

Apostolate of the souls in Purgatory

1. Prayer for the dead

The human heart finds it hard to accept the loss of loved ones forever and tries to maintain a certain communion with them, in many cases to entrust them to God. Every culture and religion has its own ways of “remembering” its dead. For Christians, prayer for the dead is an expression of faith in the resurrection of the dead and in eternal life, promised by the one who “is not the God of the dead, but of the living” (Mk 12:27). To this God, we entrust our dearly departed in personal and liturgical prayer. In addition to the rite of obsequies and various anniversaries, and the annual remembrance of all the faithful departed, every day in the Eucharistic Prayer we remember the dead.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994) teaches how the “stay” in purgatory can be shortened through works of suffrage for the dead. “This teaching is also based on the practice of prayer for the dead, already mentioned in Sacred Scripture... From the beginning, the Church has honoured the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God. The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead.”¹

Among the various forms of suffrage, the main one is the Eucharistic sacrifice. Tradition sets fixed dates: three, seven and 30 days after death, and then on each annual anniversary. “It is the Christian way of remembering and prolonging, in the Lord, communion with those who have crossed the threshold of death”.² This timing has its origin in the Bible: Jesus rose from the dead after three days; Joseph mourned the death of his father Jacob for seven days (Gen 50:10); Aaron and Moses were mourned for thirty days (Num 20:30; Deut 34:8). The annual Mass on the anniversary of the death is the remembrance of the Dies natalis, the birth into Heaven.

2. A long tradition

Throughout the centuries, Christians have always prayed for the dead as a supreme act of charity towards loved ones who have passed from this life or towards unknown souls for whom no one prays. It is a practice that dates back at least to the 3rd century. Tertullian wrote as early as 211 about the practice of offering prayers and the Eucharist for the dead. In the fifth century, St Augustine alludes to the practice of remembering the dead “at the altar of God in the communion of the Body of Christ”.

The practice of suffrages is observed in the Catholic Church, and many ancient liturgies testify to its presence in the Eastern Churches. The Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed, on 2 November, began in 998, thanks to the Odilon of Cluny, who ordered the Benedictines to observe it every year. The practice soon spread to the other Catholic communities. Protestants rejected

¹ *Catechismo della Chiesa Cattolica*, n. 1032.

² CONGREGAZIONE PER IL CULTO DIVINO E LA DISCIPLINA DEI SACRAMENTI, *Direttorio su pietà popolare e liturgia*, n. 255.

the practice because of its association with the doctrine of purgatory; today, many Protestant churches observe the practice.

The word “suffrage” comes from Latin and refers to the shards of earthenware (“frame”) used in ancient times to cast a vote. This is why ‘suffrage’ is still synonymous with ‘voting’ today. It is like ‘recommending’ a particular candidate for election. Applied to a deceased person, suffrage is thus a ‘recommendation’ that the ‘time’ of purgatory be shorter.

On the subject of suffrage, it is worth recalling the meaning of the “Gregorian Masses”: the celebration of one Mass a day, for 30 consecutive days. The origin dates back to St Gregory the Great: in Book IV of the Dialogues, attributed to him, there is a story of a monk who died without reconciliation with the Church after committing a sin against poverty. After thirty days during which a suffrage Mass had been celebrated for him, he appeared to a brother and announced his release from the pains of purgatory.

In some ecclesial institutions, there is the Society of Perpetual Masses, approved by the Church; also in the Society of Saint Paul there is this initiative, desired by Fr Alberione, which unites apostolic zeal and intercession for the deceased: anyone who wishes to collaborate in the Pauline apostolate, with a small offering, participates in the perpetual Masses that Pauline priests celebrate every year for these people.

