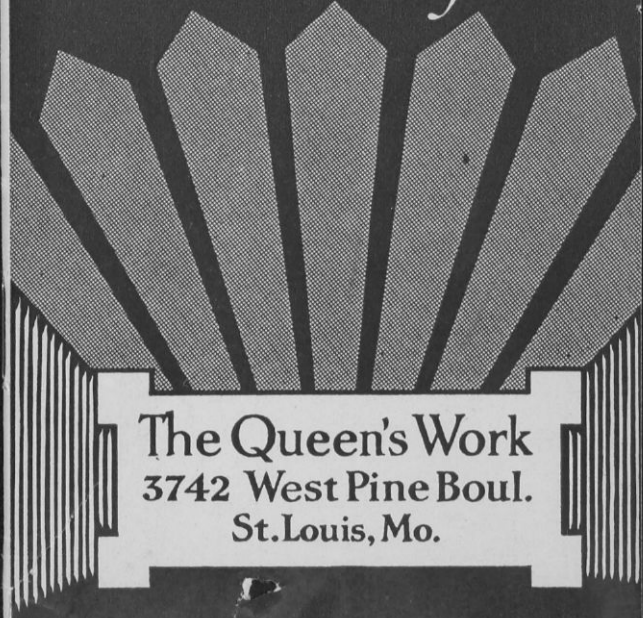


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in
Purgatory
by
James J. Daly, S.J.



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. in PURGATORY

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THE SOULS IN PURGATORY

By JAMES J. DALY, S. J.

WHEN we are sitting in a church while the last rites are going on over the tenant of the coffin near the sanctuary, our thoughts ought to be running fast. Yet it is probable that they are frozen into a hard, dull inertia. Big things—mountains, the ocean, eternity—stupefy the mind, crush it and overwhelm it. Death is one of the big things.

It is not the commonness of death that has blunted the edges of perception. Although few things in human experience are more commonplace than death, we have never got used to it. Every death among our relatives, our friends, or our acquaintances, even though it has been expected, is a surprise that momentarily strikes us mute. The greatest surprise of all will probably be our own death. Death may be a commonplace of the race, but it is not a commonplace of the individual man. My death will not matter in the least to the world at large. But to me it is a subject to which my thoughts keep returning; and I am dimly aware of a pack of restless fears which will give tongue when Death unlatches the front gate and comes slowly up the path to my door.

I have been accustomed to brace myself to meet new experiences by remembering that others have met triumphantly the difficulties and uncertainties that confronted me. But that thought will have no sustaining power, it seems to me, when night has fallen and the ocean of eternity lies ahead and the moment has come to plunge into the shadowy regions beyond the old familiar world of sense. Millions of men have appeared before their Creator and Judge, and gone through the ordeal of a divine sentencing, and been rewarded or punished. But that fact breathes no courage into my soul, nor tempts me to set out on my last journey with jaunty airs.

A Day of Realities

I have called the regions beyond life shadowy. And so they are to our unspiritual senses. But my soul has been whispering to me all my life, and Christian faith has been earnestly trying to confirm what my soul whispered, that when I shall leave this mortal life I shall be leaving a world of shadows and dreams to enter among the great solid realities of existence. And I know that a day of realities, whether pleasant or unpleasant, is an entirely different thing from a night of dreams and images.

We all cherish the confident hope of going, with God's grace and mercy, to heaven. But which of us looks forward to direct passage from our deathbed to the white

throng of the Blessed? The teaching of the Church is hardly required to make us see the unfitness of immediate translation into that glorious brotherhood. If heaven is what we firmly believe it to be, a land of happy souls enjoying perfection of intellect and will, of instinct and impulse, of manners and habits and sweet experience, a perfection beyond all human dreams—if heaven is this, how can mortal man desire to join its noble populace with the consciousness of his wilful deficiencies protesting its embarrassment and shame in the presence of that white happiness and high nobility? The soul cries out for delay, for pause, for some “conditioning” process that will accustom it to the patrician usages and tumultuous joy.

In Purifying Pain

What that conditioning process will be we can at the most only vaguely conjecture. The Church, whose words and accents are controlled by the divine Spirit of Truth, tells us that it will be a crucible of suffering. It will be, to change the figure, a bitter sea to cross. But the land of leal is on the other side, and we are content to be engulfed in purifying pain. There is so much to be washed away! A Catholic may have led what on all hands was called a blameless life enriched by good works; but unless he is a great saint, he probably can look back remorsefully over a road strewn with little selfishnesses, wasted opportunities, uncompleted tasks, idle words, indo-

lences, small vanities, uncontrolled temper, impatience, shallow views, worldliness and laxities of one kind or another in the shepherding of his thoughts and desires.

