

Image of Purgatory by Ludovico Carracci



November 2, All Souls Day. To pray for the dead is the main purpose of All Souls Day. We pray for the dead because we know in faith three truths: first, contrary to the popular heresy that presumes that everyone who dies goes to a “better place,” the Catholic faith does not believe everyone who dies goes to heaven, especially immediately; second, the dead may need our help; and third our prayers and sacrifices can in fact help them. Let’s examine more deeply these three truths of faith.

Heaven, Hell and Purgatory. First, the Church teaches that to enter heaven, one must be completely attached to God and radically detached from all sin and everything that is not of God. “Nothing unclean shall enter heaven,” (Rev. 21:27). There are many who do not live and die with that type of purity of life and hence they need to be purified to enter into the kingdom in which God is all in all. This state in which the dead are decontaminated from all sin and worldliness has been traditionally called by the Church “Purgatory” from the Latin term *purgare*, which means “to cleanse.”

In 2007, Pope Benedict wrote an encyclical letter on Christian hope in which he talked about what happens after we die and who goes to Hell, Heaven and Purgatory. He described Hell as that state where those people go “who have totally destroyed their desire for truth and readiness to love; people for whom everything has become a lie; people who have lived for hatred and have suppressed all love within themselves.” Hell, the

Catechism tells us, is the place of “definitive self-exclusion” from God. Heaven, in contrast, Pope Benedict said, is the place for those “who are utterly pure, completely permeated by God; people for whom communion with God even now gives direction to their entire being and whose final journey towards God only brings to fulfillment what they already are.”

He goes on to describe Purgatory. “For the great majority of people—we may suppose—there remains in the depths of their being an ultimate interior openness to truth, to love, to God. In the concrete choices of life, however, there exist compromises with evil. What happens to such individuals when they appear before the Judge?” Pope Benedict says that they need to be purified, to “pass through fire so as to become fully open to receiving God...” That encounter happens in the fire of Christ’s saving love. “Before his gaze all falsehood melts away. This encounter with him, as it burns us, transforms and frees us, allowing us to become truly ourselves.” This, he says with hope, is the place where the great majority of people go, the people who are in need of this purifying fire of Christ’s love.

The Church teaches that our prayers actually can and do help the dead if they are in purgatory, where any and all vestiges of distorted self-love are transformed into love of God. The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead” (CCC 1032). God has set up the economy of salvation so that our deeds of love offered in union with Christ’s own sacrifice may help others. Christ calls us to be co-redeemers with him. Just as his passion, death and resurrection brought salvation to the whole human race, so our deeds of love united to his, by God’s own design, can help those who have gone before us.

The Church teaches that praying for the dead is a spiritual work of mercy, a spiritual work of loving co-redemption. The greatest prayer of all we could offer for the dead is the prayer of the Mass, when we unite our own personal prayers — those emanating from our lips, our hearts, even our bodies — to Christ’s own prayer in the Mass, the continuous, saving sacrifice once-and-for-all begun during the Last Supper and finished on the Cross. Pope Francis said, “Church tradition has always urged prayer for the dead, in particular by offering the celebration of the Eucharist for them: it is the best spiritual help that we can give to their souls, particularly to the most abandoned ones.”

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