3. The doctrine of purgatory

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “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”.³ The Catechism defines the existence of the “doctrine of faith concerning purgatory”, formulated mainly in the Councils of Florence and Trent. “The Church calls purgatory this final purification of the elect, which is quite different from the punishment of the damned (...) The Tradition of the Church, referring to certain passages of Scripture (cf. for example, 1Cor 3,15; 1Pt 1,7) speaks of a purifying fire. “As for certain lesser faults, we must believe that, before the Final Judgment, there is a purifying fire; “Therefore, I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven” (Mt 12,31). From this affirmation, we understand that certain offenses can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come. (Saint Gregory the Great, Dialogues, 4, 39)”.⁴ The Catechism also recalls the Tradition of the Church, where the “Eucharistic sacrifice”, “almsgiving, indulgences and works of penance” are strongly recommended, “so that the deceased, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God”.⁵

Sacred Scripture has references that justify its existence. In addition to the Second Book of Maccabees – not considered canonical by the Protestant reformers – where we read of the sacrifice offered for the fallen, “begging that the sin committed might be fully forgiven” (cf. 2Mac 12:43-45), the Gospel of Matthew speaks several times of a purifying “fire” for sins that can be

³ *Catechismo della Chiesa cattolica*, n. 1030.

⁴ *Ibidem*, n. 1031.

⁵ *Ibidem*, n. 1032.

forgiven, as opposed to those who speak against the Holy Spirit, who “will not be forgiven either in this world or in the next” (cf. Mt 12:32).

The historical development of this doctrine is connected with a twofold belief: that there is the possibility of a temporary afterlife atonement for sins before attaining the beatific vision, and that the living can pray for the atoning dead. The first testimonies on the belief in purgatory – from the end of the 2nd century (Origen and the Cappadocian fathers and, among the Latins, St Cyprian, St Jerome, St Ambrose, St Augustine and St Gregory the Great) - refer mainly to the idea of a temporary afterlife expiation.

Devotion to the Purgatory Souls spread with the Counter-Reformation, which defended their existence, is denied by the Protestants. In reality, only God knows the fate of a deceased person; we have no way of knowing. The representation of purgatory – rare before the 15th century – developed in relation to the illustrations in the Divine Comedy and is similar to that of hell, except for the presence of angels or the Virgin Mary. For some time now, this devotion has fallen somewhat into oblivion.

In the common use of Christian language, purgatory is one of the three states of the afterlife, together with hell and heaven; in Catholic theology, it is the condition of those who, having died in the grace and friendship of God, are not yet perfectly purified and must purify themselves in order to obtain the holiness necessary to be admitted to the vision of God.

In the history of the Church, there is a long list of saints and mystics who have had visions and revelatory conversations with souls in purgatory. To mention a few: Gertrude, Catherine of Genoa, Robert Bellarmine, Nicholas of Tolentino, Catherine of Bologna, Contardo Ferrini, Margaret Mary Alacoque, John Mary Vianney, John Bosco, Gemma Galgani, Pius of Pietrelcina... and more recently, Blessed Angelo D’Acri and Blessed Anna Catherine Emerick.

St Catherine of Genoa explains that the soul presents itself to God still bound by the desires and pain that come with sin, and this makes it impossible for it to enjoy the vision of God... Then it voluntarily undertakes a purification to attain the beatific vision in the Communion of Saints. This is known as “purgatory”. Here souls have the immense joy of knowing that one day they will be with the Lord, while at the same time they suffer the pains of purification.⁶

Without going into the authenticity of the revelations, it is the Austrian mystic Maria Simma who most illuminates the subject. According to her, purgatory is a place and a condition that the soul experiences when it still needs to atone and make reparation for the sins committed during life, before joining Jesus in paradise... Purgatory is a condition, but it is also a place and a time of waiting in which souls yearn for God. It is not God who sends souls to purgatory, it is the souls themselves who wish to purify themselves before reaching God.

