From the Pastor's Desk

Greetings to all my brothers and sisters of Visitation Parish as we begin yet another month and as 2026 (in terms of both the calendar and liturgical year) is quickly drawing to a close. As we begin the month of November, we celebrate two particularly momentous events in the liturgical calendar: the Solemnity of All Saints and the feast of the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed (traditionally known as *All Souls' Day).* These two liturgical celebrations bring to mind two of the most important theological truths of our faith, since of course the whole of our lives is oriented toward life eternal, i.e., heaven and purgatory.

While there are many *popular* images of heaven, a mature theological reflection upon heaven is realized in the context of the dynamics of pure and perfect love. Very clearly if heaven is imaged in these terms, it is a social reality. One of my favorite systemic theologians, Gerald O'Collins has written quite a bit on eschatology (the theology of the last things) and when speaking about heaven he quite correctly speaks of love and its dynamism in eternal heavenly glory. He notes that love has a redemptive quality, that is, love liberates people – true and perfect love sets people free and heals the hurts of life. Accordingly, he notes that "the activity of God's redeeming love will reach its climax in the eschaton {on the last day}" ("In the End, Love" in *Fatih in the Future: Studies in Christian Eschatology, 35).* Pope Benedict XVI, another systematic theological powerhouse, writes in his encyclical *Spes Salvi* that eternal life with God is like "plunging into an ocean of infinite love" that knows no origin or conclusion. Before he was pope, his eschatology was focused on heaven being a Christological reality, and as such it was an experience of life with others saying that,

> *If heaven depends upon being with Christ, then it must involve co-being with all those who, together, constitute the body of Christ. Heaven is the [absolute] stranger to isolation. It is the open society of the communion of saints, and in this way the fulfilment of all human communion. (Ratzinger,* ***Eschatology****, 235.)*

In thinking of heaven, we also need to recall Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium)'s* description of the Church as "a sacrament – a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all [human beings] (LG, 1). This very same document acknowledged that the Church has been established by Christ as "a communion of life, love, and truth" (LG, 9). If then the nature and mission of the Church, the Body of Christ in the world, is to be an efficacious sign of communion with God and among people, it seem rather appropriate to imagine the life of the blessed dead in terms of communion… as Ratzinger said, "the fulfillment of human communion." Therefore, it is the graced experience of sharing in the dynamic personal communion that the Trinity is, it is the personal participation in mutual giving and receiving of love among the three divine persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). And the love among the members of the Trinity is the origin of the dynamics of love that the harmony of relationships that define the human person (relationships with God, neighbor, self, and world). The life of the blessed dead in heaven is a social (not individualized) experience for it is communion with those who share directly in the blessedness of heaven, those who actively are receiving God's final gift of mercy in the process of *purgation* (the state of being known as purgatory) and those who continue to strive to live God's will on earth as the pilgrim Church. It is as Aquinas so aptly described it as contemplation of the infinite true and living, boundlessly loving tripersonal God. But it is also a social reality that includes activity. The activity of the promotion of solidarity and community among the membership of the communion of saints. It is the end of all division and isolation. It is the satiation of every human desire through participation in the one unifying heavenly banquet that stands outside of time in eternity. How awesome the thought of it, a reality that my description pales in comparison to the true beauty that is eternal life with God in heaven.

The other theological truth that is front and center at the beginning of November, specifically, November 2, is the state of being known as *purgatory*. Unfortunately, purgatory has had a very troubled history of interpretation, especially in popular preaching and speculative imagination.

Regrettably, the picture of *purgatory* that has often been painted is that of something of a celestial torture chamber wherein the dead, still shackled by an unremitted, uncleansed remnant of the stain of sin undergo punishment to either expiate, counteract, and otherwise launder these stains that were not satisfactorily removed through the performance of penances received as part of the sacrament of Reconciliation. With this in mind, preachers have often transformed the metaphorical fire into literal fire. When coupled with the troubling image that has been the commercial notion of obtaining indulgences in order that others or oneself may be released from quantifiable time of confinement in purgatory which has led to abuses in the Church's theology of the validity of indulgences.

To understand the Church's teaching on *purgation*, it is important to look first to two defining paragraphs from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992, rev. 1997):

All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven (no. 1030)

and

The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned. The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence (1439) and Trent (1563). the tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire (no, 1031).

These paragraphs obviously require theological clarification (which clearly is in line with official Church teaching; however, the explanation is entirely my own). First, it should be noted that the first ecumenical council to mention purgatory was the Second Council of Lyons (1274)[1]. In any case,

[1] It is important to note that the dates of the three ecumenical councils were the dates of the session in which the teaching on purgatory was articulate (ecumenical councils each usually last several years (e.g., the Church convened the Council of Trent in several sessions between 1562-1565 AD/CE).

it should be noted that the Church teaches that those undergoing purgation have made their final yes to God with their most fundamental exercise of their freedom in the transition from time to eternity; however, it cannot be *full since* something has yet to be purified, something (things) related to the sins that they have committed. Without going into extensive detail, for lack of time and space, the object of purification is that which served as the motivation to sin. This is best explained by way of example. Most sexual sins are the result of loneliness that is thought to be inescapable; many sins against honesty are motivated by insecurity, many sins that result in the physical, phycological/emotional harm of another arise from irrational exaggerated fear…the list could go on and an. This loneliness, fear, insecurity or other deep existential disfigurements cannot be removed through sacramental absolution or remitted by penance. No, they require the immediate, direct intervention of Divine Grace that can only be afforded by God alone. That is the merciful gift of purgation…that is the *experience* of the state of being known as purgatory. What a beautiful gift on the part of God at the final "moment" of transition from time to eternity. With this in mind, it is important to note that the experience of purgatory is not chronological and cannot be measured by time (obviously because it takes place in eternity). Rather it is negotiated in terms of intensity. Thus, other traditional aspects of purgation can make sense. For one, it can be seen as a cleansing fire, for the complete elimination of these examples of psycho-spiritual dysmorphia (e.g., loneliness, fear, insecurity, distrust, etc.) must *burn* as a metaphysical fire to destroy and consume these post-mortem vestiges of sin. Indulgences represent the prayer of the Church to lessen and eventually eradicate this *burning sensation* before entry into the full, unparalleled beauty of the state of being known as heavenly communion. What a great a glorious final gift of God mediated through the redemption of the one and only once crucified and now risen Jesus the Christ.

Therefore, do not take these colorful autumn days of November for granted. They are reminders of God's eternal love that forever burns for us, his people, the subjects of God's universal will for salvation, the true and holy sheep of his flock.