



Pray for us, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

Someone once approached Mother Teresa and asked, "What is the greatest moment in life?" After pondering it, Mother Teresa responded in her characteristically simple yet profound manner, "There are two great moments in life, now and at the hour of our death, and we pray for both of these when we pray the Hail Mary." How true it is that the present moment of one's life, the "now," can be classified as the greatest moment. Furthermore, adding up the vast multitude of "now" moments that comprise one's life, leads to the final greatest moment, "death," which is the capstone of man's earthly existence.

Providentially, these two greatest moments are entrusted to Our Lady in the Hail Mary. Most Catholics learn this prayer when they are tiny children, and have prayed it countless times throughout their lives. In the Hail Mary, the suppliant turns to Our Lady asking her to guide, protect and prepare him for these meaningful moments, "now" and "the hour of our death." This also readies a person for what follows death: Judgment, Purgatory, Heaven, and Hell.

A priest was once asked to give a series of conferences on death. The day after the first conference he received a phone call from the coordinator of the group who frankly told him, "Kindly do not come again to speak about death. It's frightening. I for one was unable to sleep" (Alberione, 83). Understandably, it is natural for a sense of fear to emerge when broaching the topic of death and judgment. Yet, by approaching these subjects through the lens of Our Lady, one can experience great consolation and increase his love and longing for what she has already attained through her Son.

Through the course of life, each man will have

made something of himself, something to carry across the threshold of death. The deep questions that well up from man's nature such as, "Why am I here," "What do I want or desire," "What can I hope to attain," and "What should I do with my life," are radically and permanently answered at the moment of death. Pius IX wisely counseled a man to reflect every day on the phrase, "Memento mori – Remember, you will die." This is not an unhealthy fascination with a morbid sentiment. In actuality, it is an extremely beneficial practice. The man took Pius IX's suggestion and advanced from fear, to hope, to a deepened longing for God, and ultimately, the man reformed his life.

All of the details surrounding death are shrouded in mystery: the time, the place, the circumstances, one's readiness and the state of one's soul. The only thing a person knows for certain is that it will happen. In addition, this is the moment when man's greatest enemy, the devil, makes his final and most ardent attempt to lure souls into his clutches. Thus, one sees the need to prepare! People make plans for almost every occasion in life: vacations, occupations, residence relocations, etc. The list goes on and on. Now, when comparing these events with death, shouldn't death receive the greatest amount of preparation considering the gravity and eternal duration of the outcome? This is by far the biggest residence relocation man will ever experience.

Now is the time to prepare for death, and man does so by focusing on the type of life that he leads. Moreover, there arises the comparable need to pray for the grace of a good death, by



having confessed all mortal sins, made reparation for the sins committed, received the Eucharist, and having rejected the final temptations of satan. If someone endeavored to follow Christ in his life and fostered a sincere devotion to Our Lady, then surely he can trust in her motherly aid at death. The teachings of the Church and the lives of the saints bear witness to this reality. A story of St. Nicholas of Tolentino illustrates Mary's assistance in preparation for death.

Eight days before his death, Nicholas was suffering greatly and the devil was attacking him with fury. He experienced great pain and his soul was steeped in anguish. The devil ruthlessly taunted Nicholas and disrupted his efforts to pray. Characteristically, as he had done so many times throughout his life, Nicholas turned to Mary. From the depths of his heart, Nicholas pleaded with her to safeguard him from the assault of the devil as he was advancing closer to his death. Within an instant, the devil fled and all of Nicholas' temptations ceased. Then, an angel appeared to Nicholas and conveyed that Mary graciously heard his prayers and interceded for him. St. Nicholas went on to meet his death in great peace.

After addressing the topic of death, the subsequent subject of Judgment comes to the fore. After death, the veil that separates a soul from Christ is lifted, and each person will meet Jesus face to face. With this encounter, the soul will also undergo Judgment, which plumbs the very depths of one's being and reveals his true identity.

Considering that God is omniscient, He has a profound knowledge of every soul down to the minutest detail. God knows every thought, word and intention of one's heart. He also knows the state of one's soul at every moment of his life. In regards to every action, God knows the degree of knowledge a person had, his will's consent, the manner in which it was performed and the value of the act itself. He knows each individual's gifts, talents, health, intelligence, life circumstances, vocation, and all of the inspirations, promptings and graces He

offered to help someone carry out his holy will. He knows each man better than the man knows himself, and God knows the whole story of one's life from start to finish. He knows each soul so intimately, not in order to hold this over one's head at his Judgment, but because of his infinite love for every being He has brought into being.

Christ stands as man's mediator with the Father. Yet, as St. Alphonsus Liguori stated that to make our confidence in God's mercy even stronger, God has also given us Mary who obtains through her prayers whatever she asks of the Lord. May each person strive to live now in preparation for this blessed encounter with Christ by making a thorough and daily examination of conscience, by sincere confession and frequent reception of Holy Communion, and by increasing devotion to Our Lady who serves as man's loving advocate with her Son.