St John Paul II taught that “the offering of mercy (by Jesus to the Father for us) does not exclude the duty to present ourselves pure and whole before God, rich in that charity which Paul calls ‘the bond of perfection’ (Col 3:14) ... we are invited to ‘cleanse ourselves from every stain

⁶ CATERINA DA GENOVA, *Vita mirabile*, 177r.

of the flesh and of the spirit' (2 Cor 7:1; cf. 1 Jn 3:3) because the encounter with God requires absolute purity...".⁷

4. Prayer for the souls in Purgatory

The practice of praying for the dead was strengthened by the doctrine of purgatory, the origins of which can be traced back to the second century. "From the earliest times, the Church has honoured the memory of the dead and offered suffrages for them, in particular the Eucharistic sacrifice, (cf. Council of Lyons II: DS 856) so that, purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God. The Church also recommends almsgiving, indulgences and works of penance on behalf of the dead: "Let us help them and commemorate them. If the sons of Job were purified by their father's sacrifice, (cf. Job 1:5) why should we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them any consolation? Let us not hesitate to come to the aid of those who have died and to offer our prayers for them (St John Chrysostom, *Homiliae in primam ad Corinthios*, 41, 5)".⁸

St John Paul II teaches: "Just as in earthly life believers are united together in the one Mystical Body so after death those who live in a state of purification experience the same ecclesial solidarity that works in prayer, in suffrages and in the charity of other brothers and sisters in the faith. Purification is experienced in the essential bond that is created between those who live the life of the present century and those who are already enjoying eternal beatitude".⁹

What we do with the suffrages for the dead is to pray that the will of God be done, "who desires everyone to be saved" (1 Timothy 2:4), that no one be lost and that Jesus "raise them up on the last day" (John 6:40). In today's mentality, there is a tendency to "hide" the reality of death, with the habit of removing the deceased from their homes by taking them to funeral parlours, with anonymous burials, almost as if trying to erase their memory as quickly as possible. This hinders community prayer, and leads to forgetting one of the works of spiritual mercy: that of praying for the dead, that is, for those in "purgatory".

The most effective way to help souls in purgatory is through Holy Mass because it is Christ himself who offers himself for our sake. St Bernard of Clairvaux had a vision in a church in Rome: on a ladder, the souls in purgatory were climbing to go to heaven while he celebrated Mass. The vision highlights the value of the Mass in helping the souls in purgatory.

All forms of prayers, sacrifices and good works are also useful, the offerings to God of sufferings: voluntary ones, such as fasting, privations, etc., and involuntary ones, such as illness, humiliation, bereavement, etc. From 1 to 8 November there is a special indulgence applicable for holy souls when visiting a cemetery, with the usual conditions: sacramental confession within eight days, Communion, prayers for the Pope's intentions and a sincere desire to detach oneself from all sin.

The solicitude to support the souls in purgatory is not only a duty of justice and charity for us, but also a great benefit, because the souls in purgatory are extremely grateful for the relief we

⁷ GIOVANNI PAOLO II, *Udienza generale*, 4 agosto 1999.

⁸ *Catechismo della Chiesa cattolica*, n. 1032

⁹ GIOVANNI PAOLO II, *Udienza generale*, 4 agosto 1999.

give them, and they protect us. They do not have the possibility of deserving, but they do have the possibility of praying, and they pray with a preference for those who benefit them.

The effects of this spiritual protection are not visible, but many good inspirations, holy thoughts, which give us victory in temptations, and prodigious conversions at the point of death, are certainly due to the prayers of purgative souls. Their prayers are most efficacious, because they are holy souls, and they bring us great benefits for the spiritual and corporal life. Many graces, even miraculous ones, are said to have been obtained through the intercession of the souls in purgatory.

It is an exchange between heaven and earth, the fruit of the dogma of the communion of saints. There is a true exchange of charity between Heaven and earth; the members of the Church are called to participate in Christ's mission of salvation and to assume his feelings towards these holy souls: the holy souls, unable to help themselves, rely on the prayers of the pilgrim Church to shorten their purification. St Thomas teaches us those holy souls can pray for those they have loved on earth even though they do not know their concrete needs.¹⁰

