

Homily for November 8, 2009, 32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday B. St. Ignatius Church.  
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The leaves are falling—have you noticed! It is a dance of death—the leaf detached from the living tree. A poet puts it thus:

Leaves fall. Return to earth, to sod.  
So do we all. Peasants and kings  
*and all manner of things*  
fall, fall—  
into the hand of the living God.

This is the month, chill November, when we follow All Saints with All Souls, and emphasize praying for the dead. We put out beautiful books of remembrance, and pray in every Mass for those named there. But perhaps we pray TO them. There has been a falling off in belief in purgatory, and that needs some comment. When Catholics finally realized that Limbo is no longer projected as a state in the future for unbaptized children, and are told, rather lamely, that all this was never more than a theological opinion anyway, they become doubtful of purgatory as well. Not a lot is said about it now. In an ecumenical age we also become much more aware of what other Christian churches teach. And we know that most Protestant churches do not believe in this temporary state of life after death, nor do they follow Catholic piety in praying for the dead. What about us? What are we believing and doing?

To put it simply: we believe in or recognize the condition that purgatory represents. And that is *the unfinished business of life*. In earlier years we may have been told that our vocation is to become a saint. If true, many of us don't succeed! We may know someone like a devout grandmother or Mother Teresa who does succeed but we are quite sure about ourselves, that we do not become very holy people, patient, loving, serving, and all the rest. We drive cars like mad men right to the end! One person looked back on his association with various Christian fellowships and said that, for all their high-minded purpose, the members had difficulty getting along with each other. And yet reconciliation is a key theme of the gospels and of Christian fellowship. Considering this he said, with alarming frankness, that he could never be reconciled to anything except maybe a tree, certainly not to something that could talk back. Perhaps we recognize ourselves in his confession. We talk a good case for forgiveness (and being a Christian) but old grievances have a way of lingering on. Some have compared it to the way a dog clutches an old bone.

If we don't feel that we achieve a very high degree of holiness, we certainly don't feel ready to appear immediately before the holy God. Perhaps we feel the need for further repentance; perhaps it is just a conviction of unworthiness. *Purgatory represents that feeling*. It is an attempt to satisfy that need. Beyond that we cannot talk of it as a place, or in terms of time, because space and time do not belong to a future life. Nor should we try to picture purgatory as full of cleansing fire. It *has* been so pictured, but this is imagination, not revelation. In the past this was a favorite theme—to describe its joys

(anticipation) and its pains (separation from God). But proceeding thus is an exercise of fancy. Two theologians, Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, are among those who rethink what purgatory is—perhaps an illumination, or realization, of a person's life, what might have been. One's failures are now left to the infinite mercy of God.

There is a Jewish tale that makes the same point. It says that God himself is in the temple, wrapped in the prayer shawl. But for what is God praying? Over and over, the same prayer: "O that my justice may not overcome my mercy!"

A statement in the Old Testament says that "no one can see the face of God and live." We are quite well aware that God can close this gap. After all, God made us with all our weaknesses, our mortal frame. He can remake us. He may do that without any condition or state like purgatory—or he may not. We leave this up to the creator, but in the meantime we are humble and honest enough to think that we need some kind of purification or preparation beyond the hectic business of living 20 or 90 years.

A priest looked back on his ordination many years ago and said that he spent the night before in a monastery, most of it in the chapel. Back at the family home relatives were spilling over, ready for the ordination and first Mass. It would be like heaven. He had already made a retreat and all the rest. He just felt the need for this final preparation—or purification. Perhaps we feel like that before coming in the door and sitting down at the heavenly banquet.

And so: what about praying for those in purgatory and the old teaching that we could shorten the time that people spend there? Once again, this represents a need which humans feel, a sense of solidarity. Or what the church has defined as the communion of saints. Or the presence everywhere of the Spirit, God uniting us with each other. It is very human to wish to rejoice in the beloved's happiness or to help the beloved attain that happiness. the only way we can do this beyond this life is through the spirit, by prayer. So we do it. How this works we do not know, and we should give up, as the church is slowly giving up, all thought of "reducing a sentence," working within a time frame. Just think about those we love as alive with God. Pray for them if you wish, because no prayer, no act of love is ever wasted. Or pray to them.

Purification, solidarity, and a communion in the spirit. These are ways to think about this subject without getting into the trap of images and detail. Here we are, thinking of death in the midst of life. But actually, for believers, we are thinking of life in the midst of death.