

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (2017 - A)

Today I would like to talk about death and, as we move from fall into winter, this is a good time to reflect on death. I would also like to say something about purgatory – something most of us will have to endure after we die.

Each year, nature dies. In early autumn, the leaves begin to change and then fall to the ground; birds begin to fly south and animals prepare for hibernation. Soon our lakes and streams will freeze over and nature will go to sleep to await its rebirth in spring. It's a cycle ever ancient, ever new.

Here in the northern hemisphere, nature's cycle of death and new life coincide with our Church year. In just two weeks, we will celebrate the Solemnity of Christ the King. It comes at the very end of the Church year. Then, Advent begins, and with it new life in Christ.

With the death of nature before us, and with the end of the Church year upon us, we are reminded that all things come to an end, and that includes us. We too will die. We will not live forever. Not only that, but the world itself will come to an end. In its liturgy, the Church reflects upon these mysteries, our own death and also Christ's second coming at the end of the world.

Concerning death, Andy Rooney, a long-time commentator on 60 minutes made this interesting comment. He said, *"Death is a distant rumor to the young."*

In other words, the young don't think about death. I would add that neither do the middle aged, and surprisingly, a lot of older people don't think about death either. Yet death is part of life. It is a reality that none of us can escape. As Saint Thomas More says in the play, A Man for All Seasons, *"Death comes for us all. Even for kings he comes."*

While death may be an unpleasant subject, yet because it is something we will all face, it's also something we ought to prepare for. In fact, it's for our own good that the Church reminds us we must be prepared for death. That's because when we die, we will face our own particular judgement. When we die we will have to give an account of how we have used the time God has given to us here on this Earth. So that is why from time to time the Church speaks to us about death. It says to us: Be prepared!

In our second reading today, Saint Paul speaks about those who have "fallen asleep" that is, those who have died in Christ. He says,

"We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters about those who have fallen asleep, so that you may not grieve like the rest, who have no hope."

When Saint Paul spoke of those who have "died in Christ" he meant those who died not only believing Jesus Christ was their Lord and Savior but also striving to live out their faith. Saint Paul said that they will rise again and will be taken up into the sky to meet the Lord.

Saint Paul offered these encouraging remarks to counter the beliefs of the vast majority of pagans among whom these first Christians lived. These pagans had no notion of resurrection. Instead, many believed that when you died, you went to a gloomy world beneath the ground, a world ruled by the god Hades. In this underworld world, there were five rivers that had the names sorrow and woe, lamentation, fire, oblivion, and hate. Not nice ideas.

From this, it's clear why the pagans would grieve over those who had died. It was because they had no hope for anything more than a sad and gloomy eternity. The pagans even had a saying which Saint Paul quotes in First Corinthians. He says, if the dead are not raised, **"Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die (1Cor 15:32)."**

But that is not so for those who have died in Christ. To those who believe in Him and who live by His teachings, Jesus offers eternal life. His disciples will live on God's holy mountain where death will be destroyed and God will wipe away all their tears (Is 25:8).

At this point, let me say something about a modern heresy, or perhaps better a modern delusion. It's a mistaken belief held by many people – something they hold to in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. This is their delusion: They think you don't have to do anything to get to heaven. Some even think you can ignore God's commandments or even break them, and it won't matter.

Yet in our holy Gospel today, Jesus Himself warns us that this is not so. He warns us to be prepared. That was the whole point of His parable of the ten virgins. The virgins did not know when the bridegroom was coming but the wise ones were ready for him. In a similar way, we do not know when God will call us from this life, but when He does, we had better be ready. Jesus says to us, **"Stay awake for you know neither the day nor the hour."**

So what happens after we die? Here is the answer: Our faith teaches that immediately after the soul leaves the body, we will be judged by the Lord. At that time, all will be made known to us. All our virtuous actions and all of our sinful actions will be laid before us.

Then, those who have died in a state of mortal sin, that is, those who have died loving their sins more than God will be banished to hell forever.

On the other hand, some of those who have died in a state of grace, those who loved God above all things will go directly to heaven where they will see God face to face. The rest will go to Purgatory where they will be purified of the residue of the sins still clinging to them. After that they too will go to heaven.

Many of the saints believed the vast majority of us will have to spend some time in Purgatory before we can go to heaven. For that reason, let me say a bit more about this teaching.

First, you may know that the word Purgatory is not found in the Bible. However, certain Bible passages clearly point to its existence. For example, Jesus said, **"whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come (Mt 12:32)."** This implies there is a place in the next life where sins are forgiven.

It's also the case that the Jews, our spiritual ancestors, prayed for their dead (and still do to this day). An example of this can be found in the Bible in the Second Book of Maccabees where Judas Maccabees had prayers and sacrifices offered for the soldiers under his command who had died in battle (2Mac 12:43).

So why is there a Purgatory? Because of the infinite perfection of God. It exists because God is so holy, nothing impure and nothing unclean in even the slightest way can enter into His presence. Before we can see God, all that is not love must be blotted out.

Think about when you are cleaning a window on a sunny day. If you leave streaks on it, even if they are just in a corner, it's going to show up because the window isn't totally clean. In a similar way, our souls must be totally clean to be light of God's presence.

So what happens in Purgatory? We grieve for our sins. In Purgatory, we are presented with our sins, actions that have wounded love. We are reminded of those times when we failed to live as we should, when we behaved selfishly.

Think about it this way. Grief comes from inside us. It is our own judgement, our own personal realization that we have behaved poorly, that we have wounded those we love. So, before we can enter into God's presence, we must grieve for our sins, all of them, and that's a painful thing, but it must be done. How Jesus treated Saint Peter gives us a good example of how this works.

Remember that Saint Peter had denied Jesus three times. Then after He rose from the dead, Jesus spoke to Saint Peter on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Our Lord said, "Simon son of John do you love me?" to which Saint Peter said "Yes." Then Jesus asked him a second time and a third time the same question, and it was only after the third time that Saint Peter realized what Jesus was getting at. Then the gospel says, "Peter was grieved." He had deep sorrow for having denied the one he loved. Then, after he had grieved, after he had affirming his love for the Lord three times and erased his sins of denial, Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

Now it's true that some people do all of their grieving in this life. They are prayerful and they sacrifice and they lead holy lives, and they sin very little if at all. These people will go straight to heaven when they die.

However, that's not true for most of us. Furthermore, what about someone who has lead a sinful life but who repents just before he or she dies? For example, I have heard confessions of people just hours before they have died. People who had been away from God for years, decades even. What about them? Their eternal punishment has been forgiven, but because they have not grieved for their sins, they will probably be in Purgatory for a long time before they can see God.

One last thing here. We can help those in Purgatory with our prayers and sacrifices and by having Masses said for them. We can aid them on their journey to heaven. So don't forget to pray for your deceased loved ones.

Yes, certainly it's true that some are in heaven, but it's also very likely that many will have to pass through Purgatory before they can enter into heaven. Who of us would allow someone we love to suffer needlessly in this life? So why would we let our loved ones suffer after they have died? Why would we let them languish in Purgatory? So pray for your departed loved ones.

As winter draws near and the death of nature is all around us, it doesn't hurt for us to think about our own upcoming death and to consider if indeed we are prepared for it. If not, let us get ready so that we aren't like the foolish virgins who were unprepared when the bridegroom came. Amen.