

# Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

## CATHOLIC APOLOGETICS 101

### Purgatory

It is virtually impossible to be Catholic and not be asked the question: “Why do you pray for dead people?” The real question being asked is, “If the deceased who had accepted the salvation of Jesus Christ are in heaven and those who had not are in hell (and cannot get out), then whom are we praying for?” The Catholic answer is, of course, “Purgatory,” which only invites more questions. Many Catholics feel inadequate answering these questions about Purgatory. How we answer, however, is very important. I have yet to run into a non-Catholic who did not fully accept the reality of Purgatory after it was properly explained to him or her.

While often misleadingly spoken of as a place, 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? Saint Paul helps us answer this question.

Throughout the New Testament letters, we read descriptions of the human person. Saint Paul describes people as being composed of body, soul (mind), and spirit.<sup>1</sup> Through baptism we begin a new life with Christ, our sins are washed away, and we are given a new spirit, the Holy Spirit.

“We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in *newness* of life” (Romans 6:4).

While we receive a new Spirit within us through baptism, 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>2</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>3</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!

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Paul uses two different Greek words for “mind”: διανοια (pronounced dee-an'-oy-ah), which is found in Ephesians 2:3 and ψυχη (psoo-khay), which is found in 1 Thess. 5:23 and literally describes the place where our feelings, desires, affections, and aversions are located.

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

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:16-17