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All Souls' Day

All Souls' Day: this day the Church remembers all those who have left this world at peace with the Lord. We remember all those who have died this year especially, but in years past as well. This would include our friends, members of our family and those who have been good to us. We remember our neighbors and fellow parishioners too. The Church gives us this day that we might take the time to remember them in our prayers this month.

For the past few weeks, I have spoken about the fire of faith, and All Souls' Day is a day that we remember that there is a purifying fire that we can encounter after we pass from this world. This fire is not intended to destroy us, but rather to purify our hearts. Because we leave this world without taking anything with us from this world, we must let go of the material possessions that we have. If we are attached to them, it will be a difficult process to let go of them and learn to live without them.

The image of the Unburnt Bush applies here too. The Unburnt Bush signified the fire of divine love, and this divine love will not burn us. The fire of divine love is something that will enlighten and warm our hearts, but we must be ready to accept it. We must have the strength to endure this fire. The altar in our hearts must be strong enough so that we can offer to the Lord our song and our love for all eternity.

For the holy souls who have passed from this life, they realize that they are not quite there yet. There is still a need for them to prepare themselves for this eternal song. Whatever preparation did not happen in this life, must be undertaken in the next. To enter God's house means to be sinless, to be without the stain of sin, or even the desire to sin. How could any of us sing eternally to God, but at the same time experience withdrawal symptoms because we do not have our favorite tv shows on, or there is no coffee shop in Heaven. As the Lord said, we cannot enter the Kingdom of God looking back at what we left behind.

The Church's teaching regarding Purgatory can be misunderstood. When we think about it carefully, Purgatory is something that we can appreciate. Certainly, there are those in our lives who we want to see again in our heavenly home. We realize that they have certain flaws, and if we are going to live forever with each other in Heaven, we cannot get on each other's nerves, or else it would not be Heaven. Some might argue that God can just resolve all those issues in the next life. But things are a little more complicated than that.

Salvation or redemption of a person involves transforming a person, without changing the person into something else. Turning a person into someone else is not redeeming the person. Deconstructing someone's personality and replacing it with another personality (think Jason Bourne) is not saving someone or redeeming someone, even if it is done to make a person better. The process of redemption must eliminate the bad things about a person, and keeping the good things, all the while, maintaining continuity so that the person remains the same person. This is tricky, and God cannot just wave His hand to make it happen. This is not to deny that sometimes transformations are dramatic, as in the case of St. Paul. God transforms us, but without changing us into someone else.

This can help us to understand why our faithful friends and family and all those who have gone before us rely on our prayers to help them prepare to meet the Lord Jesus in the next life. The prayers that we offer here on earth come to God's throne in Heaven, rising like incense. Whatever prayers that we offer, help the faithful departed to make that journey from this world to the next. Our prayers are a kind of song, that helps the faithful departed to find their own song as they prepare to enter Heaven.

We might wonder how and why our prayers, and offering the Sacrifice of the Mass, helps the souls in Purgatory. Our prayers are requests that God may have mercy on those who need His mercy. There must be accountability, whether in this life or the next life, but there is room for God's mercy. Our prayers help our friends and family by appealing to that mercy, and to maintaining that connection that was forged in this life. We continue those bonds with our deceased loved ones by the prayers that we offer for them. We might think that praying for the souls in Purgatory is about putting out a flame. No, the prayers that we offer strengthen their souls, so that they can bear the fire of divine love.

The fire of Purgatory is a fire of faith, and a fire of hope. It is tempting to think that once a soul's time in Purgatory is over, there is no more fire, but the fire of divine love will continue to burn in the souls of the faithful departed in Heaven.

The souls of the faithful departed will become a reflection of God's glory. The light of God's glory will be reflected in the souls of His faithful as glass reflects the brilliance of the light passing through it. How is glass made? The first step is to refine sand, so that there are no impurities. There are agents added to the sand to lower the melt temperature, so that the process takes place easier and more smoothly. There are also agents added to provide the sand with stability. Then the sand is melted until it becomes glass.

Perhaps Purgatory can be thought of in a similar way. Our souls can be like the sand: there needs to be a refining process, to get rid of the impurities within our souls. The prayers and Masses that are offered for the souls in Purgatory "lower the melt temperature," so that the process is easier. The time spent in Purgatory is less. The time spent in Purgatory is also a time of preparation, so that there will be stability in the souls when it comes to reflecting God's glory. Yes, the biggest transformation happens whenever heat is applied, and the fire of love in Purgatory is transformative. This transformation does not change a person into another person, or a different personality, but allows the person's soul to allow to reflect God's glory.

As we approach the altar, we ask the Lord to remember the souls of the faithful departed, to continue to show His mercy to the souls in Purgatory. We ask the Lord to transform the souls of the faithful departed, so that the light of their souls may shine above the darkness, until they are ready to take on the fire of God's love in their own souls. We ask the Lord to transform us, and maintain the bonds with our family and friends that we forged in this life.