

## Purgatory and Casual Canonization

*Pastor's note: So many of our funerals anymore are for non-practicing Catholics, and these families, in their grief seek consolation. True, the deceased is physically suffering no more in this life, and that is a good thing, but the spiritual suffering caused by his or her choice to not obey the Third or Sixth Commandment, or to live a selfish life in general has often led to lifelong unrepented mortal sin—which deserves an eternity in Hell. Yet these families want to be able to say their unrepentant, non-practicing Catholic loved one is in heaven. At best, he or she is in purgatory, undergoing “the same suffering as those in Hell” but without the eternal duration—at least they may have hope. These suffering souls in Purgatory need our prayers, not our platitudes and denial that the truth of their suffering after physical death were not so. This whistling in the dark will not change the fact that non-practicing Catholics who have not gained the plenary indulgence will undergo Hell-like suffering in state of existence called purgatory, at best, and eternal suffering at worst. It really is unkind to say that so-and-so is in heaven and to deny them our prayers to lighten the sufferings or foreshorten the duration of their purgatory.*



Masses offered for the souls in Purgatory gain them release

*The Church's doctrines on sin and the four last things, death, judgment, Heaven and Hell is very clearly based on the teachings of Jesus who knew it was a very real possibility that some would die and never see Heaven. The place of eternal punishment (Hell) is reserved for those who sin against the Holy Spirit—which means steadfastly refusing the grace of repentance. What does this mean for us today? If we are non-practicing Catholics, we sin mortally every time we miss a Sunday Mass or Holy Day of Obligation. If we receive communion in a state of mortal sin we add the mortal sin of sacrilege. If we are not married in the Church, for whatever reason, every time we have relations with our spouse, we commit either fornication or adultery—both mortal sins. And if we go to communion after such things, we also commit sacrilege. If we are dating after a divorce and have not received a decree of invalidity for that former marriage, we are committing adultery as well, because the law of the Church presumes we are still bound to or former spouse until such time as the investigation proves our attempted marriage was not sacramental. If we kill or steal or covet or break any of the other Ten Commandments and have not repented and confessed these mortal sins, yet receive communion, we also commit sacrilege. Those beloved deceased who have done these things and have not repented and confessed, will die in the state of Mortal Sin and will not see Heaven. (For the Church's Authentic Teaching Cf. The Catechism of the Catholic Church 1033, 1035, 1037, 1457)*

*By the grace of God, these souls are not bereft of help. If they are in a state of venial sin only, they can simply confess their sins when death is the prognosis for their terminal disease. They can amend their lives by returning to the Church, even if only by receiving reconciliation and viaticum and communion at home while bedridden. If they have made a positive step toward conversion by this means, at their last hours they may receive the Apostolic Pardon and be liberated from Purgatory. If they have died without the Apostolic Pardon, but having repented from their mortal sins, they are in a state of grace, though in purgatory. Then we can avail ourselves of the Masses offered for the intentions of the dead and we can even free them from purgatory (not Hell—because that would deny them their free will choice to be separated from God made during their lifetime) by gaining for them a plenary indulgence by our prayers and pious acts ordered toward this goal.*

*Please enjoy the following article beginning on the next page.*

*--Fr. Don*

## The Cruelty of Casual Canonizations

In recent years it has become commonplace to turn funerals into casual canonizations. “Bob is in a better place,” we’re told, which, if taken literally, can only mean Heaven, as neither Hell nor Purgatory are better places than earth. Never mind the fact that Bob wasn’t very generous with his time or money, drank too much, rarely read Catholic books or listened to Catholic radio, and in his retirement, watched baseball and football games most of the day, to the detriment of his marriage. He did, however, get to Mass every Sunday, prayed a few times during the week, and managed to make a good confession before dying.

Hardly the stuff you’d find in *Butler’s Lives of the Saints*, yet we’re told that Bob is now in Heaven, which is another way of saying he’s a saint. After all, there are no other kinds of people in Heaven—either we’re perfected here below, or we have the job finished in Purgatory. You will not find in Heaven a bunch of saints on one side and a bunch of imperfect sinners on the other. No, in Heaven *all are perfected*, because God is Pure Holiness, and in His Presence nothing unholy can exist. “And there shall not enter into [Heaven] anything defiled,” we read in Revelation 21:27.

So those of us, who die in a state of grace but are still in need of perfecting, will go through the pains of Purgatory before entering Heaven. St. Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510) bluntly stated after a vision that “The souls [in Purgatory] endure a torment so extreme that no tongue can describe it, nor could the understanding conceive the least notion of it, if God did not make it known by a particular grace.” She even went so far as to say that the sufferings of Purgatory are “equal to those of Hell” (as far as intensity, not duration).

Because it is certain that the imperfect (which, in the absence of gaining a plenary indulgence, would include Bob) go through Purgatory before getting to Heaven, and because Purgatory is unimaginably painful, it is easy to see that casual canonizations are not at all compassionate, but are in fact very cruel. They deprive the faithful departed of many prayers and good works that could have helped them get through Purgatory sooner, and they encourage spiritual sloth in those present at the funeral. “If *Bob* is in Heaven, I don’t have to make too much of an effort to get there either,” one would logically think, if he believes the casual canonization to be true. “Pour me another beer...”

*“But Bob was nice to me,” you say.*

Bob may have been “nice” to you—that is, he may not have hurt your feelings, but your feelings are not the measure of someone else’s sanctity (or your own). We read from the Prophet Isaiah, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts: nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways, and my thoughts above your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9). Our human standards fall infinitely short of Our Lord’s standards.

