

22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time  
August 28, 2011  
Fr. Tom Elliott

## Christian Anthropology & Purgatory

Jeremiah 20:7-9  
Psalm 63  
Romans 12:1-2  
Matthew 16:21-27

Having gotten some of the greetings out of the way last week at the Masses, we are going to kick things up a notch this weekend! Our second reading today gives us an opportunity to look at Christian anthropology and purgatory. You'll have to pay close attention because I'm going to take us on a wild theological journey during this homily!

Let's begin at the beginning—Christian anthropology. The word “anthropology” means the “study of human beings.” When we put the word, “Christian” in front of it, it becomes the study of who we are as Christians. As most of you know, we understand ourselves to be made up of a body, mind, and soul. We read about this in Saint Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians—

May the God of peace himself make you perfectly holy and may you entirely,  
spirit, soul, and body, be preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus  
Christ.

-1 Thessalonians 5:23

The Greek word being translated “soul” in this passage is what you and I would refer to as our minds—the place of memories, thoughts, and feelings—whereas the word being translated, “spirit” is what you and I commonly think of as the soul. This passage, then, is describing the human person—body, mind, and soul.

Another great Scripture passage about Christian anthropology is our second reading today, from Saint Paul's letter to the Romans. In these two verses, Paul not only describes us, but connects Christian anthropology to discernment—

I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God,  
to offer your *bodies* as a living sacrifice,  
holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship.  
Do not conform yourselves to this age  
but be transformed by the renewal of your *mind*,  
that you may *discern* what is the will of God,  
what is good and pleasing and perfect.

-Romans 12:1-2 (*emphasis mine*)

Saint Paul is suggesting that we conform our minds and our hearts to the Spirit of Jesus Christ that is alive within us through baptism and faith. He is also suggesting that the more we

do this, the more clearly we will be able to discern God's will. This process becomes, then, our spiritual journey. This Christian anthropology has some really awesome implications for our understanding of purgatory and discernment! It's impossible to cover all of it in one homily, so we're going to look at the implications of this Christian anthropology on purgatory this week.

As you probably already know, purgatory is not a *location*, but rather, it is a *process*. The word "purgatory" comes from a Latin word meaning, "to be purged or cleansed." The people who have died and are going through this purging process are not being given a "second chance" to choose Christ, nor can they backslide into hell. They have already accepted the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ and are on their way to heaven. So why do most people not go straight to heaven? Why do we need a process called "purgatory"?

Saint Paul's Christian anthropology helps us answer these questions. While we receive a new Spirit within us through baptism and faith, we still have the same mind that we have always had. This is why St. Paul repeatedly writes in his letters that we must conform our minds to the mind of Christ.<sup>1</sup> Paul is writing these things to people who are already Christian! He is essentially saying that we must conform our minds to the new Spirit of God that has been given to us through baptism and faith.

I have yet to meet a Christian who does not have a mind that contains at least *some* painful memories, hurts, anger, bad habits, sinful inclinations, addictions, troubles, and confusions despite having accepted Jesus Christ. If most of these people die before they have allowed their minds to be completely conformed and transformed into the likeness of the new Spirit that is living within them, then there *has to be* a process of purging, cleansing, and healing that takes place for those who are on their way to heaven. What good God would want His creation to spend all eternity with emotional and mental wounds?

Since God is not bound by time and space, this process we call Purgatory may take place at the very moment of death, or it may be a lengthier time period; no one knows. What we do know, however, is that a lifetime is often not enough time for us to conform our minds to the redeemed spirit that has been placed within us. And, just because we believe in Purgatory does not mean that we must wait until after death in order to work on conforming our minds to the mind of Christ. No, Saint Paul alludes to the fact that this cleansing process should be a part of our everyday journey with the Lord.<sup>2</sup>

Whether we are praying for the souls of the faithful departed, or praying for one another here on earth, our prayer is the same—that we will all allow God to speedily complete and fulfill the good work He has begun in us. We pray that He completely renews our minds in conformity with the Holy Spirit that is living within us!

### **SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:**

- ✚ In your prayer journal, write a letter to God and share with Him what things you like about yourself and what things you would like to have Him change. What aspects of your life do you feel are already conformed to the new Spirit of Christ living within you and what parts do you feel still need healing?

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 4:22-23; Romans 12:2; Romans 8:6

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:16-17