

## Homily for the 31<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time 2023 Year A

The Church, in her own life of liturgy and worship, tries to reflect our day-to-day natural experiences. We are now in the month of November, a month that marks the inevitable descent into the darkness of winter, part of the seasonal death in the annual cycle of nature. Our lives also have their seasons, and the brightness and warmth of our lives must progress towards our personal winter, the inevitability of our decline and death.

And so, in November, the month of the Holy Souls, the Church draws our attention, not only to death itself but also to those who have died; those who were dear to us and those who were known to us. We are asked that, through our prayers and sacrifices, we commend them to God.

This is our expression of what we call the Communion of Saints; the eternal link, through love, where we who are alive not only care for each other, but we also remember and care for those who have died. We believe that they, in turn, when they are with God, watch over and care for us. The Communion of Saints is one of the core beliefs of the Christian faith and is mentioned in the Creed we say each Sunday at Mass.

Just as the seasons are part of a cycle, so too death is part of a cycle. We have to die so that we may enter into a new life. In the words of the Requiem (Funeral) Mass" ..... for those who believe, life is changed, not ended".

What we are dealing with here is part of a great mystery. That mystery is the concern of everyone, for we all have to take part in the process of death, the process which begins the moment we are born. So, we try to make sense of it all by using totally inadequate language to describe this process by the words Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory.

Purgatory, instead of being a source of hope and consolation, has become, for many people, a source of great fear. This is because of the way, traditionally, it has been presented to us. However, the theologians teach us that such is the purity and holiness of Almighty God that, at the moment of our death, we are unworthy to enter into eternal happiness with Him unless we are able to reflect, like a mirror, this perfect purity and holiness in our own souls. We are all made in the image and likeness of God, but we all die in a state of imperfection and God can only see some sort of distorted reflected likeness of Himself in our souls.

The Church has therefore taught us that some sort of period or process of cleansing (purgation) must happen before we can feel worthy to be with God. Traditionally this has been portrayed as a place of fire because gold is refined in a fiery furnace. But this imagery of fire is becoming, to the modern mind, a less powerful or acceptable image of what Purgatory is about.

The soul is spiritual, so fire cannot touch it, and the concept of time spent in such a process cannot apply to eternity which is timeless.

A better way to describe the process by which our imperfection is changed to one of perfection, is the notion of love.

Look to your own experience of life, who you are, and then look to the spiritual side of yourselves.

At the core of our spiritual side Love gives us the highest form of Joy and the deepest form of fulfilment. To know that you are loved, to know that somebody else feels you are worthy of their love, and to have all the love you offer accepted in return is truly wonderful.

The sharpest spiritual pain is to feel that you are unlovable, that nobody loves you, to have your love refused and rejected by another.

The spiritual pain of love is an appropriate way to describe the purifying force of purgatory, than any pain of fire.

In Hell, we can surmise that the pain would be to be perfectly aware of the fullness of love that we were created for, in other words, for God Himself, and yet to have to endure the eternal frustration of never having that longing fulfilled, because of our own free and deliberate choice; we chose the love of ourselves and sin over the love of God.

In Purgatory the purifying force of love that 'purges' us has none of the despair of the pain of Hell. It may be that, at the moment of our death, when we face God, we become sharply and intensely aware of all the love that we were created for, and were capable of, and the degree of imperfect love that we already have within us.

But that imperfect love within us makes us sharply and painfully aware of the perfection of love that we should and still can and will be capable of. In other words, Love creates an appetite for love, and the purgation or purification pain could well be that instant, when full of hope and optimism, we see, feel and understand God's great love for us, and our own poor love for Him in return.

The pain of love can punish, the pain of love can purify, the Joy of love can fulfil.

This imagery of love eliminates the problems that we have with the image of purgatory being a place of fire where time passes. It is not a perfect image but if we work at it, it can cast out fear and leave us with hope and optimism.

But that leaves us with the question - if purgatory is a sort of instant purification through the

intense pain of love, then what are we doing offering Masses and prayers for the dead, especially in November?

This requires a long discussion about the nature of prayer and what happens when we pray. We will explore that at a later stage.

For now, let us consider that through the process of thinking about death and praying for those who have died, we will become aware of how we fall short of the perfection of love in our lives. Then while we still have the time and the opportunity, we can do something about it.

We believe that, through our love for those who have died, we ourselves, as members of the Communion of Saints, can begin our own purifying and healing process.

This is what Theology is about; our words about God are always imperfect, and in need of revision, but a good theology should not obscure or deny God, and the mysteries of God, but help us to see and understand a little bit more, in a language which is meaningful to us.