



LIGHT & LIFE

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CARVED IN STONE

By Fr. Joseph Sergott, O.P.

As my life has progressed, I have come to appreciate sacred art more deeply. It's amazing how you can walk into a beautiful church and behold the splendor of stained-glass, ancient frescoes, carved statues and even marble floors and feel like you're closer to God. Such a place can be conducive to prayer—sometimes even if you don't consider yourself a person of faith.

If you are ever in San Francisco, wander over into St. Dominic's Church on Bush and Steiner. As the saying goes, "They don't make churches like this anymore." The church is beautiful inside and out. Over the years I have heard many stories about people who have ventured into the church intrigued by its beauty and only a short time later have had their faith awakened. Most people who visit there can tell you about their favorite altar, statue, stained-glass window, or place to pray. For years, I have felt myself drawn to the modest statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the "Lady Chapel" which is located to the right of the main altar in the church.

The Lady Chapel is often used for daily Mass. Its windows depict the Mysteries of the Rosary in beautiful stained-glass. However, at the center of the chapel is a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary carved in stone. One cannot help but pause before this statue and ponder what she is contemplating.

Before I go any further, I will digress for a moment to speak of statues and other sacred images and their rightful place in the Catholic religion. Non-Catholics will sometimes question whether Catholics worship statues and other images as if the image itself is a god. They will even see a Catholic approach a statue of a saint and kiss its feet or reach out and touch the garment of its clothing.

However, any worship of a statue or of any piece of art would be considered a pagan practice and would not be something that is apropos for any Christian. Only the Lord himself is worshipped. Thus, sacred images of the saints, including the Blessed Virgin Mary, are inspired art forms to lift our spirits, minds, hearts and even our eyes to heaven to dwell on the Lord and his kingdom, and to inspire us to strive for that kingdom. In short, any sacred image is meant to help us on our way to eternal life in heaven. If they are done well, they teach us something about our Christian faith, inspire us to pray, and move us to take stock of our lives.

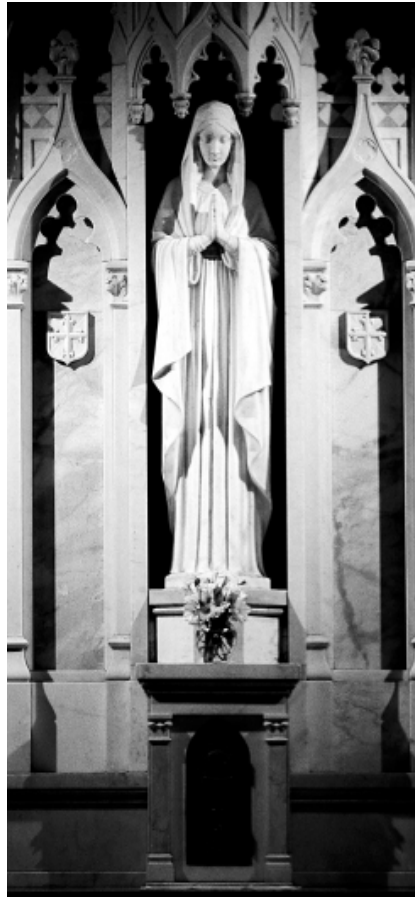
When beholding sacred art, we take into account everything about the image, in this case a statue of carved stone, including clothing, gestures, bearing and posture. We take note of other things that surround the statue, the way the artist foresaw light shining upon it, and even its original place in a church or oratory.

When I look upon this statue of the Blessed Mother, the word that comes to mind is *resolute*. She is determined, steadfast and unwavering. She is introspective and centered upon her Lord and nothing will pull her away. Her union with the Lord is immovable as the stone she has been cast in; yet, while on earth, her will had always been flexible, moving with the divine will as it had been revealed to her. We recall Mary's Yes, "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say." (Luke 1:38)

Could the artist have had a single purpose in mind for this sacred image of the Blessed Virgin Mary? In our own review of it maybe we can uncover the mystery.

Mary is wearing the apparel of her time: a simple tunic held together by a sash, with a mantle that covers her

Continued on page 4



Sculptor, Alphonse Peeters et Fils
St. Dominic's Church, San Francisco
Photo by Casey O'Leary

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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

On Purgatory

By Fr. Reginald Martin, O.P.

[Fr. Reginald entered the Dominicans in 1968, and was ordained in 1974. He served the Western Province's campus ministries at the University of Washington and the University of Oregon, and was very happily the director of the Rosary Center from 2004 until 2016. He is presently director of Vallombrosa Retreat Center and Chaplain to the Dominican nuns at Corpus Christi Monastery—both in Menlo Park, California.]

