



SILENT HOMILIES

# The Last Washing

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*Purgatory, and the mercy  
that still has work to do*





SILENT HOMILIES

LITTLE TREASURES

# The Last Washing

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*Purgatory, and the mercy that still has work to do*

## **Before You Begin**

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Most of us first meet purgatory as a picture. Flames. Faces that look like hell. Then someone else says the whole idea was invented to sell indulgences. The Church's actual teaching sits between those two claims, and many people never hear it.

The Catechism is quieter. All who die in God's grace and friendship, but who are still imperfectly purified, are assured of their eternal salvation. After death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect. It is entirely different from the punishment of the damned.

That is the defined core. These people are saved. What remains is a last purification before heaven.

This little book is not a threat, and it is not a map of the next world. It walks through what the Church has actually said, and through a few things the pictures usually skip: a collection taken for dead soldiers two centuries before Christ, a mother asking her son to remember her at the altar, a day a French abbot gave to the Church, a woman in Genoa who spoke of purification and love, and a pope who asked how the encounter with Christ himself may purify us.

The Church teaches that this purification is real. She has not defined exactly what it looks like or how it is experienced.

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Printing this book

## Chapter 1

# **Not hell with a window**

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The first mistake is almost always a picture. A cavern. A grill. Faces that belong to a different doctrine.

Hell is eternal separation from God after a final rejection of him. Purgatory is completely different. It is the purification of people who die in God's friendship and are already assured of salvation. Mixing the two does not make either of them clearer.

People in purgatory are not waiting to find out where they will go. Their eternal salvation is already assured. What remains is not a second chance to choose God. What remains is the holiness still needed before heaven.

Purgatory is not only a pious theory. Those who die in God's grace and friendship, but who are still imperfectly purified, undergo this purification. The Church teaches that the purification is real. She has not defined exactly what it looks like or how it is experienced.

Heaven does not receive us while we are still carrying what cannot belong there. Purgatory is God's last work of mercy on people who already belong to him.

### **A Small Reflection**

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Purgatory is not hell. It is the final purification of people who are already saved.

If the pictures have made you afraid, start with the Catechism instead. The people we pray for are not lost. They are being made ready for heaven.

### **A short prayer**

*Lord, teach us to speak of purgatory as your mercy, not as a second hell.  
Amen.*

## Chapter 2

# **A collection for the dead**

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Two centuries before Christ, the Second Book of Maccabees tells a story that Catholics have never been able to forget.

After a battle, Judas Maccabeus found that some of the fallen Jewish soldiers had been wearing pagan amulets. In the faith of that time this was a sin. He took a collection. Money was sent to Jerusalem for a sacrifice for these dead men. The writer praises the act. He says it was a holy and pious thought to pray for the dead, because he had the resurrection in view.

This is not yet purgatory as later theology defined it. It is older than that. It shows that prayer for the dead was already part of Jewish religious life before Christ. It became an important biblical foundation for later Catholic teaching.

A religion that believes in the resurrection does not stop praying when the body is buried.

### **A Small Reflection**

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Prayer for the dead is older than Christianity and is rooted in Scripture.

Judas Maccabeus did not wait for a full later doctrine. He saw that the dead still needed prayer, and he acted. The Church has never stopped doing the same thing.

### **A short prayer**

*Lord, keep us from treating the dead as finished business. Teach us to pray for them. Amen.*

## Chapter 3

# **Saved, but as through fire**

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In the First Letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul writes about a builder whose work is tested by fire. If the work remains, the builder receives a reward. If the work is burned up, the builder suffers loss, but is still saved, though only as through fire.

Paul is speaking about the work of building the Church. Catholic tradition has often read the passage as one biblical support for purification after death. The person is saved. What is unworthy is tested or burned away.

That reading should not be overstated. Paul is not writing a textbook chapter on purgatory. He is saying that God will test what we have built. The Church later heard, in that testing, a hint of the purification that the saved may still need.

Other passages have been used in the same careful way. Catholic tradition has also seen hints of purification after death in some of the Lord's words about being released in the age to come, and about paying the last coin. These texts do not prove the whole doctrine by themselves. They helped the Church think.

### **A Small Reflection**

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Some biblical passages helped the Church understand purification after death.

The strongest point is simple. A person can be saved, and still need what is unworthy to be taken away. That is not despair. It is honest hope.

### **A short prayer**

*Lord, take from us what cannot enter heaven, and keep us in your friendship. Amen.*

## Chapter 4

# **Remember me at the altar**

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Saint Monica died at Ostia, the port of Rome, in 387. Augustine tells the story in the Confessions.

She asked her sons for one thing. They were not to trouble about the place of her body. She asked them to remember her at the altar of the Lord, wherever they were.

That is the strength of the story. A saint on her deathbed asked to be remembered at the Mass.

Early Christians prayed for the dead. We find it on inscriptions and in the oldest liturgies. One inscription does not carry the whole doctrine. Together they show something simple. From the beginning, Christians did not think love ended at the grave.

Monica's request is the same instinct in a mother's voice. Remember me where Christ is offered.