Unclean

Perfection and happiness go together. Nay, they are, practically speaking, one and the same thing. Even unalloyed natural happiness would be an intolerable experience to an imperfect man, just as the sensation of bright light could not be borne by weak eyes. But when we speak of the happiness and perfection of heaven, we are speaking of a happiness and perfection of an unutterably higher range than anything within the compass of human capacities in their natural state. If the organs of happiness must be fortified by perfection, not to be shriveled by the intense brightness of a perfectly happy natural experience, what must we think of the perfection of heavenly spirits moving forever in the light of the Beatific Vision? How can I even so much as desire to enter into their comradeship straightway out of this smoke and dust, these languors and morbidities, with the unlovely stains and accretions of simple mortality thick upon me? The penalties of my many treasons remain unpaid. The soiled vesture of imperfection clings to me. The dust and fogs of mortality have weakened my capacities for joy. I should be blinded by the bliss and stricken with shame by the high perfection of the saints in glory. To be ushered in among them at

once would be agony, not delight. And to appear before the unveiled Vision of Beauty and Holiness and Divine Love in all my frailty—that is too painful to be possible. For even in hell there must be a limit in the degree, if not in the duration, of pain.

Dependent on the Living

While we are here on earth we can shorten and allay that novitiate of pain which we see ahead and fear even when we welcome it as the vestibule of heaven. By prayers and good deeds, meritorious in the eyes of God, we can obtain remission of the satisfaction due to forgiven sins and clear our souls of venial faults. But after death that power ceases. We cannot merit then. We have to depend upon others still among the living to merit for us. Christ thus links His Church Suffering with His Church Militant. The Church Triumphant contains the treasures of merit which the members of the Church Militant can draw upon and apply to the alleviation of the Church Suffering. They are, all three churches, one Church of Christ in different stages of perfection and happiness; but all are brothers, the living and the dead, in the communion of saints and the bonds of charity.

God is ready to accept our prayers, sacrifices, good deeds, indulgences, penances, and trials in payment for the debts of the dead. Above all, according to the Council of Trent, the souls detained in purgatory

are aided "by the acceptable sacrifice of the altar." St. Monica, holy woman that she was, about to die, felt the need of succor beyond the grave. "I care not," she said to Augustine, "where my body will rest; but, my son, remember me at the altar." The constant teaching and tradition of the Church lays stress on the great efficacy of the mass to curtail the suffering of the souls in purgatory.

Holy Mass

The quiet acceptance of pain, the courage to confront crucial trials, the patience to bear disappointments and humiliations cheerfully, out of a desire to suffer with the suffering Christ and to help the souls in purgatory, gives us the fortitude of saints and must be precious ransom for the redemption of the imprisoned souls. But if we harken to the Church, the offering of the sacrifice of the mass for the dead is still more precious.

Anyone can have a mass said for the dead by going to the parish house and arranging for it with a priest. A stipend, or offering, usually one dollar, though in no sense "payment for mass," makes it a grave obligation for the priest to see that the mass is offered for the intention of the person making the offering. Thus the stipend gives the petitioner for a mass certain assurance that the mass will be said for his intention. Any priest who accepts a stipend for a mass and fails to say it for the intention of the donor commits a grave sin.

Rich and Poor

Catholics who are so poor that they cannot find even the stipend for a mass need not worry, nor conclude that the rich enjoy the advantages of their wealth in the next world as well as in this. That thought would do injustice to Christ, who loved the poor, and to His Church, which, though its ministers may sometimes be worldly and proud, is still, as it has always been, the Church of the Poor. Whatever the rule or usage of the Church may be in this matter or any other, we can be certain on one point: namely, that the possession of money gives no undue advantages in the kingdom of Christ.

As a matter of fact the more masses rich people have offered for their dead, the better it will be for the souls who have no one on earth to have masses said for them. The mass is said, not only for one or two or three, but for all the souls of the faithful departed; and Christ is the dispenser of relief to the waiting souls.