5. The teaching of Blessed James Alberione

Both in his writings and in his sermons, Blessed James Alberione speaks a great deal about the Purgatory Souls; naturally, his language reflects the mentality of the time. Many times, he introduces them in the list of devotions of the first week of the month – the first Tuesday of the month - or in enumerating the forms of the apostolate, and even among the intentions of prayer. Many times, he mentions them explicitly because “our love for the souls in Purgatory is a construct of compassion and caring charity”.¹¹ Explaining the parts of the Mass, he says that, after the consecration, “the distribution of the fruits is made: to heaven, to the souls in purgatory, to the Church in its struggle, with the most pious conclusion: per ipsum... the glory of the Most Holy Trinity through Jesus Christ”. And he speaks of the relationship between the various parts of the Church: “The Church militant suffers the purgative souls and glorifies the triumphant; the purgative prays for the militant or honours the triumphant to whom it aspires; the triumphant loves, communicates and helps the purgative and the militant”.¹²

Fr Alberione asked the Daughters of St Paul to pray for the souls of the purgatives, to “obtain the graces necessary for the Institute”.¹³ And he affirmed: “Propaganda is suffrage for the purgative souls of the country where you go.”¹⁴ To the Pious Disciples he entrusted prayer for the purgative souls in Adoration,¹⁵ remembering that “as we lift up the purgative souls, here we are removing our own purgatory”.¹⁶ He asked the Pastorelle Sisters to buy indulgences for the

¹⁰ Cf. S. TOMMASO, *Summa Theologiae*, 1, q.89.

¹¹ GIACOMO ALBERIONE, *Ut perfectus sit homo Dei*, n. 14, pp. 226-227.

¹² *Ibidem*, n. 69, pp. 233-234.

¹³ GIACOMO ALBERIONE, *Alle Figlie di San Paolo* 1939, p. 693; cf. p.685.

¹⁴ GIACOMO ALBERIONE, *Alle Figlie di San Paolo* 1948, p. 526.

¹⁵ Cf. GIACOMO ALBERIONE, *Alle Pie Discepoli del Divin Maestro* 1947, p. 58. Cf. 1956, pp. 70-71; 223-224; 1961, pp 275-276; 1963, pp. 299-300.

¹⁶ GIACOMO ALBERIONE, *Alle Pie Discepoli del Divin Maestro* 1957, p. 302. Cf. anche ad esempio: 1956, pp. 70-71; 223-224.

souls in purgatory and to promote worship of the dead, to make reparation for the sins of the parishes and to suffrage the souls in purgatory, because “then they will help you for the community. I have never asked for grace from the souls in purgatory without having obtained it”.¹⁷ They must have a pastoral heart, sensitive “to the sufferings of the souls in purgatory”.¹⁸ To the consecrated seculars Fr Alberione reiterated the value of the Mass to help the souls in purgatory and recalled that thirty Masses are celebrated for the members of the Pauline Family.¹⁹

Meditating on purgatory, Fr Alberione says that we must do two things: avoid it and empty it: “To suffrage the souls in purgatory; it is a duty to relatives; it is often gratitude to benefactors; many times, it is justice for the deceased to whom there is some obligation; it is always an act of spiritual charity.”²⁰

A handwritten note of his dated 14 September 1953, contains a prayer to be added “after the prayer for the Dead”, which concludes: “I undertake to suffrage the purging souls as much as I can; and you, Infinite Goodness, as soon as you have loosened the soul from the bonds of the body, admit it to the vision and to eternal joy”. In St Paul’s of July 1955, a prayer for the first Tuesday of the month was published, which is actually a remake of the fourth point of the chaplet.²¹

