

Purgatory

*But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?
For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and
purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and
silver, till they present right offerings to the Lord. ~ Malachi 3:2-3*

EVERY HUMAN being has been created with a calling so profound and a destiny so beautiful that human words cannot even begin to describe it. Indeed, when St. Paul writes about the glories of life in Heaven, he says, "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9; see Is 64:4). The joy of Heaven is a life of such deep and perfect love that we must be transformed completely by love before we can feel "at home." In Heaven, we will be in the presence of God. We know from the Scriptures that the presence of God is so pure and so holy that "nothing unclean shall enter it" (Rv 21:27). And so, before it is possible to enter into Heaven, each person must be perfect in purity and holiness. Jesus told us as much when he said, "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48).

Later Jesus went further. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15:12). Jesus loved us to the cross, by laying down his very life for us. It is absolutely necessary that we learn to selflessly love in the same way. This is our great task, for it will not be possible for us to enter Heaven unless our love has been puri-

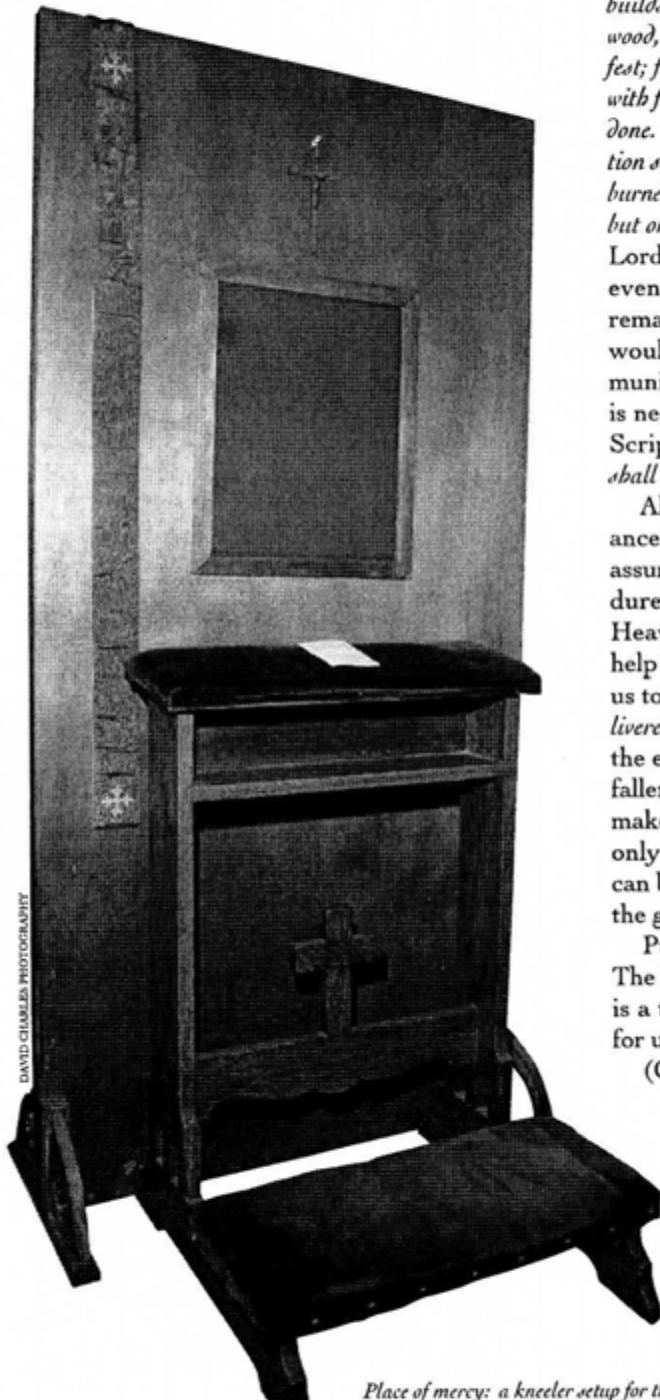
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The Sacred Heart of Jesus, full of endless mercy

fied of selfishness and reaches the level of divine perfection. We experience much of this purification in our suffering while in this earthly life. Some people leave this life with the kind of love for God and neighbor that is totally selfless and pure. It is the saints that have reached perfect holiness during their life on earth who will be immediately admitted into eternal glory at the moment of death. However, many others die without grave sin and in relationship with God, though not having reached this necessary condition of perfection. Some sins, though forgiven, may still have grave consequences as yet unsatisfied. It is the person in this condition who will enter Purgatory at the moment of death. A beautiful and poetic description of the situation of those in Purgatory is found in Scripture: "But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be an affliction, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace. For though in the sight of men they were punished, their hope is full of immortality. Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself; like gold in the furnace

be tried them, and like a sacrificial burnt offering be accepted them" (Wis 3:1-6). This description tells us of the utter peace experienced by the souls in Purgatory despite their need to be, for a time, a "sacrificial burnt offering."



DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

Place of mercy: a kneeler setup for the Sacrament of Reconciliation

What is Purgatory? It is a temporary state of existence in which the soul is purified and brought to Christian perfection. Just as God purified the unclean lips of Isaiah with a burning coal (see Is 6:5-7), so he graciously purifies his children before bringing them to eternal glory in Heaven: "Now if any one builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw — each man's work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire" (1 Cor 3:12-15). Indeed, the Lord's desire to save us is so strong that it extends even past the grave. He is intent on purging any remaining selfishness or residual effects of sin that would prevent us from entering into the full communion of the saints in Heaven. This purity of heart is necessary for full participation in Trinitarian life. Scripture says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Mt 5:8).

All who enter Purgatory have the blessed assurance that they will spend eternity in Heaven. This assurance brings them great consolation as they endure their final purification. Both the Church in Heaven (the saints) and the Church on earth can help those suffering in Purgatory. The Bible exhorts us to "make atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin" (2 Mc 12:45). Christians from the earliest times offered prayers for those who had fallen asleep in death. As well, the saints in Heaven make intercession to God the Father for them. Not only prayer but also fasting and works of penance can be offered for the dead and help bring them into the glory of Heaven.

Purgatory is one of the Lord's greatest mercies. The fact that such a place of purification even exists is a testimony to God's deep and providential love for us.

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