Alas, it is not the rich who commonly arrange for masses for the dead. I think it is true that most mass offerings come from the poor. Terrestrial logic and mathematics seem to go awry in the spiritual world. One would think, for instance, that the soul of a priest in purgatory would be especially favored on account of the large number of faithful whom he had helped during life and who would remember his needs in the next world. But a missionary

priest once said to me: "I have been fifteen years giving missions in all parts of the country. I have received hundreds of stipends for masses, but not one for the soul of a priest." There is a strange delusion that a good priest does not need prayers either in this life or in the next. It is a tribute to his character; but he pays dearly for it.

Ruined Chuntries

The Catholic sightseer in England is often saddened by the chantries in the great cathedrals. They were built by rich noblemen as shrines where a priest, supported by the annual income of a generous fund, was to say mass daily in perpetuity for their souls. The Reformation came; the mass was banished; the funds were diverted to other purposes or confiscated, and the beautiful chantries were transformed into pathetic ruins with desecrated altars.

If wealth and place cannot always ensure provision in the spiritual world, we get inklings now and then of mysterious ways in which the mercy of God operates in favor of His poor. "I was named," a priest once told me, "after my mother's brother. He was her favorite brother. While she was a very young girl in Ireland, the brother resolved to challenge fortune in remote Australia. Those were unsettled frontier days in the antipodes. My uncle was killed shortly after he landed.

"Life was cheap on the frontiers of civilization, and my mother never heard details

of his death. The thought of his nameless grave in a land of strangers brought her, doubtless, moments of sadness. She asked me when I became a priest to remember him always in my masses. I have been saying mass now every morning for thirty years, and his name has never been left out of a single mass. My uncle has been lying in his unmarked grave these sixty or seventy years. I don't suppose his grave in some obscure corner of a cemetery is still to be seen. If it were, a passer-by might entertain a fleeting reflection on the poor unknown immigrant lying there so long, with no friend to say a prayer for the repose of his soul. The strange fact is that he is probably remembered oftener at the altar than the tenants of the marble mausoleums which are the pride of the graveyard."

Spiritual Tragedy

We do not all read poetry, but everyone has read sometime in his life, generally in his youth, Longfellow's story of Evangeline. Whatever else in that sweet and simple narrative may have dropped out of our memory, we are sure to remember the almost too painful passage in which the lovers, scouring the western wilderness in their eager and untiring quest each for the other, are brought within hailing distance and yet fail to meet. The ardent boy who has been breathlessly following the fortunes of Evangeline wants to shout to her where she lies sleeping, after an arduous day, on an island of the Mississippi while Gabriel is

padding down the river "behind a screen of palmettos" under the very lee of the island. So they miss each other. "Angel of God, was there none to waken the slumbering maiden?"

It is, as we said, almost too painful for the purposes of art. The sadness of missed opportunity is the most poignant in human experience. It is also the most common. Life and literature are full of it. But if it is the pathos of life, it must be the tragedy of eternity. As the dewdrop reflects the starry sky, the sad little story of Evangeline must represent on a diminutive scale the momentous spiritual tragedies involved in "the little less, and what miles away!"

Faithful to Dim Lights

For instance. There are many good men and women living outside the visible pale of the Church in perfect good faith, whose spiritual dispositions make them dear to God and who will be the recipients of His mercy and salvation. With fewer helps to sustain them and greater difficulties to try them than come to us, they are faithful to their dim and obscured lights; and, though always searching for the truth and frustrated always by the entanglements of unfavorable birth, environment, inherited prejudice, and other circumstances over which they have no control, they will discover the truth indeed by the grace of God, but not in this world.

Too Late

In heaven of course they will be incapable of regret. But that is precisely the mystery to my understanding. How can these saved souls look back on the drabness and dullness of their life on earth, with the thrilling splendor of God's Church always within easy reach, and not be utterly overwhelmed and undone by the deluge of sad regrets? How often and how near they passed by Christ in His thousand tabernacles with averted and alien faces! They might have assisted at mass and welcomed Him, whom their hearts were hungering for, into the yearning emptiness of their breasts; and some thin veil of prejudice, some interposing screen of custom, excluded them like a despotic wall of iron from their divine Lover. He was the object of their weary journeyings by night and day, and they passed Him by a hundred times upon the streets. They felt the loneliness of exiles when they might so easily have put their hand in His and gone cheerfully down the roads of the world.