On 8 April 1956 (Sunday in Albis), Fr Alberione composed the chaplet for the Purgatory Souls, especially for the first Tuesday of the month. It consists of five points: 1) one makes an act of faith in the existence of purgatory and in the value of suffrages, and asks for an increase in faith and charity towards one’s deceased brothers and sisters; 2) one invokes the intercession of Mary and all the Saints, in particular Saint Michael “standard bearer of the heavenly militia”, so that these souls may be admitted “to the light and to eternal joy”; 3) one prays for the souls towards whom one has “the closest duties of gratitude, justice, charity, kinship: parents, spiritual and corporal benefactors”, and for “the people on earth who have had the greatest responsibility”, for the “forgotten souls and for those most devoted to Jesus Master, to the Queen of Apostles, to Saint Paul the Apostle”; 4) one thanks Jesus Master for having saved us “with your doctrine, holiness and death”, and one prays “for the souls who are in purgatory because of the press, cinema, radio and television”; 5) one prays for one’s sins and asks for forgiveness of the “punishments merited for this life or the next”, one asks for “a spirit of penance, delicacy of conscience, hatred for any deliberate veniality and the necessary provisions for the purchase of indulgences”, with the “commitment to support the souls in purgatory”, in order to be admitted immediately “to contemplate you, love you, enjoy you forever in heaven”.²²

In 1963 Fr Alberione invited people to make the heroic act of charity for all vocations, together with “the heroic act of charity for the purgative souls. For the souls in purgatory, we offer the

¹⁷ GIACOMO ALBERIONE, *Prediche alle Suore Pastorelle*. 1947 vol III grigi, p. 114.

¹⁸ GIACOMO ALBERIONE, *Alle Suore di Gesù Buon Pastore*. 1961 vol VIII rossi, p. 75.

¹⁹ Cf. GIACOMO ALBERIONE, *Meditazioni per consacrate secolari*, p. 63.

²⁰ GIACOMO ALBERIONE, *Brevi Meditazioni per ogni giorno dell’anno I*, pp. 61-63.

²¹ GIACOMO ALBERIONE, *Preghiere*, sez. VI, pp. 238-239.

²² *Preghiere della Famiglia Paolina*, pp. 126-128.

whole satisfactory part of our good works; for vocations, we offer the whole imperative or propitiatory and reparatory part".²³

The Founder says that we must live with a righteous intention – Glory to God and peace to men – united to Jesus Christ the Worker, so that our work may be, like his, "redemptive for all living men and for all purging souls".²⁴ If we pray for the deceased, we can trust them to pray for us.²⁵

It is of course in the booklet *To Our Dear Departed Ones* that Fr Alberione speaks most extensively about the souls in purgatory, who form with "the blessed of heaven one single family, in which all is received from the Head Jesus Christ".²⁶ "The Church militant suffers the souls in purgatory with Masses, penances, indulgences and good works... The Blessed in Paradise and the purgatorial souls themselves pray for us and help us with their intercession, which is powerful with the Lord".²⁷

Father Alberione offers words from the Fathers in favour of the existence of purgatory and of the torments of the souls in purgatory, which are not diminished by the consolation of the certainty of their salvation.²⁸ "Regarding the pains of the souls in purgatory, we have no formal definition from the Church. But the saints have spoken to us at length about the nature and intensity of these pains".²⁹ He reflects on the relationship of the purgative souls to us, who "may have blood ties with many of them".³⁰ Moreover, they reflect the beauty of God, "sharing in the divine glory with whose splendour they are clothed". And he affirms: "Charity towards the dead is not only useful for them but is still salutary for us".³¹ "The purgative souls pray incessantly for us. They assist us continually."³²

He then devotes a few pages to suffrages, the main one being the Mass, because "it is the Son of God who offers himself as a victim of expiation for the purging souls". And it offers testimonies of various saints.³³ He presents Mary Queen of Suffrage, stating that devotion to Mary is a very effective means of avoiding purgatory.³⁴ Among the ways of satisfying for sins and suffering souls in purgatory he emphasises indulgences. And he presents other works of suffrage: "We can offer to God not only our prayers, but all our good works insofar as they are satisfactory and impetratory".³⁵ He then presents three means of avoiding purgatory, and invites people to spread devotion to it; he ends with the Novena proposed by Saint Alphonsus.³⁶

²³ *Bollettino San Paolo* 1963, p. 5.

²⁴ GIACOMO ALBERIONE, *Anima e corpo per il Vangelo*, n. 16, pp. 188-190.