### **A Small Reflection**

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St Monica's last request shows how natural prayer for the dead was in the early Church.

She did not ask for a monument. She asked for the altar. That is still the first thing a Catholic family can do.

### **A short prayer**

*Saint Monica, who asked only to be remembered at the altar, pray for us and for those we love who have died. Amen.*

## Chapter 5

### **What the councils actually said**

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The Council of Florence, in the fifteenth century, taught that those who die in God's love but still need purification are purified after death. The prayers of the living, Masses, alms and other works of the faithful can help them.

The Council of Trent, in the sixteenth century, taught that purgatory exists, and that the souls there are helped by the prayers of the faithful, especially by the acceptable sacrifice of the altar. It also warned preachers. They were not to disturb ordinary people with curious questions, uncertain opinions, or stories that feed superstition. They were not to let the doctrine become a way of making money.

The councils defined the essential teaching. They deliberately avoided many speculative details. They also refused to let abuse become an argument against the doctrine itself.

That balance is still the Church's balance. Purgatory is real. Most of the extra pictures people add around it are not defined.

### **A Small Reflection**

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The councils defined the essentials and warned against speculation and abuse.

We do not need a detailed picture of the next world in order to pray. We need the teaching: the saved may still be purified, and the living may still help them.

### **A short prayer**

*Lord, keep our faith simple enough to pray, and exact enough not to invent what you have not told us. Amen.*

## Chapter 6

# **The woman in Genoa**

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Saint Catherine of Genoa died in 1510. A treatise on purgatory has long been associated with her name. Scholars still discuss how much of the written text is exactly hers. That question matters. It means we should not treat every sentence in the treatise as if it were defined doctrine.

What the tradition around Catherine has given the Church is still worth hearing. The souls she describes are turned towards God. The pain is bound up with longing for him. In that tradition the purification is described as something coming from God's love, not from divine hatred.

That is a spiritual interpretation. It is not a dogmatic definition of the nature of purgatorial fire. The Church has not said, as dogma, that "the fire is love." She has said that the saved are purified. Catherine's way of speaking can help us pray without turning God into an enemy of the people he has already accepted.

### **A Small Reflection**

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St Catherine helps us see purgatory as painful purification within God's love.

The pain is real because the longing is real. The souls are not being thrown away. They are being made ready to see God.

### **A short prayer**

*Saint Catherine of Genoa, teach us to trust the God who purifies without ceasing to love. Amen.*

## Chapter 7

# **The day after the saints**

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In the late tenth century, Saint Odilo, abbot of Cluny, asked his monasteries to remember all the faithful departed on the day after All Saints. The custom spread. The Western Church now keeps 2 November as All Souls' Day.

The order of the two days is itself a teaching. First the Church rejoices with those who are already in heaven. The next day she prays for those who are not there yet.

In 1915, during the First World War, Pope Benedict XV allowed priests throughout the Church to celebrate three Masses on All Souls' Day. One Mass follows a particular intention. One is for all the faithful departed. One is for the intention of the Pope. That permission remains in the current Roman Missal.

In many places, including Poland, families still go to the cemetery in those days. They light candles. They say names. The custom is not tourism. It is the parish keeping its dead in view.

### **A Small Reflection**

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All Souls' Day gives the whole Church a special day each year to pray for the dead.

One day is not enough for every name we carry. It is enough to remind us that prayer for the dead is not a private hobby. It is the Church's work.

### **A short prayer**

*Lord, on every November morning, and on ordinary days as well, keep the dead within our prayer. Amen.*

## Chapter 8

# **A gift that is not a purchase**

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An indulgence is the remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven.

An indulgence does not forgive sin. It concerns the temporal effects of sins whose guilt has already been forgiven. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is the ordinary sacramental way Catholics receive forgiveness for serious sins committed after Baptism.

The faithful can gain an indulgence for themselves, or apply it to the dead by way of suffrage. That means the Church offers the benefit for them in prayer. We do not command God, and we do not mechanically decide when a soul enters heaven.

To gain an indulgence a person must be baptised, not excommunicated, in the state of grace at least by the time the prescribed work is completed, and have at least the general intention of gaining the indulgence. Then the prescribed work must be done.

A plenary indulgence remits all temporal punishment. A partial indulgence remits part of it. For a plenary indulgence the usual further conditions are sacramental Confession, Holy Communion, prayer for the Pope's intentions, and complete detachment from all sin, even venial sin. If the work is done, but the full conditions or the complete disposition required for a plenary indulgence are lacking, the indulgence is partial.

Real abuses existed. Johann Tetzel's preaching is the name most people remember. The Church corrected the abuses. Abuse does not make the underlying doctrine false.

A Mass stipend is not payment for the Eucharist. The Mass cannot be bought. The offering helps support the Church and her ministers. The priest accepts the obligation of applying that Mass for a particular intention.

### **A Small Reflection**

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Indulgences are not payment and cannot buy forgiveness.

They are one way the Church lets the living share the merits of Christ with the dead. If the older language of debt confuses you, keep the simpler truth: we can pray, and the Church can apply that prayer.

