

PURGATORY

'There are some who depart this life not so bad as to be deemed unworthy of mercy – not so good as to be admitted to the immediate happiness of heaven' (St Augustine). The pain is a temporary loss of God. These souls are much more aware than we are of the distance between the goodness and beauty of God for whom they suffer an ardent longing and their own imperfect state

They see now that there is a God and realise more clearly how much they have hurt Him, how many times they have disregarded Him and how many opportunities they have wasted. Purgatory is like a divine crucible in which the dross of sins effects is consumed. Scripture tells us that nothing defiled can enter Heaven.

In one of the Second Vatican Council documents it reads: 'We accept with great devotion the venerable faith of our ancestors regarding this vital fellowship with our brethren who are in heavenly glory or who, having died, are still being purified'.

The catechism states that all who died 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 the final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned. The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence and Trent. Pope St Gregory the Great teaches: *'as for certain lesser faults, we must believe that, before the Final Judgement, 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 offences can be forgiven even in the age to come'*

This teaching is also based on the practice of prayer for the dead, already mentioned in Sacred Scripture in the book of the Maccabeus where it reads: *'it is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins'*.

The Holy souls are crying out for our prayers. The Mass is the most effective suffrage we can offer them. St John Chrysostom says that the Mass is the best way of bringing relief to the Dead. The Catechism says: 'from the beginning the Church has honoured the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Mass so that, thus purified they may attain the beatific vision of God, which is Heaven. The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead:

Purgatory is particularly relevant for those people, who while on Earth, have not taken responsibility for their day to day sins and failings. We're not talking here about mortal sins but venial. Even though forgiveness is readily available by the merits of Christ's death and resurrection, those in Purgatory have chosen to ignore this. In Purgatory we willingly endure its pains in order to make up for our sins.

Though healing pain is writ large across the landscape of purgatory its inmates are at the same time bathed in peace as they become more and more united with God. The Holy Souls, as they are commonly called, purify themselves willingly and lovingly. St Francis says that the bitterest anguish experienced by the holy souls is shot through with a profound peace.

QUESTIONS

- 1. People rarely mention Purgatory these days? Discuss*
- 2. Some say that Purgatory is here on Earth? Discuss*
- 3. It is very rare for priests to mention hell or Purgatory in homilies these days? Discuss*
- 4. When, during November we pray for the 'holy souls', does this not refer to the souls in Purgatory? Discuss*

