

When we lose a loved one, we find ourselves trying to think about what happens after we die. Everyone would like to know more about that, so we're spending the next three weeks talking about purgatory, heaven, and hell. Today let's explore purgatory.

I have just two points I want to make: One is what purgatory is—a purification for love. The other is where we should keep our focus—and that's on God's love.

First, what is purgatory? The doctrine of purgatory developed gradually, mainly in the Middle Ages at the Councils of Lyons, Trent, and Florence, as bishops got to thinking about what happens after we die. I'll sum up their thinking in one sentence, and then I'll unpack it more slowly. Here it is: The bishops realized that our souls need to be cleansed or purified before we're fully ready to be with God and his saints in heaven.

We know that we all come from God and that God wants us to return to him. That's what we call "heaven"—enjoying eternal life with God and his saints. We also know that God gave us each free will. Some of us use it well; some of us don't. Mind you, God doesn't expect us to be perfect—not by a long shot. God is always ready to forgive us, even at the moment of death after a long life of turning away from God. But some of us even then don't turn back towards God's love. That's what we call "hell"—being eternally separated from God and his love.

Here's where purgatory fits in. None of us, except for the rare saint, is ready to meet our Maker when we die. We do love God, but we're not ready for the fullness of his love. Purgatory is for those headed for heaven who still need some purifying. It's a time of growing in love. Purgatory is not a punishment at all. It's a preparation for receiving the full love of God.

My other point is that we need to keep our focus. When we think about heaven, we can easily turn our attention from God and start thinking about ourselves. We may even begin to think that heaven is something we deserve, based on our good behavior. Heaven is not about our good efforts; it's about God's great love. The focus is on God and on God's great love.

Similarly, when we think about purgatory, we can easily turn our attention from God and start thinking again about ourselves. We may even get carried away putting all our attention on our own unworthiness. We must remember: Purgatory is not about our shortcomings; it's about God's wanting to share the fullness of his love with us.

God's love is the center of everything in the Christian life. Let's keep our focus there, above all.

Thank you.



