

Every year All Souls Day follows All Saints Day. We celebrate those who are in heaven, then we remember those on the way to heaven. Catholics believe that not all those who die in God's grace are immediately ready for the Beatific Vision, that is, ready to see the beauty of God face to face. So, they must be purified of their "lesser faults," and the temporal effects of sin. The Catholic Church calls this purification "purgatory."

The Catholic teaching on Purgatory essentially requires belief in two realities: 1. that there will be a purification of believers prior to entering heaven and 2. that the prayers and Masses of the faithful in some way benefit those in the state of purification. As to the duration, place, and exact nature of this purification, the Church has no official dogma, although Saint Augustine and others used fire as a way to explain the nature of the purification. As a more everyday explanation, many liken Purgatory to a place or state where one gets "cleaned up" before entering into the presence of Almighty God.

The Church prays for the faithful departed throughout the entire year. However, All Souls Day is the general, solemn, day of commemoration, when the Church remembers, prays for, and offers *requiem* masses for the faithful departed in the state of purification. The faithful will take this day to offer prayers on behalf of their departed relatives and friends.

Christians have been praying for their departed brothers and sisters since the earliest days of Christianity. Early liturgies and inscriptions on catacomb walls attest to the ancientness of prayers for the dead.

Praying for the dead is actually borrowed from Judaism, as indicated in 2 Maccabees 12:41-42. In the New Testament, St Paul prays for mercy for his departed friend Onesiphorus (2 Timothy 1:18). Early Christian writers Tertullian and St. Cyprian testify to the regular practice of praying for the souls of the departed. Tertullian justified the practice based on custom and Tradition. All this demonstrates that Christians believed that their prayers could somehow have a positive effect on the souls of departed believers. Closely connected to the ancient practice of praying for the dead is the belief in an explicit state called purgatory.

The New Testament hints at a purification of believers after death. For example, St. Paul speaks of being saved, "but only as through fire" (1 Corinthians 3:15). Over time, many Church Fathers further developed the concept of a purgation of sins through fire after death.

The whole concept of purgatory and a purification process before a soul enters the full presence of God is actually a confirmation on just how merciful and compassionate our God is—and how much He desires every soul to live with Him for eternity. To be in God's presence a person must be ready, that is, "presentable" for the Almighty. Very few, if any, except the Blessed Mother, are totally presentable to our all-perfect and holy God. Our loving God, therefore, has provided a purification process, called purgatory, to make every one presentable to Him.

So, purgatory is a good thing. All those in purgatory *on their way to heaven*, and our prayers and charitable works could help them get there soon.