Thinking faith
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Judgement and Purgatory: Part 2

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As we observe the Feasts of All Saints and All Souls on 1st and 2nd November, we might ask if and how we are separated from the dead, and what our prayers for them mean. John McDade SJ answers these questions by exploring further the doctrine of Purgatory – how are we given life in death through achieving complete attentiveness to God?

In the preceding discussion, I began to explore what we understand by Purgatory and our journey into the fullness of God. Here, we develop these ideas further and look at how they shape our understanding of the relations between the living and the dead.


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When God's relation to me is brought to completion, then I love God and that is heaven; in the journey towards that point, false ways of being me are stripped from me, and that is Purgatory. This will take place in conformity with the truth about myself, and that is judgement. The only tribunal we face is God and before God, self-delusion is not possible because God is the completely real (what Aquinas means by *ipsum esse*). That others are with me on this movement into God is clear; no one is saved alone. That others contribute towards my ultimate wellbeing is also clear because there is a mutual gifting of holiness shared among all who are in Christ, circulated by prayers and good works; *what each of us does contributes to the final good of all*. Is this not the key insight behind the doctrine of Purgatory?

Why do we pray, offer Mass for the dead? In order to do what we can do for them through prayer, sacrament and acts of penance. The objection at the time of the Reformation that Catholics by their practices were engaged in a process of self-salvation, trying to save themselves by their religious works, trying to bring about the entry of souls into heaven as a consequence of what human beings did on earth, having multiple Masses said, thereby rendering the grace of Christ unnecessary – all this is a misunderstanding and a distortion, as we said then and say now. Everything that we do is brought about by the grace of Christ. There is a circulation of grace that issues in prayers and sacrifices. What we direct towards the dead is what is prompted and sustained in us by the redeeming grace of Christ: it does not replace Christ's grace, but channels it through the 'thinking members' of the Church.[1]

If you have been to a funeral in a Church which resolutely refuses to pray for the dead person, you will have felt that something absolutely fundamental is missing. It is as though the desire to do something for the person, commending them to God's mercy and acting in a way that helps them, is blocked: the grace of Christ stops with me and I cannot act as a channel of that grace for the good of those who have died. All the more galling in that one is apparently permitted in those churches to pray for the living, but not for the dead. There is something that feels deeply wrong here: what comes into me from Christ may be directed by me towards others, all others, whether living or dead. And indeed it *needs* to be directed by me towards others because grace impels us outwards.

We do not live for ourselves: that is hell. The doctrine of hell is not a doctrine of divine punishment. It is not in fact a doctrine about God at all, but a recognition of the extreme possibility

available to us: there can be self-ruination. (I think, by the way, that we should avoid language of damnation, even self-damnation; possibly what we need to say is best expressed by speaking of 'self-ruination' or 'complete self-enclosure'.). The doctrine of hell is a way of saying that it is within our power so to enclose ourselves, so to make ourselves a 'black hole' into which no light can penetrate, that not even God can come into us. Augustine has a phrase about someone being *involutus in se*, 'enfolded inwards into himself'. A possibility? Yes, in principle. In reality? We do not know. There can be an extreme point of selfishness and destructiveness that is within our grasp; the scope of freedom has no bounds, it is open to unlimited good or unlimited wrong, but we never know enough to be able to assign culpability. 'Do not judge,' said the Lord (Mt 7:1).

Let me come back to the question of the relation of living and dead: is it clear that there is a sharp boundary between them? Our Christian tradition makes it difficult to distinguish between those who are alive and those who are dead. Christ says, 'And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.' (Lk 20:37-8).

Our Lord is quite clear that the condition of those who have died should properly be described as a condition of 'living'. If it is the case that 'all are alive to him' (all live to God, in him all are living), then, within the limits of what can be said about this mystery, we can say that when we die we go into God and that this entry into God is a 'being alive'. Too much of our thinking and preaching treats death as an entry into non-being, a cessation of identity. But if you have been at the death of a holy person and shared how they commit themselves to the mercy and goodness of God, it becomes impossible to return to sub-Christian accounts of death as a separation from goodness and life. If I believe Christ, I will 'live' in God when I die.

