

MEDITATION ON THE CONCEPT OF PURGATORY

Every weekend, we sit here in Church and at one point or another we look that this beautiful window behind me. As many of you know the window was made in Marseille, France and depicts Our Lady of Purgatory. But let's take a moment now and take a closer look.

The concept of Purgatory has undergone some changes over the years, but the basic premise remains the same: God is merciful and if we die in a state of grace, but with some imperfections, we will not be damned to hell, but rather will go through a process of purification that will allow us to enter heaven. It is by this process that the corruptible will be clothed in incorruption. (1 Corinthians 15:54). The Second Vatican Council stated that while waiting for death to be overcome once and for all, "some of the disciples are pilgrims on earth. Others have died and are being purified, while still others are in glory" contemplating the trinity in full light.

Another basic premise that has not changed is that the souls in Purgatory can only be helped by the prayers of those in heaven and those on earth. It is this "communion of saints" that we speak of in the Apostles Creed. Although we may not realize it, we are actually practicing this belief when we pray "Eternal Rest grant to them Oh Lord and let the perpetual light shine upon them."

Now let us look to the window. We believe that Purgatory is the process of purification, and this is symbolized by the flames at the bottom of the picture. These are not the flames of hell, but rather the purifying ember that removes the rust of imperfection that clouds our ability to truly be one with God. At one point in our lives most of us have really longed for something and we have felt a "burning desire" for that thing. Could it be that the flames really represent the "burning desire" of the souls in Purgatory to be with God?

We also see that some of the people in the bottom of the picture are clothed and some do not appear to be clothed. Again could it be that once the soul has been purified, it is "clothed in glory" and ready to become one with God?

What do the angels on the right and left represent? They may represent our prayers on behalf of the dead. As St. John Chrysostom once wrote, “Let us help and commemorate them. If Job’s sons were purified by their father’s sacrifice, why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them consolation.? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and offer our prayers for them.”

Finally, we look to Mary with Christ on her knee. During the Hoosoyo on the Sunday of the Faithful Departed we pray that Christ, through the intercession of his Mother and his saints, will deliver the faithful departed from their suffering. Thus we have Our Lady of Purgatory.

During his Message for the Millenium of All Souls Day, Pope John Paul II said:

“As I entrust the faithful who will pray for the death to the intercession of Our Lady, St. Odilio and of St. Joseph, patron of a happy death, I cordially grant my Apostolic Blessing to them extend it to all who pray for the intention of the souls in Purgatory, who take part in the Eucharist and who offer sacrifices for the dead.”

We should be proud that our prayers hold special meaning and assist those in purgatory. The vast majority of us are good people, who do not murder or steal, but rather commit sins from weakness in our lives. We should take comfort in knowing that we are helping our loved ones how have passed on and that we will be helped when we ourselves die. In today’s instant society, it is difficult to accept the fact that when we die, we may be near God yet not yet with God. However, through the intercession of Mary, the communion of the saints and the prayers of the living, we can be sure that we will see the face of God.