

Homily of All Souls, 2024

Wisdom 3:1-9; Psalm 23:1-6; Romans 5:5-11; John 6:37-40

We celebrated the Church Triumphant (All Saints) yesterday. Today, we pray for the Church Suffering, the departed souls in Purgatory. The Catholic Church teaches that we assist the souls of the dead who are in the condition of purification in Purgatory by offering Eucharistic sacrifice for them, and undertake almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance on their behalf (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1032). Today's celebration enables us to pray for countless departed souls that Masses are not requested or offered for.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church 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" (CCC 1030). "The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned" (CCC 1031).

Communion with the departed is a common practice in many cultures. Praying for the departed existed in the Jewish belief far before Christianity. We read in 2 Maccabees 12:43-46, "Judas then took up a collection among all his soldiers, amounting to two thousand silver drachmas, which he sent to Jerusalem to provide for an expiatory sacrifice. In doing this he acted in a very excellent and noble way, in as much as he had the resurrection in mind; for if he were not expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. ...Thus, he made atonement for the dead that they might be absolved from their sin."

Indications of the existence of Purgatory are, also, found in the New Testament. For instance, we read in Revelation 21:22, "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God almighty and the Lamb. The city had no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gave it light, and its lamp was the Lamb. ... Nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who does abominable things or tells lies. Only those who will enter whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life." At our death, none of us is clean and worthy to enter the "City of the Lord God Almighty." "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Each soul, therefore, goes through a purification before entering the glory of God. The location of Purgatory and the duration that souls spend in Purgatory are beyond human knowledge since it is a mystical reality.

The notion of purgatory was not alien to many ancient cultures. I come from Mbaise, the part of Igboland of Nigeria, where before Christianity, the traditional seventh month (Onwa Asaa), which is coincidentally the month of November, was dedicated to celebrating the dead. Throughout the month, certain ceremonies were for releasing souls from whatever might have withheld them from joining the ancestral realm to transmute and join them. When the Catholic missionaries taught the people about purgatory, it was not difficult for many of them to connect and understand.

The Halloween celebration is a feast of holy souls. It was a pre-Christian feast which was continued in Christianity as a time to remember the dead. But it is now celebrated in a secularly non-Christian way. The word 'Halloween' is derived from 'Hallowed (Holy) Souls' Eve.'

As Christians, we are a people of hope. Therefore, today's celebration is a celebration of hope; that, indeed, God's love is everlasting, even, in the afterlife. The first reading guarantees that by God's grace and mercy, the faithful shall be purified, and they shall abide with God in love (Wisdom 3:9). St. Paul assures us in the second reading that "Hope does not disappoint" (Romans 5:5).

In our celebration, we believe in the fulfilment of the words of Jesus in today's gospel, "Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and I will not reject anyone who comes to me, because I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me. And this is the will of the one who sent me, that I should not lose anything of what he gave me, but that I should raise it on the last day" (John 6:37-39).

Let us pray: Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let your perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. Amen. May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God rest in peace. Amen.

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