

## The Requiem Mass, III

ogetics for Catholic doctrine are always good to hear, as when he was asked by his biographer James Boswell about Guardian Angels. Boswell: "What proof have you Sir, of Guardian Angels?" Johnson: "Why, drunks, Sir, and little boys." That is an eloquent reply.

Regarding then the subject of purgatory, their short exchange went like this:

Boswell: "What do you think, Sir, of Purgatory, as believed by the Roman Catholics?"

Johnson: "Why, Sir, it is a very harmless doctrine. They are of the opinion that the generality of mankind are neither so obstinately wicked as to deserve everlasting punishment, nor so good as to merit being admitted into the society of blessed spirits; and therefore God is graciously pleased to allow of a middle state, where they may be purified by certain degrees of suffering. You see, Sir, there is nothing unreasonable in this."

Boswell: "But then, Sir, their masses for the dead?"

Johnson: "Why, Sir, if it be once established that there are souls in purgatory, it is as proper to pray for them, as for our brethren of mankind who are yet in this life."

Sixth, in keeping with the principal that Dr. Johnson elucidated, the traditional Latin Requiem does not judge. It does not say – either in the texts or anywhere – that the deceased was a saint, or saintly, or in heaven. It does not say – either in the texts or anywhere – that he was bad, or evil or in hell.

Now the sermon is a different matter. I know of a Mass where the priest began to speak of the deceased, and as he did so, became more and more irritated that he was saying a funeral Mass at all for the man, and then he exploded and shouted that the deceased was "a son of a biscuit!" I say biscuit lest I scandalize Judge Reavis. Needless to say, this is not a good approach to take in the sermon, regardless of its veracity.

But the Mass does not make these judgments. It says simply that the deceased was a human being, affected by original sin, offered salvation by Christ. There is no mention of whether or not he received that salvation. And so we behave with solemnity – not with statements that we cannot possibly know such as "he is in a better place," but only that the departed is in the hands of God, and that God is the only One that can judge with perfect justice and perfect mercy.

Seventh, there is no judgment of the deceased, but much hope for him, in that we trust God will do what is best for him. This hope has a basis, and it is not the good things he did in his life. Our hope is based instead on what our Blessed Lord did for him, as no man can justify himself before God. Our hope is also founded on the Resurrection. This resurrection is a definitive victory over sin and death. In Christ, the second Adam, mankind has passed from death to spiritual resurrection, to sonship, to grace, to participation in the life of the three divine persons. Christ rose for us and has now established the bridge to Heaven and leads us on after him to the Father.

And all these ceremonies are the fulfillment of the Old Covenant. Christ said explicitly that He did not come to destroy it, but to fulfill it. So His priesthood was not in the order of Levi or Aaron, but the order of Melchisedech; the high priest and king of Salem who gave the original blessing to Abraham. The movements of the priests in the Temple of Solomon, the incense, the Psalms, all you see has its origin in Jewish practice – but not the offering of animals – rather being present in a liturgical way at the immolation of Christ on Calvary. That is the first purpose of every Requiem: to adore the Father in spirit and in truth, and to thank Him for creating the deceased for whom the Mass is said; to thank the Son for redeeming him, and the Holy Ghost for sanctifying him.

The benefit to the living is not just for their consolation. It is also to awaken in the minds of those present at the ceremonies the belief in the resurrection of the dead on the last day, and above all to pray for the repose of the souls of the faithful departed and their speedy delivery from Purgatory.

The second thing experienced might be reverence. Reverence is a word from the Latin language, and it is a deponent verb, signifying something that we do and is simultaneously done to us. It is one of several words for fear. The altar, the missal, the crucifix, all holy things are given reverence, at the heart of which is fearing to harm someone or something you love. Thus we give the utmost human respect to the mortal remains of the deceased because his body was a temple of the Holy Ghost, by virtue of his baptism.

A third thing experienced is the doctrine that the soul, once created by God, is not destroyed, but changed. This is said in the preface of the Mass – *vita mutatur non tollitur*. Life is changed, not ended. This is symbolized in the candles, which around the coffin are unbleached. They burn with a different flame as the candles on the altar, which represent those who are living. We are bleached, so to speak. People do not see us as we truly are. But this may not be said of the faithful departed, who appear before God as they were created, unbleached, so to speak.

Fourth, the use of black, the traditional Jewish and Western color of death. We live in an age which seeks to repress the cardinal emotion of sadness. If someone is sad, many in our times feel driven to cheer them up and not let them be sad. But before Jerusalem was destroyed, Christ wept. And at the death of His friend Lazarus, He wept. There is a time to mourn, a time to weep. Yet as St. Paul says, not as the pagans do, as those who have no hope. On the tabernacle, however, the veil is not black but purple (since our Lord lives) to symbolize the sorrow of the Savior at the death of one of His own, and the altar cloths remain white, which is a symbol of His Resurrection and Ascension.

Fifth, we pray for the dead. This ancient tradition so well exemplified by the Maccabees and the sacrifices they had ensured in the Temple to be said for their fallen comrades, is carried on to this day. And this practice of praying for the dead assumes that there is a purgatory.

To illustrate the Catholic doctrine of purgatory, I turn to Dr. Samuel Johnson, a famous Protestant man of letters. His apol-