What is the outcome of each man's Particular Judgment? There are three options: Purgatory, Heaven, and Hell. Reflecting on the possible outcomes may provide encouragement to strive for the spiritually preeminent offer. The doctrines of Purgatory, Heaven, and Hell are great mysteries of the faith, and knowledge of them flows from Divine Revelation. Additionally, there have been numerous visions experienced by the saints that supply further insights about these future states of being. Progressing from the least promising to the greatest, one must first consider Hell.

As the catechism states, Hell is the "state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed" (CCC, 1033). Many theologians, authors, and poets have produced treatises, literary works and meditations describing the horror of what a soul experiences in this state. Some saints have even received private revelations illuminating this dark reality. Teresa of Avila's experience serves as just one of many apt examples.



Unfortunately, at one point in her early life as a religious, Teresa of Avila was struggling with grave mediocrity. God granted her a vision of her place in Hell, which she would have merited by her sins, if she did not reform her life. Teresa opened her heart to grace, and providentially, the vision contributed to her conversion. Even though Teresa provided a detailed description of her vision of Hell in her autobiography, a paraphrased accounting will suffice to demonstrate the dreadfulness of what she experienced.

She said that the entrance resembled a very long straight alley, like a very low oven, which was dark and narrow. The ground was covered with what looked like filthy, muddy water. There was a nauseatingly foul stench that attacked her senses from the water that was being stirred up by the many vile reptiles slithering through it. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she spotted on one side of the ominous pathway, a cavity pigeonholed in the wall. It could have been a cupboard, except for what she saw locked up tightly within (it was herself). She felt a fire in her soul and the most unbearable bodily pains she had ever known, including excruciating spasms resulting from the shrinking of her limbs. The physical and spiritual torment caused by the devil could not compare with the agony she experienced in her soul, which seemed to be cutting itself into pieces. She was in a place that was so evil and she was so helpless to escape. The walls tightened around her, closed in on her, and were suffocating her. Even though she was enveloped in utter darkness, she could see everything that was horrible to behold in that deep dark black hole.

After reading any description of Hell, especially one as vivid as Teresa's, and considering the bleak prospect of total separation from God and eternal suffering, how could anyone not see the dire need to avoid sin at all cost and to courageously strive for virtue throughout his life? Sadly, it is possible for someone without faith to remain oblivious to this reality and its effects. Nevertheless, for those who have embraced the truth, God graciously shows the way to carry out this valiant spiritual

endeavor. One such example was revealed by Mary at the apparition at Fatima. She called upon all souls to recite the rosary and to pray for the conversion of sinners. Mary further stated that God wants to save souls from going to Hell, and He desires to do so through her intercession and her Immaculate Heart. With God's grace and Mary's powerful aid, many souls can and will be saved. Yet when they die and are judged, they may not be ready for heavenly glory. Therefore, the topic of Purgatory requires investigation to bridge the chasm between Hell and Heaven.

Purgatory is a state for those who are not deserving of Hell, but are not yet worthy of the blessedness of Heaven. If a person dies without making full reparation for past sins or without repenting of venial sins, then he is in need of further purification. Some artistic renditions of purgatory show souls immersed in flames with mournful expressions on their faces. Yet, these visual depictions fail to "paint" the full picture. Many sources referred to the purification a soul undergoes in Purgatory as the "Pains of Purgatory." To quantify this pain, Thomas Aquinas stated that "All the suffering of this earth taken together would not equal the smallest pain of purgatory" (Alberione, 165). That is a sobering and enlightening thought.

Ironically, when comparing the experience of suffering in Hell to that of suffering in Purgatory, there is no categorical difference: the type of suffering is the same. Then one may ask, "What is the difference?" The ultimate distinction is the duration of the suffering and the effects it produces. The souls in Hell are tormented by their sufferings and their experience of torment will never end. Whereas the sufferings experienced by those in purgatory are temporary and work towards the good of the soul; they produce a purifying and ultimately unifying effect. The sufferings of the souls in Purgatory lead them to the greatest joy imagi-



nable, eternal union with God.

Just as the saints visions and meditations of Hell provide a fuller understanding of that reality, so too do the saint's visions of Purgatory. St. Catherine of Genoa mystically described purgatory in saying, "No happiness can be found worthy to be compared with that of a soul in purgatory except that of the saints in paradise; and day by day this happiness grows as God flows into these souls, more and more as the hindrances to His entrance are consumed...At the same time, the soul endures a pain so extreme that no tongue can be found to tell it" (Lord, 143). This quote helps one to grapple with the paradox of having an experience of extreme pain and at the same time an experience of the greatest happiness second only to the happiness of heaven.

What are the pains a soul experiences in Purgatory? The first is the pain of loss. This entails being temporarily deprived of the vision of God. In an attempt to better comprehend what this pain is like, one could try to imagine every desire he has had throughout his life (the desire for food, water, pleasure, comfort, security, intellectual understanding, belonging, mental, moral, and spiritual integrity, etc.) and the occasions when he experienced those desires at their greatest intensity. Then, he could lump sum every one of those desires together into one monumental desire. In Purgatory, the soul only has one desire and that desire is to be with God. Since they have this deep and insatiable yearning (the desire for union with God) and are deprived of its fulfillment, the souls in Purgatory experience intense pain.

