

Last Sunday after Pentecost, 26th November 2017

I wonder if Catholics are still familiar with the “*De profundis* (Out of the depths)”, “Out of the depths I have cried to thee, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice”, and so forth. The prayer as such consists of Psalm 129 in its entirety, plus a few versicles and responses, concluding with the collect, “O God, the Creator and Redeemer of all the faithful”, and is very much a traditional prayer for the souls of the departed.

On this last Sunday of November (and indeed of the Church’s year), we are very conscious of the need to pray for the Holy Souls in Purgatory. In fact, both the Gradual and Offertory chants for today’s Mass contain the opening of the prayer and psalm, *De profundis*: “*De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine: Domine exaudi orationem meam*”. But why this psalm for praying for the dead? Well, if we look at the words, they are placed on the lips of someone in obvious distress, someone in “the depths”, the “*profundis*”. The souls in Purgatory, although assured of salvation, undergo some sort of purifying punishment, and they cry to the Lord “out of the depths”, seeming to exclaim: “If thou, O Lord, wilt mark iniquities, Lord, who shall stand it? Because with thee there is merciful forgiveness”. We pray for them on their behalf, putting ourselves in their place and their words on our lips; while trusting, like them, in the Lord’s power to save and mercifully forgive their iniquities.

Associating oneself with the faithful departed in Purgatory, and even imagining what it would be like to be there is a theme which notably marks that poem by Blessed John Henry Newman, *The Dream of Gerontius*, made rightly famous by its being set to music by Edward Elgar (I really felt that I had to mention him at some point). Something that sticks in my memory from hearing a performance of Elgar’s work is that moment when Gerontius, after his death and particular judgment, sings to the angel:

Take me away, (Take me away), and in the lowest deep
There let me be,
And there in hope the lone night-watches keep,
Told out for me
There, motionless and happy in my pain
Lone, not forlorn.

The *Dream of Gerontius* is perhaps to culture and the arts what the “*De profundis*” is to popular devotion: a well-known and authentic expression of the Catholic belief in Purgatory. Both the poem (with or without its musical setting) and the psalm are indeed marvellous vehicles for promoting and explaining this belief to a wider audience: a belief that has sadly often been misunderstood. Purgatory is not some sort of ‘mini-hell’, as it were: no, it is place (though not precisely a ‘place’ but rather a ‘state’) in which there is; yes, some degree of punishment for sin, yet also that hope and assurance of salvation, already mentioned, which surely outweighs any punishment that might be involved. It is probably worth quoting here from the present Catechism:

All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned (CCC 1030-1031).

To go back to the "*De profundis*". In it we hear the psalmist singing: "let Israel [that is, the faithful] hope in the Lord. Because with the Lord there is mercy, and with him plentiful redemption. And he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities". For the faithful departed to be freed from their "iniquities", they have indeed to be purified, purged, of these iniquities: since it is only the "clean of heart" who (as our Lord tells us in the Beatitudes) "shall see God" (Mt 5:8); seeing God in the beatific vision of heaven. And yet the souls in Purgatory are not entirely left on their own: in the 'communion of the saints' we are united with them, as we are with the saints in heaven. Our bond of friendship with them should urge us on to assist them with our prayers, with our "pious supplications", as the collect which concludes the "*De profundis*" puts it: "grant to the souls of thy servants departed the remission of all their sins, that through pious supplications they may obtain that pardon which they have always desired [...] Amen".