

Homily for Christ the King Sunday

As we are slowly closing in on the end of the calendar year, we see the trees all but barren, the farmers completing the harvest, and the hibernation of animals for the coming winter. Really, nature points to signs of death all around us. And even the Church calendar too points to this reality as we celebrate the feast of Christ the King this weekend, and then the beginning of the new liturgical year with Advent next. And so, it's by no accident that during the month of November, the Catholic Church pays extra attention to those ultimate realities that each human being must face – death and judgement. Of course these are two topics most of us don't like to really dwell on; and yet the Church wants us to know that ignorance is not bliss. And so during this past month, we have been praying for our beloved dead in a special way. You have listed the names of your loved ones on our special All Souls envelopes, or you have requested Masses for those who have died throughout the year, and we have offered Masses for the repose of their souls. And, you have written names of family members, friends, and others in the Book of Remembrance in the vestibule of the church, and we have prayed for their eternal rest.

But, why do we pray for those who have died? Why do we offer the perfect prayer of the Mass for them? Why do we offer funeral Masses for people when they die? Why do we not just remember them, but actually pray for them?

Well, the answers to these good questions draw us necessarily to the topic of purgatory. Unfortunately, purgatory is not a topic that gets a whole lot of press these days. So, I'd like to give it some attention in this homily as we close out this month of November.

Our Gospel today from Matthew 25 speaks about the final judgement at the end of time, when Jesus returns in glory, and we will be judged by not only how we believed, but how we lived (or did not live) that belief. But, in addition to the final judgement, we also know that there is a *particular* judgement for each person when they die. Now, I know it's not going to be popular to say this, but when most people die they will not immediately go to heaven. You say to me, "How do you know that, Father?" Because, as the Book of Revelation, along with other Scriptures, teach us: "Nothing unclean shall enter into heaven." And, how many of us if we were to die tonight could boldly stand before God declaring we have no sin staining our souls, which makes renders them unclean? I dare say most none of us!

In fact, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: those who "die in God's grace, but are still imperfectly purified, who are indeed assured of their eternal salvation, must after death, undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven".

But, doesn't this deny the sufficiency of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for our salvation? Wasn't His atoning death enough for us? Why do we have to pass through purgatory if He's already saved us from sin? More good questions.

Jesus did in fact die once for all on the cross to offer salvation to every person under heaven. However, to say that does not explain how His perfect atoning sacrifice is applied to us. For example, we are first saved by Christ in baptism, when we are washed clean of our sins and receive God's righteousness to become children of God. However, after baptism when we sin, we are able to receive God's forgiveness anew in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, as that one sacrifice of Christ atones for those sins and we receive God's mercy afresh. Well, something similar can be said about purgatory, which can be better thought about as a process – a process of purgation – rather than a place, at least wrote Pope Benedict XVI. Purgatory is the final phase of Christ's applying to us the purifying redemption that He accomplished for us by his death on the cross.

So, even though you won't find the word "purgatory" in the Bible (but, neither will you find the words "trinity" or "incarnation"), the concept is clearly there. And, just like we can pray for one another while alive on this earth, so can we pray for one another, because "nothing can separate us from the love of God". And just as it is pure mercy for God to forgive us sins on this earth, so is it God's pure mercy to purify us of all venial sin and our attachment to sin in purgatory.

One illustration of purgatory to close. A little boy may say sorry to the neighbor, whose window he broke when he threw the baseball through it. But, he'll still have to pay for that broken window. Actions have consequences. Similarly, we are truly forgiven by God of our sins when we repent in Confession. But, because He loves us so much, He wants us to learn from our wrongs through the process of being purged of those sins so that we can enjoy His infinite splendor in heaven. God bless you.