



Devotion to the Poor Souls

Today is the feast of All Souls. It comes on the day after All Saints. Between these two feast days, we remember all the members of the Mystical Body of Christ: The Church Triumphant in heaven, the Church Militant on earth, and the Church Suffering in purgatory.

Over the centuries the month of November has been dedicated to the Poor Souls. No doubt the reason is because November is the last month of the liturgical year, even as purgatory is the last stage of human existence before a soul reaches heaven.

During this homily, I would like to ask three questions and share with you a short answer on what our Catholic faith teaches about devotion to the Poor Souls in purgatory.

- Who are the Poor Souls?
- Why are the Poor Souls in purgatory?
- How are we to practice our devotion to the souls in purgatory?

Who Are the Poor Souls?

The Poor Souls are the souls of those people who died in the friendship of God. But they still have some suffering to undergo for the sins they had committed during their lives on earth. It is the infallible teaching of the Catholic Church that there is a purgatory. As the word itself indicates, purgatory is the state of those who still must be cleansed of the penalty which they owe for their past offenses against God.

The Poor Souls are poor because they are in suffering and need our help. We know from Sacred Scripture that there is a purgatory, as described in the second book of Maccabees, which unfortunately has been removed from the Protestant Old Testament. As described in Sacred Scripture, Judas Maccabeus, the leader of a Jewish army, decided to offer a sacrifice for the Jews who had died in battle. The Bible then tells us, "If he had not expected the fallen to rise again, it would have been superstitious and foolish to pray for the dead." However, since he believed in the resurrection of the dead, "he had this atonement sacrifice offered for the dead, so that they might be released from their sins" (II Maccabees 12:41-45).

The existence of purgatory is a defined truth of the Catholic faith. Those who die without the guilt of mortal sin, but with temporal punishment still due for their past offenses "are cleansed after death in purgatorial or cleansing punishments."

It is commonly believed that the principal suffering in purgatory is the pain of loss. The souls are temporarily deprived of the Beatific Vision.

Why are the Poor Souls in Purgatory?

To understand why the Poor Souls are in purgatory, as Catholics we should know what we believe about the double effect of every sin. Every time we sin, we lose more or less of God's grace. This we call "guilt." Every time we sin, we also incur a debt of pain. This we call "penalty."

Mortal sins are called mortal because they deprive the sinner of sanctifying grace and the right to heaven. Mortal sins also incur the debt of eternal punishment.

When mortal sins are forgiven in the sacrament of penance, sanctifying grace is restored, and the debt of eternal punishment is removed. But normally there is still temporal punishment to be expiated. Moreover, venial sins always carry with them a debt of temporal punishment, which is remitted, depending on a person's spiritual dispositions.

This immediately tells us that because we are sinners we must expect to suffer in expiation for our sins. The choice we have is between patiently suffering here on earth or suffering in purgatory after our bodily death.

Devotion to the Poor Souls

It must seem strange to speak of devotion to the Poor Souls. But it is not strange. Devotion to the Poor Souls has two sides: our side and the side of the souls in purgatory.

On their side, the Poor Souls are united with us in the one Kingdom of Christ. They can pray and obtain blessings for us here on earth. They are united, as the Second Vatican Council teaches, with the pilgrim Church in the Communion of Saints. We are therefore encouraged to invoke their aid, with a confidence of being heard by those who understand our needs. They know from their own experience what it means to carry the cross here on earth.

On our side we are to do everything we can to help the Poor Souls in the Church Suffering. The sufferings in purgatory are not the same for all. They depend on each person's degree of sinfulness. St. Thomas Aquinas held that the least pain in purgatory is greater than the worst pain in this life. St. Bonaventure held that the worst suffering after death was greater than the worst suffering on earth, but the same could not be said regarding the least pain in purgatory. In general, however, we should say that the pains of purgatory are greater than those on earth.

What does it mean to pray for the Poor Souls? It means everything that we can offer for the faithful departed.

- We can offer our bodily pains in expiation for their sins.
- We can offer our spiritual sufferings, our disappointments and fears, our discouragement and estrangement from those we love.

- We can offer our vocal prayers, like the Rosary, the Memorare, the Angelus, the recitation of the Divine Office.
- We can offer our mental prayers, like the Way of the Cross, our daily meditation and examination of conscience.
- We can offer our mortifications, like giving up some delicacy at table, or performance of some unpleasant work.

But the most effective offering we can make for the Poor Souls is the Holy Eucharist at the Sacrifice of the Mass, Holy Communion, and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Over the centuries, the Catholic faithful have by now offered countless Masses for the Poor Souls. In the Society of Jesus, we priests are expected to offer one Mass each month for all the deceased Jesuits. This amounts to over sixteen thousand Masses that are to be said every month for the members of the Society of Jesus who are still in purgatory.

May I offer a recommendation? During the month of November, I suggest that we make a list of all the deceased persons whom we wish to specially remember in our Masses, prayers, and sacrifices for the repose of their souls. Add to this list as those enter eternity whom you wish to specially commend to the mercy of God. This, by the way, is called a Necrology. Every Catholic diocese in the world has a Necrology of its deceased priests. Every family should have its own Necrology of deceased members whom we daily remember to our merciful Lord.

Every time you say the grace after meals, be sure to add the invocation, "May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen." In every Rosary you recite, do not forget to say after each decade, "O, my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell, and bring all souls to heaven, especially those who are in most need of thy mercy."

Remember that devotion to the Poor Souls is really a covenant between them and us. We pray and sacrifice for them, they can pray and suffer for us. They appreciate whatever help we give them, to lessen their suffering and to shorten their stay in Purgatory. They will continue to show their appreciation when we join them in a heavenly eternity.

By Fr. John Hardon, SJ, reprinted with permission from Inter Mirifica. For more information, visit www.therealpresence.org

