray for them now, so they will remember you later!

Questions

1. Who says purgatory exists? Is it in the Bible?
2. How does purgatory differ to heaven and hell?
3. How long is one in purgatory?
4. Do the souls in purgatory suffer? Why?
5. What can we do for those who have died?

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Faith & Life Matters

November: month of the Holy Souls



Cover Image:
Painting from Church in
Stiftskirche St. Gallen, Switzerland

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In this article, Rev Dr Peter Murphy Ph.B., S.T.L., S.T.D. (Philosophy & Moral Theology) reflects upon the significance of the month of November for Catholics as the month of the Holy Souls.



- *Communion of the sacraments.* All the sacraments are sacred links uniting the faithful with one another and binding them to Jesus Christ.

- *Communion in charity.* None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together. In this solidarity with all men, living or dead, which is founded on the communion of saints, the least of our acts done in charity redounds to the profit of all.

(2) AMONG HOLY PERSONS (CCC 954-959)

The Church exists in three states and intercedes for each other.

- But at the present time some of his disciples are on earth (PILGRIMS). Others have died and are being purified (HOLY SOULS), while still others are in glory, contemplating 'in full light, God himself triune and one, exactly as he is' (SAINTS).

- So the union of the wayfarers with the brethren who sleep in the peace is reinforced by an exchange of spiritual goods.

- The intercession of the saints. Being more closely united to Christ, those who dwell in heaven intercede with the Father for us, as they proffer the merits which they acquired on earth through the one mediator between God and men.

Do not weep, for I shall be more useful to you after my death and I shall help you then more effectively than during my life. (St. Dominic, dying, to his brothers)

I want to spend my heaven in doing good on earth. (St. Thérèse, *The Final Conversations*)

Spiritual Welfare

Often at Mass, and other occasions, we have collections and raise money for the poor, or those suffering, as was the case a few years ago with a tsunami. People united their hearts and wallets to provide for those in need. Such Christian charity does not cease with death, which is a transitional stage between time and eternity, but endures unto the next life.

We may not take up a collection but we can pray and spiritually intercede for others. As practising Catholics, we have the right to seek assistance from holy Mother Church for those whom we have loved on earth. A poor person may seek assistance from a wealthy uncle for his family in times of poverty and destitution. In like manner, we can seek spiritual compensation from the Church's spiritual wealth on behalf of the dead. This spiritual wealth is called her treasury.

We also call these spiritual goods of the communion of saints the Church's treasury, which is of infinite value and can never be exhausted...This treasury includes as well the prayers and good works of the Blessed Virgin Mary. They are truly immense, unfathomable and even pristine in their value before God. In the treasury, too, are the prayers and good works of all the saints, all those who have followed in the footsteps of Christ the Lord and carried out the mission the Father entrusted to them (CCC 1476-1477).



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. (CCC 1030).

R.I.P – may they REST in PEACE

As we have loved our beloved in life we do not forget them in death. It is a secular and pagan notion that death is the end. Christians believe that the next life, eternal life, is the true mode of existence: our ultimate fulfilment. Also there is a basic human need to relate to those who have gone before us with prayers and by praying for them at Mass.

The Church in its pilgrim members, from the very earliest days of the Christian religion, has honoured with great respect the memory of the dead; and 'because it is a holy and a wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins' she offers her suffrages for them. Our prayer for them is capable not only of helping them, but also of making their intercession for us effective (CCC 958, emphasis in underline added).

This practice of interceding for the dead is normal and ancient, dating back to Jewish times as recalled in the Second Book of Maccabees 12:41-45:

And the noble Judas exhorted the people... because of the sin of those who had fallen. He also took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. In doing this he acted very well and honourably, taking account of the resurrection... he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin.

The Bible instructs us to offer sacrifice for the liberation of the dead from their sins. Moreover, it is a holy and pious practice to do so. This sacred practice that we offer Mass, God's holy Sacrifice, for the repose of the faithful departed on 2nd November and throughout the month is immemorial.

Fragile Faith

Today amongst Bible based ecclesial communities, this belief is not only foreign but nonsensical for they would say: 'If you're saved you don't need prayers and if you're damned you don't want prayers.'

At the outset this response seems to make sense; the saints in heaven don't need our prayers - we need theirs - and the damned are not seeking our prayerful intercession. Yet such thinking is superficial and lacks theological depth because it fails to understand what the Catholic Church teaches us about purgatory.

