



Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time C November 3, 2019

- **Particular Judgment**
- **Why the Catholic Church Believes in Purgatory**
- **The Importance of Praying for the Souls in Purgatory**

On our website, I have 28 articles on the teachings of the Catholic Church based on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Article 11 deals with what our Church calls *The Last Things*: Death, Judgment, Heaven, Hell and Purgatory. The following are some excerpts from Article 11.

◆ Particular Judgment

“In death, the body separates from the soul, the human body decays, and the soul goes to meet God, while awaiting its reunion with its glorified body.” (C 997)

Drawing from the riches of Scripture and Tradition, Catholics affirm the following beliefs of what happens after death.

At the moment of death, the soul is separated from the body and the human person is judged and continues to exist, even though the person’s body has ceased to function. The judgment that takes place immediately after death is called in Catholic theology the *“particular judgment.”* At the Last Judgment, one’s body will be reunited with its soul. In 2Cor 5:10, Paul states that each of us *“must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil according to what he did in the body.”*

The Church’s belief in the ‘particular judgment’ immediately after death is based on the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31) and the words of Jesus to the repentant thief on the Cross (Lk 23:43). At the particular judgment, there is *“no condemnation for those who die in Christ Jesus”* (Rom 8:1-2). Nevertheless, those who die in Christ but with some remaining unrepented sin or with selfishness in their hearts, will go through some period of purification known as *“Purgatory.”* For those who have deliberately rejected God and the saving grace of Christ, there will be total separation

from God, which is called *“hell”* (Mt. 18:7-9, Mk 9:47). If during life on earth, a person had chosen to live without God and had no regard for Jesus’ Great Commandment of Love, then at death that person remains estranged from God. We will now look a little more at the Catholic belief about Purgatory.

PAUSE: What is the closest you have gotten to death personally or with a loved one? What was that experience like for you? What do you want your legacy to be? What words would you like written on your tombstone?

◆ Purgatory - Final Purification

The Catechism (1030-1031) states: *“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.”*

Speaking about Purgatory, St. John Paul II said: *“Those who live in this state of purification after death are not separated from God but are immersed in the love of Christ. Neither are they separated from the saints in heaven...nor from us on earth... We all remain united in the Mystical Body of Christ, and we can therefore offer up prayers and good works on behalf of our brothers and sisters in purgatory”* (General Audience, August 4, 1999).

The Church’s belief in Purgatory is one not shared by most other Christians. They say it has no basis in Scripture. One does not find the word *“Purgatory”* in the Bible. But neither will one find the words *“Incarnation”* or *“Trinity”*—two central doctrines of the Christian faith.

Catholic belief in Purgatory is rooted in *Sacred Tradition* and *reason*. It is implied in Scripture. Let’s look briefly at all three.

Scripture. Catholics believe that the reality we call Purgatory is hinted at in Scripture texts like 2Mac 12:42- 46, 1Cor 3:11-15 and 1Pet 1:17. In the Maccabees text, people are urged to pray for the dead. Prayers for the dead only make sense if our prayers benefit the dead in some way. If the dead have reached their final destination, praying for them makes no sense. The Christian text speaks of a purifying fire that the saved will experience. Those early Christians believed that Christians who died in an imperfect state would undergo a purification process before entering heaven.

Sacred Tradition. As we saw in Article 2 of my Catechism Articles, Sacred Tradition, along with Sacred Scripture, is, for Catholics, their source of Divine Revelation. Catholics believe that Sacred Tradition affirms our belief in Purgatory.

Around 211 AD, Tertullian wrote that Christians offered prayers and Mass for deceased loved ones. Sainly and scholarly pastors in the early church urged their people to pray for the dead. As mentioned earlier, such prayers would make no sense if souls had already reached their final destination.

PAUSE: When judgment time comes, what do you think you will be judged on? What do you hope heaven will be like?

Reason. The Book of Revelation (21:27) tells us that “nothing unclean will enter heaven.” Most of us will die with some imperfection, making us unworthy of heaven—hence, the need for final purification which the Church calls Purgatory. Purgatory is God’s way of purifying us from all sin, from the effects or wounds of sin and any attachment we may have to particular sins. Purgatory is God’s way of cleansing us of imperfections that would hinder us from fully enjoying heaven.

The pain and joy of Purgatory. The pain of Purgatory will probably involve the sense of horror we will feel as we become fully aware of the ugliness of sin. The joy of Purgatory will be the joy we will feel as we get closer to God. St. Catherine of Genoa, a fifteenth century mystic, wrote that the “fire” of Purgatory is God’s love “burning” the soul so that, at last, the soul is wholly aflame.

◆ Praying for the Souls in Purgatory

The Church urges us to pray for the souls in Purgatory. They *depend on our prayers*. The souls in

Purgatory cannot help themselves, but our prayers *can* help them. We should *frequently* pray for the souls of our deceased loved ones and for souls who have no one to pray for them. The *Catechism* also states that the souls in Purgatory can pray for us. (I never knew that—it’s a consoling thought.)

Diamonds in the rough

A rabbi devoted many hours working in the ghetto of the city, offering whatever help he could to the homeless and destitute, to alcoholics and addicts. A member of his congregation, a very successful diamond merchant, challenged the rabbi as to why he wasted so much time with lowlifes and crazies.

The rabbi asked the merchant if he had ever thrown out a million-dollar diamond in the rough.

“Never!” the merchant said emphatically. “An expert would know the worth of whatever he held in his hand.”

“I’ll let you in on a secret, my friend,” the rabbi responded softly. “I’m also an expert on diamonds. I walk the street every day, and all I see are the most precious diamonds walking past me. Some of them you have to pick up from the gutter and polish a bit. But once you do, oh how they shine! So, you see, the most important thing you have to know in life is that everyone, everyone, is a diamond in the rough.”

In the eyes of God, every man, woman and child is a “diamond” of great value; every one of us possesses a goodness and dignity just by virtue of being created by God. Today’s readings speak of God’s love for all (“You spare all things, because they are yours, O Lord and lover of souls, for your imperishable spirit is in all things” - Reading 1) and God’s unwavering determination to be reconciled with the creation God so lovingly fashioned (“The Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost” - Gospel). As Jesus affirms the honest Zacchaeus in the eyes of his skeptical neighbors, as the humble rabbi reaches out to “polish” the poor and needy of the gutter, so we are called to affirm that “imperishable spirit” of God existing in everyone as a child of God.

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Have a blessed week,

Fr. Sean