

THIRTY SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, Yr. B

“PURGATORY: A PERIOD OF PURIFICATION”

1. The Widow's Offering

Today's Gospel of the Widow's Offering (Mk. 12:38-44) has led some to call today 'Stewardship Sunday'.

The widow in today's Gospel gave out of her poverty. Remember that, in the ancient world, widows did not necessarily have any means of supporting themselves. They were often the poorest members of a given society.

Jesus points here to a paradox: 'the poor widow gave more to the Temple treasury than the rich people, despite her miniscule donation. Unlike them, she offered to God her whole livelihood with pure intention and a generous spirit.'

There is a lesson here for us. Not only are we called to be good stewards of the time, talent and treasure that have been given to us, but we should offer our entire being to God in a spirit of gratitude and generosity.

St. Paul states in his second letter to the Corinthians (9:7):

'Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.'

2. The Existence of Purgatory

During the month of November we are asked in a special way to remember the souls of the faithful departed. It is very much a part of a Catholic culture to pray for the dead. By doing so, we are agreeing with the Church's teaching on the existence of purgatory.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that:

‘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.’ (CCC, n. 1030)

‘The Church gives the name *Purgatory* to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned.’ (CCC, n. 1031)

3. Proof from Sacred Scripture

II Maccabees 12:46. The second Book of Maccabees notes that a number of soldiers who were killed in battle were found to be wearing ‘sacred tokens of the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear.’ (II Mac. 12:40) In response this, the men turned to prayer, beseeching that the sin which had been committed might be wholly blotted out. ... [Judas Maccabeus] took up a collection ... and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering.’ (II Mac. 12:43)

‘Therefore, [Judas Maccabeus] made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin.’ (II Mac. 12:26)

Mt. 12:32. ‘Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or the world to come.’

In response to this verse, St Gregory the Great comments:

‘From this sentence we understand that certain offenses can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come.’ⁱ

4. The Suffering of the Souls in Purgatory

The souls in purgatory suffer from a great longing to be united to God, and from other pains.ⁱⁱ

The chief pain of the suffering souls ‘is the deprivation of the Beatific Vision, the vision of God in the glory of heaven. This temporary deprivation is a most severe punishment, because the poor souls already have a full knowledge of what they are missing.’

St Augustine believed that ‘the sufferings of the poor souls are greater than anything that man can suffer in this life.’ⁱⁱⁱ

St Thomas Aquinas believes that ‘the least pain [in purgatory] is greater than the greatest [pain] on earth.’^{iv}

The greatness and duration of a soul's suffering in purgatory vary according to the gravity of the sins committed. One who has lived a long life of sin, but is saved from hell only by a deathbed repentance, will suffer in purgatory longer and with greater intensity than a child, who has committed only the venial sins of an ordinary child.^v

5. How can we help the Poor Souls in Purgatory?

The suffering souls can no longer merit anything to satisfy for their sins. Although they cannot merit anything for themselves, they intercede for us with their prayers to God. We can help the poor souls in purgatory by having Masses offered for them, by our prayers, and by other good works.^{vi}

St John Chrysostom advises us with these words:

‘Let us help and commemorate [the souls in purgatory]. If Job's sons were purified by their father's sacrifice, why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them.’^{vii}

ⁱ See Ott, 1954, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, B. Herder Book Company, St Louis, MO, p. 483

ⁱⁱ Louis L. Morrow, 1963, *My Catholic Faith: A manual of religion*, My Mission House, Kenosha, WI, p. 168

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1032