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In simple terms it claims that those who are 'saved' but not yet perfect need temporary purification before the eternal reward of heaven. We note that purgatory is a transit stage prior to and in preparation for heaven and therefore not eternal. Heaven is only for those who are perfect as the Lord commands: "You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48) and nothing unclean can enter therein (cf. Rev 21:27).

How many of us die perfect – let's be honest! We are all sinners to some extent. Some may argue that we should not limit God's forgiveness. Also Christ died for all sins and once we accept him are we not justified and made holy? Such points contain truths yet they remain partial truths. We need to be very clear about the nature of sin and its effects.

Kinds of Sins

Some sins wound our fallen nature more than others. Christ refers to certain sins that defile a soul making them unfit for Heaven (Mt 15:19-10). The Bible reminds us of the two degrees of sin: venial – everyday sins and mortal / serious – deadly sins. The First Letter of Saint John even uses the word *mortal* (1 Jn 5:16) which means death to God's grace in the soul.

These latter sins cause grave spiritual harm to the soul. When one sincerely atones for such sins then God forgives us. Once King David had been convicted of his sin of adultery and murder by Nathan, the prophet, he was forgiven yet reparation was still required of him. "I have sinned against the Lord," Nathan answered David, "The Lord on his part has forgiven your sins, you shall not die." (2 Sam 12:13).

Temporal Punishment

The debt or punishment owing on our sins is called *temporal punishment* not to be confused with eternal punishment which is hell (cf. CCC 1033).

Take, for example, a child who disobeys the house rules by playing cricket too close to the house and breaks a window. After admitting his guilt he seeks forgiveness from dad for the smashed window. Dad being merciful, and perhaps remembering his own youth, truly forgives his son. Is it all over – done and dusted? No, forgiveness has been granted but reparation is still awaiting. The glass needs to be cleaned up and the window replaced.

Our sins are much the same, one needs to clean up the spiritual harm caused by them, one needs to repair or make reparation for them. If we do insufficient penance for sins already forgiven during this life then a debt remains after death that prevents us entering heaven – for we remain imperfect. This debt is our temporal punishment. No wonder the Lord warned us: "I tell you solemnly, you will not get out till you have paid the last penny" (Mt 5:26).

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What do most Catholics think of during the month of November? Perhaps it's the forthcoming Summer holidays and the Christmas Season or the need to let the "mo grow" as a manly means of fundraising. Our Christian heritage, however, tells us that during November, Catholics throughout the world pray for the dead.

Catholic Customs & Divine Liturgy

Every year we begin November with the Communion of Saints. This venerable custom is enshrined in Catholic cultures that witness to the gathering of the faithful in cemeteries and shrines to remember the faithful departed. It is, indeed, an ancient practice that we pray for the dead in November. In fact, this pious belief is so ingrained in our religious make-up that at every daily Mass we pray for the faithful departed.

The ancient dictum *lex orandi, lex credendi*: the law of prayer is the law of faith, (Prosper of Aquitaine, 5th Century), reminds us to seek in the liturgy the answers to what we believe.

Priests are permitted to offer three Masses each Sunday, if necessity dictates, so that God's faithful may be able to fulfil their religious obligation. The liturgical texts for Christmas, the Nativity of the Lord, also provide a variety of text settings for the same reason - that being a holy day of obligation.

The Divine Liturgy for 2nd November, All Souls Day, however, which is not a feast day, also provides three Mass settings, yet it is not a holy day of obligation - much to the astonishment of some faithful. So why is the priest encouraged to offer three Masses?

The emphasis on this occasion is not the people's need to attend Holy Mass but the needs of the deceased. All Souls Day is not so much about us **here** but the commemoration of the faithful departed over **there**. On this day, the universal Church recalls and prays for all the dead.

Communion of Saints

The Church is the Body of Christ. Just as we can view our own bodies in a three dimensional manner, so too we can analogically visualise three modes in the Church. Membership in the Church is three dimensional: pilgrims on earth, saints in heaven, holy souls in purgatory. Although the example is imperfect because those in Purgatory are *saints-in-the-making* on the way to heaven, the unity of membership nonetheless is real and vibrant.

In article 9 of the Apostle's Creed - the ancient Symbol of Faith that all Christians accept – we profess belief in the Communion of Saints. What does this communion of saints mean?

The word communion is derived from the Latin *communio* and is comprised of two words: *unio* (union) + *com* (with). The communion of saints means that we are united-with "holy things" and "among holy persons".

(1) HOLY THINGS (CCC 949-953)

- *Communion in the faith.* The faith of the faithful is the faith of the Church, received from the apostles.