### **A short prayer**

*Lord Jesus, whose merits are the only price of our salvation, teach us to use the Church's gifts without turning them into bargains. Amen.*

## Chapter 9

# **The Mass for the dead**

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The Church has always given a special place to the Mass when praying for the dead. The Mass is the Eucharistic Sacrifice of Christ. It is the greatest prayer she can offer.

Catholics have also joined prayer for the dead with almsgiving and works of mercy. Judas Maccabeus already joined prayer and a gift. The instinct is old. One simple act is enough: have a Mass offered, and if you can, be there.

The dead cannot thank us in the way the living can. That is not an argument against praying for them. It is one of the reasons the Church keeps doing it.

### **A Small Reflection**

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The Mass has a special place in Catholic prayer for the dead.

If you do not know what else to do for someone who has died, begin there. Ask for a Mass. Say the name. Trust that Christ is at work in that offering.

### **A short prayer**

*Lord, receive the Mass we offer for the faithful departed and bring them to the joy of heaven. Amen.*

## Chapter 10

### **Stories we may tell, and claims we should not**

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Saint Gregory the Great told stories of the dead who asked for prayer. Later centuries added many more. Some of these stories may illustrate the doctrine. They do not create the doctrine. Private revelations do not add new articles of faith. Popular stories about exact days, exact numbers, or guaranteed results must not be treated as if the Church had measured purgatory with a clock.

A prayer commonly attributed to Saint Gertrude the Great is often printed with a promise that each recitation releases a thousand souls. The prayer itself may be said. The numerical promise does not appear in Gertrude's own writings in that form. The Holy See historically rejected leaflets that promised the automatic release of one or more souls through particular prayers.

None of this means we should stop praying for the dead. It means we should pray as the Church prays, without treating a number on a card as a guaranteed result. People who have used that prayer in good faith were not foolish. The claim attached to it was simply more than the Church can promise.

### **A Small Reflection**

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Stories and private revelations must never replace Church teaching.

A good story can wake us up. A bad promise can turn mercy into a machine. Keep the prayer. Leave the hidden details to God.

### **A short prayer**

*Lord, keep us faithful in prayer for the dead, and keep us free from claims you have not made. Amen.*

## Chapter 11

# **The encounter with Christ**

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In *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI asked how we should understand this final purification. He recalled Saint Paul's words about being saved as through fire. Then he presented the view of some recent theologians: that the fire which burns and saves may be Christ himself, the Judge and Saviour. The encounter with him is the decisive act of judgement. Before his gaze what is false cannot remain.

Benedict develops this Christ-centred interpretation with care and sympathy. He also asks how, if purification is this encounter with the Lord, the prayers of the living can still help. His answer stays with the communion of saints. We are not isolated from one another, even in death.

This does not define exactly what the purifying fire is. It gives us a Christ-centred way of understanding the Church's teaching. Purgatory is not first of all about flames, clocks or duration. It is about final purification for heaven through God's saving grace in Christ.

### **A Small Reflection**

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Benedict XVI offers a Christ-centred way of understanding purification.

The last thing the soul meets is the Lord. That is enough to make us both careful and hopeful.

### **A short prayer**

*Lord Jesus, be our judge and our saviour. Take from us what is false, and lead us into joy. Amen.*

## Chapter 12

# **What we can do**

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The best response is simple.

Have Mass offered for the dead. Attend that Mass if you can. Pray for them by name. Give alms. Remember them in November. Teach children to pray for grandparents and for people they never met.

The sacraments prepare us to live and die in God's grace. If we are conscious of serious sin, we should go to Confession. The Eucharist is already the food of the life to come. Anointing of the Sick is not only for the dying, and it is not a signal that the Church has given up. It is a sacrament of strengthening.

Purgatory is not self-improvement. It is final purification by God's grace. We do not need to know the hidden details. Pray for the dead, and try to live now in friendship with God.

### **A Small Reflection**

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The best response is simple: pray for the dead and live in God's grace.

The Church has never agreed to treat the grave as the end of her responsibilities. Neither should we.

### **A short prayer**

*Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. Amen.*

## A last word

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Purgatory is the final purification of those who die in God's grace. It is not a second chance after death, and it is not hell. The Church prays for the dead. The Mass has a special place. Indulgences and prayers are not purchases. Much of the imagery around purgatory remains undefined. Christ is the one who saves and purifies.

That is enough for one sitting. The rest is in the Mass you can still ask for, and in the names you can still say.

Saint Monica, pray for us. Saint Catherine of Genoa, pray for us. Saint Odilo of Cluny, pray for us.

## A prayer

*Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.*

## **A word of thanks**

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These pages are free to read.

If they have helped you, a gift through Silent Homilies is welcome. Please give only if you wish, and only if you can. It is never a charge for a blessing.

## **Printing this book**

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This booklet is designed in A5 format.

For best results print double-sided on A5 paper, flipped on the short edge. Recommended paper: 80–100 gsm.

Written to be read in one or two sittings.