

All Souls, 2018

"We will not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning them that are asleep, that you be not sorrowful, even as others who have no hope." (1 Thess. 4:13)

"By cutting a piece out of the side of the trench, I was just able to stand in front of my tiny altar, a biscuit box supported on two German bayonets. God's angels, no doubt, were hovering overhead, but so were the shells, hundreds of them, and I was a little afraid that when the earth shook with the crash of guns, the chalice might be overturned. Round about me on every side was the biggest congregation I ever had: behind the altar, on either side, and in front, row after row after row, sometimes crowding one upon the other, but all quiet and silent, as if they were straining their ears to catch every syllable of that tremendous act of sacrifice – but every man was dead! Some had lain there for a week and were foul and horrible to look at, with faces black and green. Others had only just fallen, and seemed rather sleeping than dead, but there they lay, for none had time to bury them, brave fellows, every one, friend and foe alike, while I held in my unworthy hands the God of Battles, their Creator and their Judge, and prayed Him to give rest to their souls. Surely that Mass for the Dead, in the midst of, and surrounded by the dead, was an experience not easily to be forgotten." From a letter written to his father by Fr. William Doyle, S.J., Chaplain, 16th Irish Division, the Battle of the Somme, September, 1916.

Fr. Doyle was a priest who was not ignorant concerning them that are asleep. He was not sorrowful as those who have no hope. And surely only a hardened heart could resist the charitable pity which came from his heart, and which goes up to the poor souls in purgatory on the second day of each November. Because we know that the more or less speedy deliverance of their great suffering lies within our power. Those poor souls would not leave purgatory even if they could, unless the last penny is paid, so united are their wills to the will of God. Let us then call to mind a few principles which throw some light on this defined doctrine of the Church.

First, every sin causes a twofold injury to the sinner: it stains his soul and renders him liable to punishment. Venial sin, which causes great pain to the Son of Man and is offensive to God, and displeases Him greatly, requires a temporal expiation. Mortal sin deforms the soul, and makes the guilty man an abomination to God; its punishment cannot be anything less than eternal banishment from heaven, unless the sinner, in this life, prevent that final and irrevocable sentence of damnation by his repentance. But even then the remission of all guilt – even though it revokes the sentence of damnation –

does not cancel the whole debt. This must be paid, in full, either here or in purgatory.

But on the other hand, every supernatural act of virtue brings a double profit to the man whom God has justified: it merits for his soul a fresh degree of grace, and it makes satisfaction for past sins, in the exact proportion to the value – in God's sight – of the labor, or privation, or trial or voluntary suffering endured.

Merit is a personal acquisition and it cannot be transferred to others, but satisfaction can. God is willing to accept it in payment of another's debt, whether the recipient is in this world or the next one – provided he is united by sanctifying grace to the mystical body of the Lord.

All the doctrines and aspirations of All Souls Day were well summed up in a poem written by John Henry Cardinal Newman, in 1857.

Help, Lord, the souls which Thou has made,
The souls to Thee so dear,
In prison for the debt unpaid
Of sins committed here.

Those holy souls, they suffer on,
Resigned in heart and will,
Until Thy high behest is done,
And justice has its fill.

For daily falls, for pardoned crime,
They joy to undergo
The shadow of thy cross sublime,
The remnant of Thy woe.

Help, Lord the souls which Thou has made,
The souls to Thee so dear,
In prison for the debt unpaid
Of sins committed here.

Oh, by their patience of delay,
Their hope amid their pain,
Their sacred zeal to burn away
Disfigurement and stain;

Oh, by their fire of love, not less
In keenness than the flame,
Oh by their very helplessness,
Oh, by Thy own great Name,

Good Jesus, help! sweet Jesus, aid
The souls to Thee most dear,
In prison for the debt unpaid
Of sins committed here.