Lost Opportunities

If the sadness of regret could be in heaven, such a retrospect of missed opportunities should be a fertile cause of it. But a far more fertile cause, it seems to me, should be the backward gaze of those who had been born, as it were, in the Church and who were always only listless and cold beneficiaries of God's fairest bounties. Their faith was a living faith, it is true, but only

half alive, paralyzed and sporadic. The distracting screens of the flesh and the world were allowed, in a weak spirit of resignation to low aims and mean performance, to keep them apart and at distance from the great spiritual realities. Christ was with them, known and recognized, inviting their companionship and intimacy, and they remained, as a general rule, almost strangers to Him. A little more effort, a little more vigilance, a little more valor in their struggle through the thickets of natural indolence and inclination, and they would not have had to reckon sadly so many lost opportunities when Christ came to their door and went away because there was no room for Him. If they had permitted the splendor of Christ to illumine their life more brightly in patience and charity and unworldly living, there would have been less of that invincible ignorance which keeps so many good men and women in the cold and darkness encircling the blessed precincts of God's Church.

The Compassionate Church

The regret of these good men and women, if they shall be allowed to experience it at all, will be, as the matter presents itself to me, small and slight beside the regret of Catholics whose missed opportunities implied carelessness and culpable neglect. Perhaps this regret will be the chief element in the purifying processes of purgatory. Regrets are bitter things to live with. And the heedlessness which occasioned

them will seem to take a summary vengeance by visiting us with the sore consequences of being forgotten by others as heedless as ourselves. If we shall have to review a life of careless acceptance of the Church into which we were born, it is likely that no side of our Catholic life will be more conspicuously negligent than the free and easy way in which we took the doctrine of the value of prayers for the dead.

It is all but startling to note the eager preoccupation of the Church Militant with her work of relief for the members of the Church Suffering who were her children. She seems to enjoy her union and intercessory power with the Church Triumphant chiefly as a means of helping the souls of her dead to pass quickly through the fiery interval between earth and heaven. She encourages us by almost preposterous privileges and indulgences to say prayers and make small sacrifices and perform acts of virtue and to receive the sacraments and to attend masses and to have masses said for them who can help themselves no longer and must now depend upon our charity.

A Stern Moment

Every year the Church sets aside an entire month, a month of clouds and winds and drifting leaves, in which she concentrates her habitual concern into a "drive" in behalf of the suffering souls. She drapes

her altars and her ministers in mourning, and appeals to us in tearful accents from innumerable sanctuaries; and scatters abroad her leaflets and her literature, in the hope of gathering a rich toll of suffrages in her annual drive for the dead.

How shall we be able to recall all this except with the most painful bewilderment, wondering how we could have been so cold and unresponsive to her all but frantic eagerness? That will be a stern moment in our eternity. The self-accusing soul will fold itself in its grief and resign itself sadly to the measure of neglect which it meted out to others.

In the wartime drives we were exhorted "to give until it hurts." And everyone with a capacity for sympathy and pity gave until it hurt, that he might in some small way share in the privations, hardships and sufferings which bore with such terrible intensity upon the upholders of his cause in the agony of battle. It is a pagan and unnatural trait to be able to enjoy comfort when misery abounds. Human beings, men and women like ourselves, our brothers, are suffering in purgatory—we do not know how many of them. They must be numerous and in great distress, since the Church is inspired to be so energetic in begging relief for them. They are paying the penalty of human frailties and faults with which we are only too familiar. The saints and angels are waiting for their deliverance. Our Blessed Lady is waiting

for them. Christ is waiting for them. But the power and privilege of curtailing their anguish and their duration lie with us. By a merciful providence we can swing back the gates of their prison and cut the leashes which restrain them from the freedom of the sons of God.

Our Loved Ones

Among those wistful petitioners for our bounty are many whom we knew and loved—souls that beamed affectionately upon us through eyes which the dust has quenched, souls that ministered to us through hands long since folded in peace, that tended us and ran our errands on weary feet now quiet for ever. Oh, my loved ones! How can I think of them without tears? The secluded graveyards of the world contain their ashes. They hold close fellowship with the November rains and the long nights and the winter winds. How remote they are! And they were so close to me! They were a part of me and I a part of them. A world that meant to be kind took my hand and led me away from their graves, telling me that my duty lay with the living, and bade me dry my tears and to forget. Alas, I have learned that lesson but too well.

It is probable that the dear dead who loved me are suffering for faults and infidelities which grew out of their very love for me. If they had loved me less and God more, they would not have to suffer

now. The thought would be too harrowing but for one thing. They are not beyond the reach of my affection. I need not sit helpless and uncomforted in my ruefulness. I can pursue them, with fond attention and grateful returns, into eternity. God be thanked who has made it possible to make up for passionate treasons and cold betrayals towards the living by loyalties to the dead!

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