You know the expression from Star Trek that 'we are in deep space'; surely we can say analogously that we are in 'deep God': this is what a doctrine of the Trinity is meant to support. The key idea in Christianity is *participation in the life of God* – this is why Christians cannot but judge that Islam marks no advance on Jewish or Christian teaching because it seems to take us back to the worship of a God whose being is not known to us and is beyond our participation, but presents only a God whose will expressed in the Qur'an demands obedience from us. But Christian Trinitarian faith is that when we deal with Christ in sign (sacrament), faith and memory, we deal with the very *self-gift* of God, and the movement of coming to be 'in Christ' is sustained by the divine love at the heart of God, that we call God's Spirit. The Catholic tradition about Purgatory is how we imagine the final stages of coming to be in Christ, the purification, the purgation, the completed self-emptying that allows there to remain in us only attentive love. *The condition of attentive love is heaven; we have access to this condition through Purgatory.*

Two years ago, the relics of Thérèse of Lisieux came to England and Wales. She is a doctor of the Church, a young woman from Normandy, full, as they say in France, of '*la sagesse normande*,' full of Norman wisdom. Her name was Thérèse Martin, and in some parishes in London this Doctor of the Church is known as 'Doc Martin'. There is an account of the events around her death bed: when she was dying, the Carmelite nuns were fussing round her saying, 'Oh, Thérèse is going to heaven, but for the rest of us, all that we can expect is a long Purgatory.' Thérèse lifted her head from the pillow and said, 'There is no Purgatory for those who love', and then lay down again and carried on the difficult business of handing herself over to the God whose existence was so problematic for her. This young woman lived out in the convent at Lisieux the spiritual trial of our age, that gnawing sense of the unreality and impossibility of God.

She is perhaps the first Doctor of the Church for whom atheism was part of her spiritual reality. A profound spiritual teaching about Purgatory being given by a young woman dying far too young is a dramatic moment, because this young woman has to hand herself over to a God who is barely glimpsed on the felt horizon of her life. She experienced in the Convent a purgation, a stripping away of pleasant consolations as God became withdrawn from her as a felt presence. 'There is no Purgatory for those who love' is a very striking statement, but its truth from another point of view is something we know already

because Purgatory is how we come to be able to love attentively and unselfishly. A self-directed form of identity will be taken from us and all that will be left of us, and all that really matters, is an attentiveness towards God.

Purgatory describes the general process of how we are brought to love; it will therefore begin now and it will continue until we are able to love. Although we may imagine Purgatory lasting for a time, and then souls leave it, this is simply a way of saying that it ends in heaven, in union with God. When we say that it may take us some time to get from Purgatory to heaven, and that through the prayers of others our journey there may be 'shortened', we speak as though there is duration and the flow of time in that world. But there is no time outside time, no time that comes 'after' time. Our language in this regard this is always 'tensed' because we cannot but interpret our lives narratively, by dealing with 'first', and 'then' and 'finally'. In our narrative about a post-death set of events that purify us, we are offering ourselves an imaginative way of describing the full impact of God on a person. In the divine presence, we know ourselves, perhaps for the first time and that may reasonably be described as 'causing us pain' simply because we experience self-knowledge now as both hard, necessary and yet liberating. *I no longer have to pretend*: that final experience may be the purgation imagined in our stories of the pains of Purgatory.

Should we pray for the dead? Yes. Is it right to think that we can help the dead by prayers and sacrifices? Yes, because goodness is shared and is efficacious. Is it right to think that those in heaven help people like us to get there too? Yes. Behind all these practices and beliefs is the idea that there is an abundant circulation of Christ's grace channelled through free creatures. Our death is how we enter more deeply into the love we're already in touch with. God's loving me is God making me be; when I die, that loving does not cease but can only be an intensification of God's creative action, and when God's making me be reaches its pitch, we have what the Bible calls 'resurrection'. Certainly, as David Jenkins, the former Bishop of Durham said, it is certainly not ' a conjuring trick with bones' and should not be viewed in this way. Resurrection is what we will be when the full self-gift of God strips away from us all self-directed living, and all that remains is a bond of responsive identity shaped by divine love. We're now at the limits of what we can say and you may well judge that we are already saying more than we can, but it's no bad thing to get to that point and have a look around because there's nothing more important than getting this right.

Pope John Paul II used a threefold division when he wanted to describe the unfolding of God's action among us: he spoke first of the *mystery of unity*: humans are united through the creative action of God who makes them be. And then this presence deepens as God intensifies his presence among us though the direct presence of Word and Spirit, and this is the *mystery of redemption*. This is where we are as we move towards the *mystery of completion*, when God will be all in all. The final stage in the process of human beings entering the mystery of completion is what we imaginatively call Purgatory. The doctrine encapsulated in this imaginative way is that ultimately we are not defined by the wrong that we do, by the frailty of purpose endemic in us, by the betrayals and lapses that we inflict on ourselves and others. Instead we are defined by the effect of God on us; we are defined by mercy and grace, and it is consoling to know at a funeral or a Mass for the dead that the last word on their identity will be written not by what they have done, but by Christ's merciful death for all.

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This article is based on a talk given to the Priests of the Diocese of Westminster at Westminster Cathedral on 11 November 2010.

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[1] 'Imagine a body of thinking members... To be a member is to have no life, no being and no movement except through the spirit of the body and for the body.' (Pascal, *Op.cit.*, L.370-1), 108)