

[Readings: Wisdom 3:1-9; Psalm 23; Romans 6:3-9; John 6:37-40]

Some fear it. Others hope for it. Some see it as proof of God's mercy; others as testimony to God's wrath. Many don't know anything about it, while many more have forgotten what they once knew.

The "it" is Purgatory, and when it comes to Catholic beliefs about the afterlife, the Church's teachings on Purgatory have long been among its most contested and misunderstood.

Someone asked this question: I've been reading about apparitions where Our Lady revealed to the children in Fátima and to Sister Mariana in Quito, Ecuador, that some souls spend the rest of time in purgatory, some priests, bishops and religious for 80 to 100 years! Wouldn't these folks have heard of plenary indulgences? It makes me depressed to think how long I could spend in Purgatory -- God willing if I make it!

The shortest answer I can give is this.

Of Purgatory, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: "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. The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned" (Nos. 1030-31)

There are, however, significant mysteries pertaining to Purgatory that merit a caution on our part. While it is true that numerous saints have had visions or ideas of Purgatory, their visions are not at the level of dogma. That Purgatory exists and that it is a place of purifications are indeed dogmas of the Church. But time or the exact manner of the purification is not fully known. Does time exist in Purgatory? If so, how does it relate to time here on earth? Is 80 to 100 years the same as here? It is not certain. Further, is Purgatory a fiery place of great suffering, or is the purification more gentle? Both images seem to be rooted in Scripture. Hence, it would seem that there is some release of sorrows also after death. So purgatory includes both suffering and healing.

It has always been the duty of the Church on earth to pray for the souls in Purgatory, and this is due to the belief that there is some degree of suffering. Purification and the letting go of earthly sorrows surely involves suffering.

As for plenary indulgences, this refers to a complete purification of all sin's effects and sorrows, and we can apply them to the souls in purgatory. But a full indulgence is not easy to obtain since one must be free of all attachment to sin. Rare indeed is such a holy soul here on earth. Thus, the remarks of Our Lady and other saints as to the lengthy purification of some souls can be seen as likely. Our prayers for them can lessen their time there even if we cannot easily gain a plenary indulgence on their behalf.

Any prayer or pious act applied to the souls in purgatory can be a way to pray for them. The most effective manner of praying is to have Masses offered for them or to apply the fruits of your own attendance at Mass. The Rosary, too, is a wonderful way to pray for them.

Most of us realize that few leave this world as perfect or pure, even if they are in friendship with God and in a state of grace. Some final work must be done to take away any final attachments to sin, any rough edges, any sorrows, regrets or hurts. These things are surely disclosed when we appear before the judgment seat of Christ (see 2 Cor 5:10).

So on account of this judgment and purification (that seems necessary and is taught), we pray for the dead that this process be swift and that they be in the full glory of heaven soon. Yet, still, it is our instinct to pray and assist them in those final finishing touches, as the Lord completes His masterpiece.

Eternal Rest grant unto them, O Lord, And let Perpetual Light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. May their souls and all the souls of the Faithful Departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. AMEN!"