Our human experience teaches we are no strangers to sin. This is a frightening thought when we consider the assurance of Scripture, "Nothing unclean shall enter it [God's Kingdom]...but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life." (Rev. 21:27) This is a powerful reminder of the value of a virtuous life, and cause for immense gratitude. God has provided a means by which we may be cleansed of sin even after our death.

This remedy, of course, is Purgatory, and what our Faith asks us to believe about Purgatory can be expressed very succinctly:

The souls of the just which, in the moment of death, are burdened with venial sins or temporal punishment due to sins, enter Purgatory. (*De Fide*)

These twenty-four words are as remarkable for what they do not say as they are for what they proclaim. They say nothing about where Purgatory is, how long a soul spends there, or what the soul is apt to find once it arrives. Theologians have provided reflections on all these questions, and we shall explore them shortly. For the moment, however, let us consider only the Church's belief that God offers a means by which those who are not altogether prepared for His Kingdom will be purified so they can worthily enter heaven.

Purgatory is not a second chance; it is the final step in a life-long journey that leads to God. Our faith assures us God provides a grace appropriate for each step of this journey, and Purgatory is the fulfillment of Jesus' promise that he will be present at the last step with the same love that greeted the first.

This is the will of the one who sent me, that I should not lose anything of what he gave me, but that I should raise it up on the last day. (Jn 6:39)

Purgatory, like the Mass, proclaims the promise and power of Christ's preserving, uplifting love. And like the Eucharist, it invites us to identify ourselves in the spiritual drama that St. Paul reminds us we share with Christ.

Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life. (Rm 6:3-4)

Purgatory has been an article of our faith from our earliest days. In the Second Book of Maccabees, Judas and his followers arrange to bury their dead comrades, "and they

turned to prayer, beseeching that the sin which had been committed might be wholly blotted out... Therefore he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin." (2 Mac 12:39)

Many of the Protestant Reformers did not believe the Books of Maccabees to have been inspired, so the Church has often turned elsewhere to identify its Scriptural belief in Purgatory. St. John records Jesus' saying, "He that lives and believes in me shall not die forever." (Jn 11:26) But the Book of Revelation observes no one may claim to this glory without being cleansed, because nothing unclean can enter God's Kingdom. Thus, the Church's theologians have taught that some form of purification must be accessible after death.

One of these theologians, St. Gregory the Great, points us to Jesus' words, "...he that shall speak against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world nor in the world to come." (Mt. 12:32) Gregory remarks

As for certain lesser faults, we must believe that before the Final Judgment there is a purifying fire. He who is truth says that whoever utters blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will be pardoned neither in this age nor in the age to come. From this sentence we understand that certain offenses can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come.

We might cite other Scriptural passages to strengthen our belief in Purgatory, (e.g., 1 Cor 3:12), but what may be far more interesting – and valuable for our spiritual life – is to consider the nature of the gift God has given us in Purgatory.

To begin, we might ask why Purgatory can be considered a "gift" when the Church's great theologians and mystics all describe the pains of Purgatory as far more severe than any we endure in this life? The answer is quite simple: the pains of Purgatory are not harmful, like the pains that afflict us on earth; the pains of Purgatory are intended for our good, to remind us how very much of God's love we have sacrificed by sin, and how much of the joy of heaven we would be sharing had we not so often chosen lesser goods.

St. Augustine taught, "The fire of Purgatory will be more severe than any pain that can be felt, seen, or conceived in this world...." This is because, in Purgatory, we will realize that one consequence of our sinful life on earth is the delay of our vision of God. St. Thomas Aquinas observed, "The more sensitive a thing is, the greater the pain." Thus, without our bodies to distract us from our longing for God, and insulate us from this pain, we shall have nothing to stand between us and the pain of the delay of the union we look forward to.

Some will ask how long we must spend in Purgatory? To answer this question we must remember that once we "shuffle off this mortal coil" we are no longer dealing with earthly clocks. Heaven and Hell are eternal realities; both are absolute, and once a soul is consigned to one of those

states, nothing can alter that soul's condition. Purgatory, on the other hand, is a "temporary" state, and one soul endures more or less of Purgatory's pains than another.

What determines the experience is the condition of the soul at the moment of death. If one has persistently committed a venial sin, she or he may expect to endure a more intense (i.e., longer) punishment in Purgatory. Part of the experience of Purgatory is to teach the soul the folly of sin, and to restore the soul to the state of perfect spiritual health that will qualify it to enter Heaven. Some souls are in greater need of these healing benefits than others; these, understandably must undergo a more intense experience of Purgatory.

