

Solemnity of Christ the King November 21, 2010

Readings: 2 Samuel 5:1-3; Colossians 1:12-20; Luke 23:35-43

Purify Now – Not Later

Most of you know that my first book was published this last summer, and many of you even bought copies. Hopefully some of you actually read it, and maybe even thought it had some merit. The reason I bring up the book is because of a struggle I encountered as I wrote it. The intent of the book was to provide tools so that people could more clearly see what they ought to do, not just what they want to do; how to make choices so they could reach heaven as the ultimate destination at the end of their journey.

But while I wrote the book for people who believe in God and in heaven, I didn't want it to be specifically a Catholic, or even a Christian, book; I wanted to appeal to a broader audience. And because of this, I intentionally steered clear of bringing up the subject of Purgatory. But without belief in the concept of Purgatory, getting to Heaven at the end of your journey means simply avoiding going to Hell. It leads to a minimalistic approach of avoiding mortal sins, but does not necessarily encourage growing in virtue. It's a little like trying to view a map in the dark as you travel in your car. You can shine a flashlight on the map to indicate your desired destination, but what you really need is a laser. The flashlight might light up the state of Florida as the desired destination of your vacation, but the laser will allow you to focus on getting all the way to see Mickey Mouse at Disney World.

And so I decided to try to write a second book about Purgatory. I realized from questions and discussions with friends and family, both Catholic and non-Catholic, that there is much confusion about what the Church teaches on this subject. As part of my research for the book, I have been trying to examine what other religions teach about Heaven and Hell. And so I am currently reading a book, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, that traces the evolution of Jewish thoughts on what happens when people die.

Of specific interest to me was trying to understand Jewish beliefs in the afterlife around the time of Jesus. It helps to put some of our scripture passages in context. And it was in the period a couple of hundred years before Christ that there came to be a pretty broad acceptance of the resurrection of the dead; that is except for the Sadducees who we heard in our gospel a couple of weeks ago rejected this concept. There had developed a general belief that when people died they went to Sheol, the land of the dead. They waited for the time when the Messiah would come and restore the nation of Israel to its greatness. It would be, in essence, heaven on earth with the Messiah as the King. It would be also a time of resurrection of those in the land of the dead. The good people in Sheol would be resurrected from the land of the dead to live once again in this new paradise on earth. The evil people would also be resurrected but sent to Gehenna, or what we call Hell.

This coming of the Messiah that the Jewish people anticipated 2000 years ago is very similar to our expectations for when Jesus, the Messiah, comes the second time for the Last Judgment. At a time that we do not know, Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. And the dead will be resurrected and there will be a new Heaven and a new earth.

But unlike the Jewish people, we recognize that the Messiah already came to suffer and die for our sins and to unlock the gates of heaven. We say in the Apostles' Creed, that we sometimes

use at Mass, that Jesus *“suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.”* And then that: *“He descended to the dead.”* This is how the official version is translated in our Sacramentary and is reflected in your missalettes. But sometimes we have been taught a different translation that reads: *“He descended into Hell.”* And this can cause confusion. Jesus went down to Sheol, the land of the dead to free the righteous who had been waiting for the gates of heaven to be opened and to lead them home. But the word Sheol in Hebrew, and its counterpart Hades in Greek, are sometimes translated in English as Hell because they represented a place where the souls were denied the vision of God. And this is indeed a great punishment in itself. But they represent a different place than Gehenna, which is the true Hell. The Catechism states: *“Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him.”* (CCC #633) He went to the land of the dead to lead the righteous home to His heavenly kingdom.

We know that the gates of heaven are now opened for us, not by any merits of our own, but by the sacrifice of Jesus who did it for us. Our job is to accept, and not turn our backs on, this opportunity. Unlike those before the time of Jesus, our souls are not required to wait in the land of the dead; but they may have to spend some time in Purgatory to be cleansed before they can enter Heaven. So our goal is to have as much cleansing as possible occur before we die, and then to trust in God’s mercy. And the first step in that cleansing process is to recognize that we need cleansing; that we are in need of repentance. The second step is to make a commitment not to sin again. There is a lot of talk during this month of November about obtaining plenary indulgences for our deceased loved ones. But it is important to remember that obtaining these indulgences is not purely a matter of following a specified formula; of simply going through the motions. The Church’s document on indulgences states: *“It is further required that all attachment to sin, even to venial sin, be absent.”* And this is probably the most difficult requirement of all. We sometimes tend to have an affection to our sins. Even though we choose not to commit a particular sin we may still reflect on it with longing. It’s kind of like the smoker that gives up smoking because he knows it is bad for him, but still longs for a cigarette after a meal or on special occasions. He still has an affection for smoking. We must work to break all our attachments to sinfulness.

The good news is that our purification and temporal punishment for sins does not necessarily have to wait until after we die and go to purgatory. The Catechism states: *“On the other hand every sin, even venial, entails an unhealthy attachment to creatures, which must be purified either here on earth, or after death in the state called Purgatory. This purification frees one from what is called the ‘temporal punishment’ of sin.”* (CCC #1472)

And there are two ways we can work on our purification here on earth. The first is through conversion. The Catechism states: *“A conversion which proceeds from a fervent charity can attain the complete purification of the sinner in such a way that no punishment would remain.”* (CCC #1472)

The second way of purification on earth is by offering up sufferings and accepting penances. Suffering on earth, if done with the right attitude and disposition, can also lead to purification as stated in the Catechism: *“While patiently bearing sufferings and trials of all kinds and, when the day comes, serenely facing death, the Christian must strive to accept this temporal punishment of sin as a grace.”* (CCC #1473) It is sometimes hard to think of our sufferings as graces, but they can shorten our time, or someone else’s, in Purgatory

Our gospel today gives us one of the most beautiful pictures of God’s mercy. Recognizing and admitting his sinfulness, the “good thief” on the cross next to Jesus offered up his sufferings

without complaint. And Jesus told him that he would be in paradise that very day. He received a wonderful helping of God's mercy; in fact, we might consider this as the first plenary indulgence.

But some use the case of the "good thief" going directly to heaven as an argument against the existence of Purgatory. The considerations from the Catechism that I have just pointed out, however, help us understand how it is not a contradiction at all. The significant conversion of the thief, along with serenely facing death and accepting the suffering of crucifixion, may have been his purification and punishment all in one.

It is important to work on our purification while we are still here on earth. We must all strive each day to make our conversions complete; it is an ongoing journey. And we must be willing to offer up our sufferings as temporal punishments for not only our own sins, but also for those souls in most need of God's mercy, in our own families and throughout the whole world.

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