

with venial sins or without having done sufficient penance for our sins, God in His love, mercy and justice will purify our souls, "cleanse the lens" so to speak. After such purification, the soul will then be united with God in heaven and enjoy the beatific vision.

As we ponder the beautiful understanding of purgatory, we must never forget the importance of praying for and having Masses offered for the repose of the souls of our loved ones. Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical "*Mirae caritatis*" (1902) beautifully elaborated this point and emphasized the connection between the communion of saints with the Mass: "The grace of mutual love among the living, strengthened and increased by the Sacrament of the Eucharist, flows, especially by virtue of the Sacrifice [of the Mass], to all who belong to the communion of saints is simply...the mutual sharing of help, atonement, prayers, and benefits among the faithful, those already in the heavenly fatherland, those consigned to the purifying fire, and those still making their pilgrim way here on earth. These all form one city, whose head is Christ, and whose vital principle is love.

Faith teaches that although the august Sacrifice can be offered to God alone, it can nevertheless be celebrated in honor of the saints now reigning in Heaven with God, who has crowned them, to obtain their intercession for us, and also, according to apostolic tradition, to wash away the stains of those brethren who died in the Lord but without yet being wholly

purified." Likewise, the *Catechism* asserts, "From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic Sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God" (No. 1032).

Therefore, when we face the death of someone, *even a person who is not Catholic*, to have a Mass offered for the repose of his soul and to offer our prayers are more beneficial and comforting than any other sympathy card or bouquet of flowers. Most importantly, we should always remember our own dearly departed loved ones in the Holy Mass and through our own prayers and sacrifices to help in their gaining eternal rest. Since we are approaching the feast of All Souls (Nov. 2), now is a good time to remember our deceased loved ones by either having a Mass offered for their repose or, if the parish offers one, to remember them in the special All Souls Novena.

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# Purgatory

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On Sept. 17, 2002, our late beloved Pope John Paul II stressed the need to pray for the Souls in Purgatory. He said, "The first and highest form of charity for brothers is the ardent desire for their eternal salvation ... Christian love knows no boundaries and goes beyond the limits of space and time, enabling us to love those who have already left this earth." Therefore, not only the belief in purgatory but also the spiritual duty to pray for the souls there remains part of our Catholic faith.

Contrary to what some may erroneously believe, Vatican II's "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" asserted, "This sacred council accepts loyally the venerable faith of our ancestors in the living communion which exists between us and our brothers who are in the glory of Heaven or who are yet being purified after their death; and it proposes again the

decrees of the Second Council of Nicea, of the Council of Florence, and of the Council of Trent" (No. 51).

Moreover, the *Catechism* clearly affirms the Church's belief in purgatory and the purification of the soul after death: "All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but, after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of Heaven. The Church gives the name *Purgatory* to this final purification of the elect which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned" (cf. No. 1030-32).

As Vatican II stated, the Church has consistently believed in a purification of the soul after death. This belief is rooted in the Old Testament. In the Second Book of Maccabees, we read of how Judas Maccabees offered sacrifices and prayers for soldiers who had died wearing amulets, which were forbidden by the Law; Scripture reads, "Turning to supplication, they prayed that the sinful deed might be fully blotted out" (2MC12:42-45) and "Thus, [Judas Maccabees] made atonement for the dead that they might be freed from the sin" (2MC 12:42-45). This passage gives evidence of the Jewish practice of offering prayers and sacrifices to cleanse the soul of the departed.

Rabbinic interpretation of Scripture also attests to the belief. In the Book of the Prophet

Zechariah, the Lord spoke, "I will bring the one third through fire, and I will refine them as silver is refined, and I will test them as gold is tested" (ZAC13:9); the School of Rabbi Shammai interpreted this passage as a purification of the soul through God's mercy and goodness, preparing it for eternal life. In Sirach 7:33, "Withhold not your kindness from the dead" was interpreted as imploring God to cleanse the soul. In sum, the Old Testament clearly attests to some kind of purification process of the soul of the faithful after death.

The New Testament has few references about a purging of the soul or even about heaven for that matter. Rather the focus is on preaching the Gospel and awaiting the second coming of Christ, which only later did the writers of sacred Scripture realize could be after their own deaths. However, in Matthew 12:32, Jesus' statement that certain sins "will not be forgiven either in this world or in the world to come," at least suggests a purging of the soul after death. Pope St. Gregory (d. 604) stated, "As for certain lesser faults, we must believe that, before the Final Judgment, there is a purifying fire. He who is truth says that whoever utters blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will be pardoned neither in this age nor in the age to come. From this sentence we understand that certain offenses can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come." The Council of Lyons (1274) likewise affirmed this interpretation of our Lord's teaching.

The key to this answer, however, is to see the beauty behind the doctrine of purgatory. We believe that God gave us a free will so that we could choose between right and wrong, good and evil. Our free will allows us to make the one fundamental choice — to love God. An act of the free will also entails responsibility. When we choose not to love God and thereby sin, we are responsible for that sin. God in His justice holds us accountable for such sins, but in His love and mercy desires us to be reconciled to Himself and our neighbor. During our life on this earth, if we really love God, we examine our consciences, admit our sins, express contrition for them, confess them, and receive absolution for them in the sacrament of penance. We perform penances and other sacrifices to heal the hurt caused by sin. In so doing, we are continually saying "yes" to the Lord.

In a sense our soul is like a lens — when we sin, we cloud the lens; it gets dirty, and we lose the focus of God in our lives. Through confession and penance, God cleanses the "lens" of our soul. When we die, if we leave this life fundamentally loving God, dying in His grace and friendship, and free of mortal sin, we will have eternal salvation and attain the beatific vision — we will see God for who He is. If we die with venial sins or without having done sufficient penance for our sins, God in His love, mercy sin, we will have eternal salvation and attain the beatific vision — we will see God for who He is. If we die