Over the centuries, the Church faithful have sought to determine the nature of the pain the soul endures in Purgatory. As we have seen, theologians teach the pains are twofold. We have already considered the pain of loss, which is to be deprived (if only temporarily) of the sight of God. But the souls in Purgatory also suffer a pain of sense. And here is where we encounter what has, since the Middle Ages, been described as the "fire" of Purgatory. This punishment has often been compared to the punishment the damned may expect in Hell, so some have suggested that Purgatory is located in that neighborhood. Scripture provides no clue, and the Church's teachers are silent on the subject. The nature of the "fire" in Purgatory is equally elusive.

Nonetheless, similarities between the punishments the souls endure in Purgatory resemble those of Hell because both are punishments the soul must endure after death; both are spiritual punishments; and their pain is far greater than anything we can imagine in this life. There, however, the similarity ends. Unlike those condemned to eternal punishment in Hell, the souls in Purgatory possess faith, hope, and charity. In addition, they may rejoice in the expectation of a reward to assuage their pain, and although they cannot see the God they long for, they do not doubt either His presence or their ultimate salvation.

We actively participate in the expectant joy experienced by the souls in Purgatory when we offer prayers for them. *Lumen Gentium*, a document of the Second Vatican Council, reminds us:

In full consciousness of this communion of the whole Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, the Church in its pilgrim members...[honors] with great respect the memory of the dead...[and] that they may be loosed from their sins she offers her suffrages for them. (LG, 50)

This echoes the belief of St. John Chrysostom, who preached:

Let us help and commemorate them. If Job's sons were purified by their father's sacrifice, why should we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them.

In the 19th Century Cardinal Manning preached a series of sermons on the gifts of the Holy Spirit. When he preached on Piety – which one modern writer has called the love that gives "religion a heart" – he observed that Purgatory is a place where – no matter how active individuals may have been in life – souls are forced to be passive.

(Continued on page 4)

What Does the Blessed Virgin say about Purgatory?

By Fr. Reginald Martin, O.P.

Now that we have considered the nature of Purgatory, we might ask what our Blessed Mother would say about praying for those who languish there, longing for eternal union with Her Son, Our Lord and Savior. Let us begin by considering that some of the feelings we are familiar with (e.g., our delight in food and sex) will not accompany us beyond the grave, because our appreciation of them depends upon the body. However, other feelings, such as love, joy, and sorrow will be a part of our life after death, and faith teaches these will be touched by our prayers and suffrages offered for those who have died. ("Suffrages" are intercessory prayers, indulgences, alms and other pious works, especially the sacrifice of the Mass.)

These actions avail the faithful departed in two ways. Our good works lay claim to God's justice; our prayers appeal to God's mercy. In the Creed, we profess our faith in the Communion of Saints, a lasting relation between members of the Church that does not end with death. This communal life is based on God's love and can be nourished even after death.

We must remember, however, that, after death, this communal life is a state enjoyed by souls who have merited a place in Purgatory. Our prayers and good deeds have no effect on souls that have been admitted to Heaven – or upon those condemned to Hell. St. Augustine describes the purpose of suffrages very succinctly when he observes, "Suffrages profit those who are not very good or not very bad."

Our Blessed Mother, the model for the Church on earth, is no less our model in her care for the Church's members after their death. Our *Catechism* quotes the Byzantine liturgy for the August 15 feast of Mary's Dormition ("falling asleep"):

...in your Dormition you did not leave the world, O Mother of God, but were joined to the source of Life. You conceived the living God and, by your prayers, will deliver our souls from death. (CCC, 966)

This trust is echoed in the Vatican Council's document, *Lumen Gentium*, which declares:

Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside her saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation....Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked by the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix. (LG, 62)

We need look no further than the Rosary to embrace a suffrage extolled for centuries by the Church's saints and devotional writers. To pray the Rosary expresses our faith in Mary's never-failing help in this life, and trust in her assistance as we approach the life we hope to share with her in God's kingdom. ■

Purgatory... (Continued from page 3)

They can do nothing...for themselves: they have no longer any sacraments; they do not even pray for themselves. They are so conformed to the will of God, that they suffer there in submission and silence... Therefore it is our duty to help them ... by our prayers, our penances, our mortifications, our alms, by the Holy Sacrifice of the Altar...If no one remembers them now, you, at least, if you have in your hearts the gift of piety, will pray for them.

