

From the PA's Desk

We ask this through Christ our Lord:

Have you ever noticed how we have a set formula for ending all our prayers – “We ask this through Christ our Lord!” This formula is more than a formality, or a ritual signal to God and us that the prayer is over. When we pray “through Christ” we are praying through the Body of Christ, which includes Jesus, the Eucharist, and the Body of Believers; you and me. We are praying **through** all of these. Thus, not only God in heaven is being asked to help, but we are also charging ourselves, as part of the Body of Christ, with some of the responsibility for answering the prayer with the word “Amen.” To pray as a Christian demands concrete involvement in trying to bring about what is pleaded for in the prayer.

Let's say that you have heard about a fellow parishioner who is thinking of leaving the church or the parish, because of recent crises or hardships in their life that have caused them to doubt everything they believe about faith, God, Jesus, and the church. You have always liked this person and have appreciated the witness and enthusiasm they have brought to the parish, so you take it upon yourself to silently pray for this parishioner to remain strong in both faith and church membership. You pray that God might give them strength to see beyond their doubts. But beyond that, you never go out of your way to directly talk to this person about their hardships and why their faith is lacking, nor do you communicate to them just how valuable they are to this community of faith. The point I'm making is obvious. Nothing will probably change. The same goes true for everything else we pray for; for our evangelization efforts, our new vocations to the priesthood, or a world filled with more peace and less violence. If all we do is ask God to fix those things, will anything really happen? Someone once said: “Without God we can't, but without us God won't.”

When we pray “through Christ our Lord,” we are committing ourselves to concrete involvement in doing something beyond just thinking or praying about it, and asking God to make it happen. When we pray “through Christ,” more is involved than merely asking God in heaven to make some kind of intervention. The community too, and we ourselves, must be involved not just in the petition but in also trying to bring about what the petition pleads for. I know that this community of faith is well aware of this reality. For the past few months I have witnessed the generosity of you folks in collecting and distributing food for those in need. As I write this, the doorbell continues to ring of those who have made appointments to see our food pantry volunteers. I see the many hours they dedicate their time and energy to helping those in need.

Just the past week I've talked to two new people who are interested in becoming Catholic. They contacted me because someone from our community asked them if they ever thought about joining the church, and they volunteered to talk to me about it. I know you understanding what praying “through Christ our Lord” means, and I encourage you to look for ways to be the eyes, heart, and hands of Jesus in our world today.

In Western Europe, there is a famous Christ statue in front of a church which has no arms, the original Christ statue was a typical and recognizable Jesus statue with outstretched arms, but because of the bombings in World War II, the arms of the were blown off. Years later as they were rebuilding and remodeling the church building, the parishioners wondered what they should do with the statue with no arms? One group in the parish suggested that they replace the entire statue. Another group thought they should just replace the arms on the original statue. The opinion of the third group won out, and although the church has been rebuilt, they left the Jesus statue as it was – with no arms, and simply put a plaque in front of it that reads: “I have no hands but yours.”

Catholics and the Afterlife:

At a Word and Communion Service this past week, during the Prayers of the Faithful, someone prayed for “all the souls in purgatory.” Since we have just celebrated All Saints and All Souls day, I thought it would be a good teaching moment to talk about the church’s understanding of the afterlife.

Look into your memories and recall times when you sensed what heaven might be like — happiness, excitement, a feeling of safety or warmth. Staying with your memories, now recall if possible — a time when you sensed what hell might be like — times when someone hurt you, when you lost something or someone precious. Finally, drawing from your memories, recall times when you experienced what purgatory might be like. In Catholic teaching, purgatory has to do with personal transformation: as God helps us to become less and less sinful, we become more and more loving — and lovable. A sense of purgatory might come from an experience of mending what was broken by sinfulness. In a relationship, this might mean feeling sorrowful for having hurt someone, really wanting to make up for it, and then apologizing in a sincere and loving way. Or it might be an experience of learning about how to love or of changing your old ways.

I think heaven must be all about love. I think hell must be about being completely cut off from others. I think purgatory must have something to do with struggling and gradually improving our ways. Catholics see afterlife, like earthly life, as a kind of process. All life — from conception to birth to death and beyond — is a continuum. Throughout this continuum, God is intimately present with us in a special way through Jesus and the Spirit. At every stage, God is actively helping us learn how to live and how to love. God helps us move toward fulfillment of our deepest human desires. Afterlife is not to be understood in literal terms. It is not about certain chambers or places in various locations. Instead, afterlife is about continued relationship with God in new states of being.

Heaven is the ultimate in joy, happiness, fulfillment, and oneness — so much so that heaven itself is beyond our wildest imagination. Therefore, the Scriptures speak of heaven in metaphors — as banquet, kingdom, and feast. Although the Church teaches that hell is a real possibility due to human free will, the Church does not teach that anyone is in hell or that anyone ever will be. Hell would be the result of a person’s freely choosing that state over choosing to be in relationship with God and others. The image of hell as a burning fire originated in Jewish tradition. A place on the boundary between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin was considered unholy because it was the site of a shrine where human sacrifices were offered. Gospel writers drew from visions of this terrible place to vividly illustrate the suffering and darkness a person would experience by turning away from love and from God.

Purgatory is understood as that part of the continuum for those who have died but are not yet ready or able to enter into the complete joy of perfect, unlimited love. Purgatory is a process by which God helps people let go of their sinfulness and find their way into heaven.