In fact, being “nice” was not endorsed by Our Lord, but He did declare *charity* to be an absolute requirement. (Cf. Matthew 22:37-39). St. Paul says that “if I have prophecy and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, yet do not have charity, I am nothing.” (1 Corinthians 13:2). Without charity, we are *nothing*. Could it be stated more plainly?

With such an exacting requirement, we should know exactly what charity is: the theological virtue by which we love God above all else and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God. Therefore, telling someone that his recent divorce and remarriage are okay may be “nice,” but it is most certainly not

charitable. In other words, you may avoid hurting his feelings, but you encourage him to remain in grave sin, which, if done with deliberation and not repented of, will lead to everlasting misery in Hell. *Not* charitable at all.

The source and destination of charity is God. We get all our ability to be charitable *from* God, and all our charity is then directed back *to* God, either directly (in worship) or indirectly through others (in good works). Thus, someone who wants what is best for his neighbor will not lie to him, but will tell him the truth, which can help lead him to Heaven. In light of this, we see that Bob being “nice” to you may even have been a vice, not a virtue.

*“But Bob was baptized,” you object.*

The answer to that objection is found from the Fathers of the Council of Trent, who declared unequivocally that

If anyone says that after the reception of the grace of justification...guilt is so remitted and the debt of eternal punishment so blotted out to every repentant sinner, that no debt of temporal punishment remains to be discharged, either in this world or in Purgatory, before the gates of Heaven can be opened, let him be anathema. (Session 6, Chapter 16, Canon 30)

In other words, just because you’ve been baptized, doesn’t mean you go straight to Heaven when you die. (Baptized children who have not yet reached the age of reason and die, *do* go straight to Heaven, as they are not capable of committing personal sin.) A man who was baptized as an infant, but who goes on to live for many decades, will likely have much sin to deal with. Our friend Bob choose to live out his Catholicism halfheartedly, which is another way of saying that he sinned a lot. Deliberately contradicting God’s Will is by definition, sinning. While not an apostate, Bob was not a saint, either.

*“But it must say in the liturgical books that you’re supposed to say something good about the deceased,” you suggest.*

Actually, there is no such instruction in the liturgical books, and in fact, there is an explicit directive to refrain from eulogies. The priest is clearly told in Number 382 of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) that “At the Funeral Mass there should, as a rule, be a short homily, but never a eulogy of any kind.” In other words, *no casual canonizations.*

Funerals are not a time to celebrate how wonderful we are, but a time to ponder how wonderful God is. St. Louis de Montfort (1673-1716) observed that

We are naturally prouder than peacocks, more groveling than toads...more envious than serpents, more gluttonous than hogs, more furious than tigers, lazier than tortoises, weaker than reeds, and more capricious than weathervanes. We have within ourselves nothing but nothingness and sin, and we deserve nothing but the anger of God and everlasting Hell.

When was the last time you heard *that* in a homily?

The fact that we’re sinners may not be pleasant, but once acknowledged, we can get on with living a truly holy life. How so? When we know our own weakness, we can then ask God for help. We can live in Him, rather than hopelessly trying to do it on our own. As St. Therese of Lisieux (1873-1897) asked,

“If you are nothing, do you forget that Jesus is everything?” Then she added, “You have only to lose your nothingness in His infinity and think only of loving Him.”

Funerals, like the rest of life, are about God first, us second—and the second part only has meaning insofar as we live in God. So we pray for the deceased and remember that one day we will die as well—a thought which leads us to prepare properly by doing penance, all the while trusting in the boundless Mercy of God.

*“But God is merciful—you just said so. Then why can’t we go straight to Heaven?” you ask.*

We *can* go straight to Heaven. The problem is, most of us do not *will* to do so. God’s grace is never lacking, but our interest in His grace often is. Those who are not at all interested, do not pray at all; those who are somewhat interested, pray sometimes; those who are very interested pray regularly. Humble and persistent prayer for the light to know and the strength to do God’s Will is essential for someone who wants to go straight to Heaven after death. St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) says that

Those who give themselves to prayer should concentrate solely on this: the conformity of their wills with the Divine Will. They should be convinced that this constitutes their highest perfection. The more fully they practice this, the greater the gifts they will receive from God, and the greater the progress they will make in the interior life.

St. Alphonsus Liguori (1696-1787) explains further that

...to save one’s soul without prayer is most difficult and even...impossible, according to the ordinary course of God’s providence. But by praying our salvation is made secure...What does it cost us to say, ‘My God, help me! Lord, assist me! Have mercy on me!’ Is there anything easier than this? And this little will suffice to save us, if we will be diligent in doing it...

...let us understand, that if we do not pray, we have no excuse, because the grace of prayer is given to everyone. It is in our power to pray whenever we will...God gives to all the grace of prayer, in order that thereby they may obtain every help, and even more than they need, for keeping the divine law, and for persevering until death. If we are not saved, the whole fault will be ours; and we shall have our own failure to answer for, because we did not pray.

What is true with salvation in general is true with going straight to Heaven in particular. God is always willing to provide us with all we need, so if we do not go straight to Heaven, we can blame no one but ourselves, because we did not pray as well or as often as we should have. Let us remedy this problem by giving more attention to prayer, or, if necessary, start praying again. Then after a life of virtue, a *real* canonization may be in order for us. In the absence of such virtue, we can conclude that *casual canonizations are cruel, not compassionate.*

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