Secondly, through his thoughts, memory, imagination, and will, a soul in Purgatory clearly and intensely recognizes all of the times he rejected God's action or presence in his life. The soul profoundly realizes that due to his sin and lack of reparation for the offences he committed against God, he is not ready or able to be with the Lord. Since the person's whole being passionately yearns for God alone, and because of his consciousness of who God is, this deliberation elicits extreme pain.

Considering the pains that souls in Purgatory experience, it is consoling to look to Mary and assess her relation with the souls in this state of purification. St. Faustina had a vision of Purgatory in which she saw, a great crowd of suffering souls. They were praying fervently for themselves, but to no avail; since, only others can come to their aid. She asked the souls what their greatest suffering was and they answered that their greatest torment was longing for God. She then saw Our Lady visiting the souls in Purgatory. The souls revealed to St. Faustina that they call Mary "The Star of the Sea" since she brings them refreshment" (Diary, 11). Mary revealed to another mystic, St. Bridget, that she is the Mother of the Poor Souls, and that her prayers serve to mitigate their sufferings every single hour that they remain in Purgatory.

Once a soul is purified, it is ready for full union with the Blessed Trinity and the Church Triumphant. However, Purgatory is not a required stop along the way. By the grace of God, it is possible for a soul to undergo the purification of Purgatory while still on earth. Surveying the lives of the saints brings to light the heroic ways in which they accepted their crosses and embraced the sufferings in their lives and expediently attained the reward of heaven after death. In order to imitate the saints in this endeavor, man needs to fervently pray through the intercession of Our Lady for the grace to faithfully follow Christ and wholeheartedly embrace the cross. In doing so, one may hope for the grace of being prepared and directly incorporated into in the joys of heaven.

As has been attested to by many sources, trying to expound upon the mystery of heaven is like grasping at straw. Even Scripture tells us that eye has not seen and ear has not heard what God has prepared for those who love Him. Truly, when trying to imagine the perfect state of heaven, the human mind falls miserably short.



Yet, the fact that man recognizes within himself a team of desires of body, mind, soul, and spirit that are never fully quenched in this life, he is ontologically compelled to seek the One who will eternally satiate the deepest longings of his being. Of all of things that man seeks throughout his life, God alone is the One that will always be found.

When reflecting upon the end of time and the new heavens and the new earth, modern theologian, Peter Kreeft, described heaven through the concept of relationships. He noted that souls in heaven will experience a perfect relationship to what is less than themselves through their bodily senses of (hearing, sight, touch, taste, and smell), thus producing the perfection of sense pleasure. In relation to themselves, Kreeft stated that the souls in heaven will have perfect integrity of all of their faculties. All of their thoughts, feelings, desires, consciousness, and their wills will be so perfectly employed in union with God that it will affect perfect happiness of soul. Lastly, he expounded upon the souls in heaven, who will enter into a perfect relationship with the One who is greater than themselves, and their spirit will experience the fullness of infinite Beauty, Goodness, and Truth, which elicits perfect joy.

When it comes down to it, every person fundamentally desires heaven and eternal union with God. Yet, man definitely needs help to reach his goal and consummate this relationship with the Lord. In this endeavor, man can eagerly turn to Mary, Queen of heaven and earth. Before St. Francis of Assisi died, he had a vision. He saw, "two ladders, which touched the earth at one end and the sky at the other. Above the one, Our Lord appeared; above the other, His most holy Mother. A number of friars minor were endeavoring to mount to heaven by the latter at which our Lord was seen; but after having climbed several rungs – some more, some less – all, overcome by the glory and the majesty of the God of virtues, could not advance and were obliged to descend" (Plus, 150). Upon seeing this, St. Francis exhorted his friars to have recourse to Mary. As the famous author Dante put it, "To hope for a grace and not to address oneself to

Mary is to wish that the desire should fly without wings" (Plus, 149). Mary has found favor with God in a unique and powerful way, and God has made her treasurer of his grace. As the mother of God and mother of all, man needs to turn to her, and implore her heavenly intercession.

In conclusion, it is fitting to repeat the introduction by restating the question posed to Mother Teresa: "What is the greatest moment in life?" As has been demonstrated, there are two: "now" and "at the hour of our death." The reward of Heaven, the purification of Purgatory and the torment of Hell stand before each soul. May all men turn to Our Lady and ask for her intercession both now and at the hour of their death so that they may rejoice with her in praising the Triune God for all eternity.

Works Cited

- Alberione, S.S.P., James. The Last Things. Trans. The Daughters of St. Paul. Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1964.
- Kowalska, Saint Maria Faustina. Diary: Divine Mercy in My Soul. Stockbridge, Mass.: Marian Press, 2007.
- Kreeft, Peter. Heaven: The Heart's Deepest Longing. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989.
- Lord, Bob and Penny. Visions of Heaven, Hell and Purgatory. Journeys of Faith, 1996.
- Plus, S.J., Raoul. Mary in Our Soul-Life. Trans. Sister Mary Bertille and Sister Mary St. Thomas. New York: Frederick Pustet Co., 1940.