A motto on old sundials reads, "*omnes vulnerant, ultima necat.*" It refers to the hours of our life and means, "They all wound, the last one kills." St. Augustine taught that we who live naturally shrink from death because it is so foreign, so terrifying, and so sad. Our belief in Purgatory ought to be very consoling, because it reminds us that while death may be the last moment in our life, it provides the most intimate connection with Christ. It also offers us a unique opportunity to reach out to one another, by praying for a lessening of the pains of those who have died, and by begging that God will soon grant the souls of our beloved dead the union with God they have so earnestly longed for. ■

Carved in Stone (Continued from page 1)

head and drapes down over her shoulders. Some locks of her hair show, but not much. It speaks of the attire of a Jewish maiden of her era and of her own modesty. There is nothing ostentatious or immodest about her dress, nothing that would lead our focus elsewhere; instead, we remain transfixed by her image, and are left wondering what she is contemplating.

Her feet appear to be completely covered, which seems unusual. Perhaps the holy ground on which she stands necessitates the covering of her feet.

Her head is tilted downward with her eyes closed. She is in deep contemplation, fixed in prayer. It speaks of her humility, as her own words come to mind, "He has looked upon his servant in her lowliness." (Luke 1:48a) But the Blessed Virgin also says, "From this day all generations will call me blessed: the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name." (Luke 1:48b-49) In these words she is prophetic as she speaks of the role that she will play in salvation history.

Her hands are perfectly synced together, including palms and fingertips, as if to say that she is wholly united to God; nothing within her is out of place. There is no discord within, no sin, nor even concupiscence. In Mary, as a daughter of Israel, in the perfect union of her hands, we can see a symmetry between the Old Testament with its Ark of the Covenant and the New Testament with its living Ark of the Covenant.

As we back off from the statue and take note of its surroundings, we observe two Dominican crosses flanked in stone on either side of her, like guardians, reminding us of the motto of the Dominican Order, *Veritas* (Truth), perhaps instructing us that Mary has never veered outside of the truth.

To the right of the statue, the mysteries of the Holy Rosary are etched in stained-glass. As the sun shines

through the windows, they tell the story of our redemption reflected in the images of the key events in the lives of Jesus Christ and his Mother, and how she played a role in salvation history through God's own design. Thus, they too shed light upon the image of the Blessed Virgin carved in stone. As we enter into the mysteries of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, we could follow the lead of Mary who shows us how to navigate the sometimes troubled waters of our own world.

Finally, if we return to the statue, as we look beneath it, we discover a small door with hinges, almost hidden in the shadows. Herein lies the secret; here we uncover the mystery. If we reflect back to when St. Dominic's Church was first built, we suddenly realize the nature of this door—it is the door to a tabernacle which houses the Holy Eucharist. Even to this day, this tabernacle is used to keep the Blessed Sacrament.

Now we understand the nature of Mary's prayer, of her contemplation, of her posture; her eyes are closed as she adores the Lord. Mary calls us not to look upon her, but upon her Son who is in our midst (in this chapel) in his Real Presence. Everything about her is oriented toward him as she beholds the Holy Eucharist, and when Mass is celebrated in this chapel, he will be made present on the altar just in front of her image.

It's not too often that we reflect upon the life of Mary after Jesus' resurrection, while she was still on earth. She who became the Ark of the Covenant, who gave birth to God's own Son, also once attended Mass with the neophyte Church and received the Body and Blood of Jesus. She lived her last days on earth wholly united to the Lord in body, mind and soul. One could say that her spiritual house was built on solid rock. Now she stands before us in adoration proclaiming the greatness of the Lord as he is present to us in the Holy Eucharist.

There is another motto of the Dominican Order, *contemplare et contemplata aliis tradere* (to contemplate and hand on to others the fruits of contemplation). As we look upon this image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, what comes to mind is that not only has she given us the fruits of her contemplation as a faithful daughter of Israel, she has also given us Jesus Christ the Fruit of her womb.

If there is no title to this image, perhaps it should be Mary, Mother of the Eucharist. ■

Note from the Director

Dear faithful supporters of the Rosary Center & Confraternity, we are grateful for your support. We could not fulfill our Mission if not for our benefactors. After decades of constant use, the Rosary Center, the home of the Rosary Confraternity, is greatly in need of renovation. Please consider making a special gift to help make badly needed repairs, and to refurbish the offices, chapel and kitchen. Thank you for your generosity!
Fr. Joseph Sergott, O.P.