²⁵ GIACOMO ALBERIONE, *Per un rinnovamento spirituale*, p. 276.

²⁶ GIACOMO ALBERIONE, *Ai nostri cari defunti*, p. 15.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 35; 39-40.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 43.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 73-77.

³¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 80-83.

³² *Ibidem*, pp. 94-102.

³³ *Ibidem*, pp. 105-109.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 122-124.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 148-165.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 201-218.

6. Final reflection

We find many invitations from the Founder to practice the apostolate of the souls in purgatory. This is not a reality of the past, only we need to place it in the context and mentality of our time. The existence of purgatory is a doctrine of the Catholic Church and therefore it must be accepted. But with what criteria?

From the point of view of theological reflection, the idea of purgatory is somewhat problematic. Despite the fact that it is found in many religions, even among the Greeks and Romans, it is not explicitly mentioned in the writings of the Bible, and has been established mainly through patristics - Origen, St Cyprian, St Augustine, St Gregory... - and through the liturgy. It was to be defined by the Council of Trent, which nevertheless left open the problem of where and how (fire), warning against curiosity, superstition and greed. Purgatory has often been written and spoken about as if it were an exact science, with the pretence of knowing the smallest details, "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mk 13:32)... It is clear that we must go beyond so much curiosity because the essential has already been revealed to us: and this is more than enough; we need to look no further.

What, then, are we to make of so many private revelations that speak to us of time, of the duration of purgatory? Lacking any concrete reference, we have to resort to known categories to express unknown realities. We cannot imagine a place or a time in eternity... In eternity, time does not exist... For modern theologians, the encounter, at the moment of death, with the merciful God, creator, judge and saviour would be a "purgatory" insofar as he judges, frees, enlightens, purifies, saves and perfects the person so that he can enter and participate definitively in the divine life. Theological speculation continues and will continue...

We know that the Father so loved the world that he sent his Son Jesus Christ not to condemn it, but to save it (cf. Jn 3:17). There is an inseparable relationship between Christ's resurrection and our future resurrection; the redemptive power of the Risen One gives eternal life to the dead; Christian eschatological hope is not only oriented towards future fulfilment but is also the force that determines and shapes the present: he who believes already has eternal life; "he has passed from death to life" (Jn 5:24).³⁷ Pope Francis said: "Into the Father's house he will also bring all that in us still needs redemption: the failings and mistakes of an entire life. This is the goal of our existence: that everything be fulfilled, and be transformed into love".³⁸

We know that only human freedom can contradict this will of God's salvation. How, then, can we combine this will of God with the undeniable reality of human imperfections, stains and sins within us? We know that the Kingdom of God will be made only of holiness, that nothing tainted will enter there.

How will this happen? In spite of so many private revelations, even concerning the souls in purgatory, perhaps the most honest attitude on our part is to answer humbly that we do not know. The Church, wisely, is very cautious about these things. Certainly, we cannot deny them,

³⁷ Cf. GEORGE AUGUSTIN, *Nell'attesa della sua venuta*, pp. 53-54, Ancora Milano 2018.

³⁸ PAPA FRANCESCO, *Udienza generale*, 25 ottobre 2017.

because God is much greater than our measures and He can use infinite means to make His ways known to us.

Prophecies, apparitions, visions... we cannot judge them with the criteria of the human sciences. We accept what the Church teaches, bearing in mind that these subjects are necessarily spoken of in an approximate way, according to the sensitivity of the times. And the sensibility of our time is not the same as that which existed at the time of Blessed James Alberione. Today it is difficult to understand, for example, the counting of indulgences in days and years... In eternity there is no such thing as time!

Let us make the apostolate of the Purgatory Souls. Let us maintain faith in God's infinite mercy, in the conviction that he accepts our humble prayers with love, that these prayers are useful to us and to those who have passed into eternity. How? Perhaps it is better to leave everything in God's hands: he knows very well what to do with our prayers, with our "apostolate of the purging souls".

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