

Have you ever wondered what purgatory will be like? The most complete description of it comes not from the Gospels at all from Dante's Divine Comedy. There he describes the places in purgatory reserved for people who have committed certain sins. Say, for example, your sin is anger. Dante finds you in a corner of purgatory filled with smoke, so much darker than a cloudy night that he can't keep his eyes open. Here's how he describes it: "Just as a blind man goes behind his guide that he may not stray or knock against what might injure or perhaps kill him, so I went through the foul and bitter air. . . . I heard voices and each seemed to pray for peace and mercy to the Lamb or God that takes away sins. Their beginning was always 'Agnus Dei' and all had the same words and the same measure so that among them seemed to be complete accord. 'Are these spirits, Master, that I hear?' I said; and he answered me: 'You're right, and they are now loosing the knot of anger.'"

Now, there are other descriptions of purgatory. Mike Murphy on his radio show recently told how the nuns he had in grade school described time spent in purgatory. Imagine an enormous mountain, like Pike's Peak in the Rockies. Then imagine there's a bird that flies to the top of this mountain and makes one peck at it and flies away. Every thousand years the bird returns for another peck. When the bird has whittled away the mountain to nothing, he will have used up one millionth of the time you will spend in purgatory for your sins.

This kind of thinking fostered a practice in the Church called indulgences. If you said certain prayers or did some good works you could gain so many days indulgence off your time in purgatory. I remember when the Royals were in the playoffs a few years ago I had a parishioner who got four tickets for the whole series. I told him that if he gave one ticket to a Catholic priest he could gain a plenary indulgence for the remission of all his sins.

Now, as I say, we don't have in the Gospels a description of purgatory or of indulgences. So why does the Church still talk about these things? Well, it seems to be the best metaphor we've come up with to resolve some of life's biggest questions: Namely, why is it that good guys don't always win? Why do bad people sometimes come out on top? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why is there so much injustice in this life? The only solution we have is that somehow this must all get evened out in the afterlife. God's judgment will prevail, so we project there must be some kind of punishment for those who are good but not good enough for heaven. So we use this metaphor of "days in purgatory" to help us understand that it pays to do good and avoid evil.

No one knows how accurate our metaphor is. So when someone we love dies, it's natural to feel concerned about that person. Scripture does tell us it's a good thing to pray for the dead, that God will be merciful and welcome them to heaven.

We don't know what purgatory will be like. We do know that Jesus has promised eternal life for those who die in faith. And so it is with great hope that we keep alive our prayers for the dead.