

PURGATORY: WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY???

I've written before about Heaven and Hell, but neglected Purgatory, partly because it's so terribly misunderstood, but especially because of the tradition of praying for the "poor" souls "there." You'll understand in a moment why there are quotation marks around those words. But as we come to the end of the month of saints and souls and celebrate Christ the King and the second coming of Jesus, I thought it might a good time to consider this very misunderstood truth of faith.

Unlike limbo which doesn't exist and never was a teaching of the Church, the reality of Purgatory is definitely an article of faith, albeit a somewhat confusing and poorly understood one, which is why there are all those "w" words in the above title followed by question marks. We need to deal with those question marks....

So, *who* "goes" to Purgatory? That's easy: everyone who isn't ready for Heaven when they die; and that really covers the *when* as well: after physical death. But *what* exactly is Purgatory – and *where* is it – and *why* would someone not be ready for heaven? If we confess our sins in this life, are truly sorry for them, and are sacramentally forgiven, why wouldn't we go straight to Heaven? We'll get to that in a moment. The *where*, though, is the easiest part to answer because, just like Heaven and Hell, *where* doesn't apply. Heaven, Hell & Purgatory aren't places, since souls/spirits don't require a place to be as we understand "place." So Purgatory isn't a place but a state of being after death – that's the *where* of it. And that leaves the more challenging questions of *what* and *why*?

As is the case with Heaven and Hell, it's easier to say *what* Purgatory is **not**: it is not a fire less painful than the non-existent "fires" of Hell, nor is it physical pain. When the scriptures use "fire" to describe "punishment", fire is merely a metaphor, since it was and still is one of the most painful physical sensations a human being can experience. And we also can't speak of "time" with regard to Purgatory because there is no such thing as "time" once we enter into eternity. That's a mind-bending challenge for us mere mortals who need clocks and calendars to mark the days of our lives. However, I still need to use that word here because we don't have a human concept to describe the timeless.

So, let's cut to the chase with the *who* and *why*....Purgatory is for those of us – likely most of us – who are still clinging to something when we die and need to let go: loved ones or possessions, regrets or grudges, unfinished business or guilt. Unless we let go of any and all of that, how can we enter into the embrace of the God who must be for us, in the end, "all in all?" If there's pain "in" Purgatory, it's the emotional pain of letting go of this world and letting the love of God overwhelm us. I often think of the beautiful movie *Ghost* when Sam is finally able to let go of his anger and his attachment to Molly and exclaims in absolute wonder: "Molly, all the love inside, you take it with you!"

I still get all teary when I recall that final scene of *Ghost*. Yes, “all the love inside”, we do indeed take it with us—but **only** the love, only that which is already part of the God who loves us passionately and wants us to enter completely into Divine Love. Purgatory gives us the “time” to do that. Souls “in” Purgatory are only “poor” if they hang on to what they’ve left behind or to the baggage they’ve brought with them. How “long” that takes isn’t determined by God; it’s entirely up to each one of us. We can help our loved ones who have gone before us to “let go” by praying for them, but more importantly, by not clinging to them as they might be clinging to us! And God will wait patiently until we’re all ready to let go and let God’s love finally bring us home.

Fr. Bob