THE WIDOW'S MITE & THE HOLY SOULS IN PURGATORY (Thirty-second Sunday of Year B)

In today's gospel of the widow's mite, Jesus praises the poor widow for supporting the worship of the very Temple, of which Jesus had prophesied that not a stone would be left on stone (Mk 13.1-2). Hers was an unrestricted gift that would go to pay for the offering of sacrifice. Even though the earthly Temple's days were numbered and its priesthood in a sorry state, the faith and love of this devout widow were still building up and preparing the way for the *eternal* Temple of God's Kingdom: *Jesus Christ is that living Temple, as well as the living Altar, the true High Priest and the one Sacrifice*. Our prayers and sacrifices do matter in God's eyes, for they are a participation in Christ's sacrifice and heavenly intercession

It is in that perspective that we, too, are called upon to offer our own widow's mite of prayers, Masses, penances, and almsgiving for the Holy Souls in purgatory. Such a final transformation and purification in Christ is necessary for many who depart this life in the grace of God, for, as the Book of Revelation tells us, "nothing unclean shall enter heaven" (Rev 21.27). At the particular judgment after death, we shall encounter the Lord Jesus Christ in glory: in that moment of truth and painful scrutiny, our Savior himself will be our "purgatory"—that is, the final cleansing, purification, and transformation of those who love him.

Often, when a preacher wishes to preach Catholic dogma, one will hear the question, "Does it really matter? Does this dogma affect my own Christian life and our life as a community of faith?" So I want to give you a real-life illustration and application of this dogmatic truth about purgatory and the Communion of Saints. This story actually happened to two people I know. I'll call them Juan Carlos and Maria (not their real names).

Juan Carlos was originally a baptized Catholic but was never taught the faith. His father died when Juan Carlos was very young, and his widowed mother had to raise a large family alone, and in grinding poverty. The situation at home was too chaotic for any effective catechesis, and the Church never played a significant role in his childhood and adolescence. And so, like so many others, he simply lapsed. As an adult, he joined the army and served in Vietnam; he was shot down and barely survived. The trauma of that experience remained with him. In the following years, he drank heavily and partied and lived a worldly life; but his life was in chaos and spiritually empty. Somewhere he came across a flier announcing that a Protestant evangelist was holding an evangelistic event; for some reason, he decided to attend. There and then, to his own surprise, Juan Carlos answered the altar call and professed Christ as his Lord and Savior, surrendering his life to Christ.

After that, Juan Carlos's life was different. He stopped drinking, joined a local evangelical congregation, and read the Bible with great intensity. Sorry to say, along with the good Christian teaching that he gained from this experience, he also swallowed a good many anti-Catholic errors and prejudices. In other words, he became an anti-Catholic fundamentalist.

But then something unexpected happened. Years later, Juan Carlos married a Catholic woman (we'll call her Maria) in a civil ceremony. Now in Catholic terms, this was not a valid marriage;

but Juan Carlos was not willing to marry in a Catholic church. Maria hoped that he would eventually change his mind about that, so that the marriage could be convalidated.

It didn't turn out that way. Instead, Juan Carlos and Maria quarreled about religion. She wanted to watch EWTN, and he wanted to watch the televangelists. She insisted on the importance of Mary and the saints, and he rejected all that as "spiritual bondage." In particular, he denied the existence of purgatory, saying it was all made up by the Catholic Church in order for priests to lay guilt trips on people and control their lives. On the more positive side, Juan Carlos challenged Maria to read the Bible for herself; and so she did. She found that very enriching though Bible-reading didn't make a Protestant of her.

Eventually, as you might guess, this marriage failed and ended in civil divorce after about five years. Maria went to confession and returned to the sacraments, regretting that she had ever even thought of marrying outside the Church, especially to an anti-Catholic Protestant. Then, a few years later, Juan Carlos received news that Maria had died. He felt guilty about the way he had treated her. For some reason, he felt moved to go to the local Catholic parish to make a donation for Masses to be offered for the repose of Maria's soul. Now that's astonishing, too—he didn't believe in purgatory or prayers for the dead; but Maria did, so it seemed to be a fitting act of reparation to her memory, a way to final "closure," as we say now.

So Juan Carlos met with the parish priest and explained the situation. The priest then told him, "Juan Carlos, your ex-wife Maria is very much alive and doing fine. She lives in another state now, but I heard from her not long ago." Juan Carlos was astonished but also relieved. Then he started talking to the priest, who invited him to attend a Bible study group in the parish. Not long after, Juan Carlos—the ex-Catholic turned anti-Catholic fundamentalist—went to confession to this priest and became a regular communicant. He then sent Maria a cross that the priest had blessed, as a peace offering. About a year and half after Juan Carlos's return to the Catholic Church, he was diagnosed with cancer. It was an aggressive cancer, and he died from it about a year later, in August of 2013. He died a Catholic, with the sacraments that he had once scorned, and was buried in Catholic rites, with prayers for the repose and purification of his soul. Maria is still living, though. Truly, we know not the day or the hour of our own passing from this life (Mt 25.13) and must live in watchfulness for the Lord's coming.

To me the most amazing thing about this story is the role that the doctrine of purgatory played in it. It was one of the areas that Juan Carlos and Maria had disagreed and quarreled over. Juan Carlos didn't believe in the Mass or in purgatory or in prayers for the dead; yet, somehow, he felt moved to make a donation for Masses to be offered for his ex-wife's soul. There is no sufficient human explanation for his: maybe Our Lady and the Holy Souls overheard Juan Carlos making dismissive remarks about them and decided to do something about it! After all, the reality of the Communion of Saints and purgatory does not depend on whether some people consciously believe in them or not. A fragment of Catholic cultural memory had survived in the back of Juan Carlos's mind, reminding him of what needed to be done for a Catholic who has died; what is surprising is that he acted upon it, despite his anti-Catholic opinions. By some strange Providence, it was this sense of the Communion of Saints, unbroken even by death, that eventually brought Juan Carlos back to the Catholic fold, to the faith of his fathers, and led him

to make peace also with one whom he had wronged. I know: it all sounds like a Graham Greene novel. But it really happened just a couple of years ago, to people I know.

In a way, it is all fitting, though. Juan Carlos had thought that belief in purgatory was a form of spiritual bondage. What he discovered is that purgatory is not about *bondage* but about being *bound together* in the charity of Christ, even with those who have already passed through the gate of death. There is a fine old evangelical hymn called, "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds," that expresses this truth in these words:

Blest be the tie that binds Our hearts in Christian love; The fellowship of kindred minds Is like to that above. When we asunder part, It gives us inward pain; But we shall still be joined in heart, And hope to meet again.

Let us then be mindful of the Holy Souls in purgatory. We can help them along the way to the Beatific Vision by prayers and Masses and penances and almsgiving. The Lord was pleased by the offering of the widow's mite, and he will bless us, too, if we remember the faithful departed, included the Poor Souls who have no one to pray for them. In ways that we will not know in this life, the Holy Souls' intercession will help us, too, on our way to heaven, when we "shall see the goodness of the Lord | in the land of the living" (Ps 27.14).