

Pastor's Corner: 'THE DREAM OF GERONTIUS'

For Catholics, November is a special month during which we recall those who have gone before us. The first day of November, *All Saints' Day*, is when we celebrate all the saints, known and unknown to us, who now share in the glory of heaven. The second day of November, *All Souls' Day*, is when we remember all who have gone before us, who have the hope of heaven, but are not quite there yet. Where are these souls who have not risen to heaven and have not fallen into hell? They find themselves in a place the Church calls purgatory. In this day of instant gratification, we want to believe all souls go immediately to heaven. The Church has other ideas. The teaching of purgatory can be a hard pill for some Catholics to swallow. Why would a loving God keep one out of heaven and confined for a time in purgatory? Well, perhaps for the same reason a loving mother keeps her child out of the house and on the porch until he wipes off his muddy boots. Being held on the porch does not call into question the mother's love, but rather the state of the boy's boots; being held in purgatory does not call into question God's love, but rather the state of one's soul. No sin of any sort: rancor, envy, or jealousy is allowed to hitch a ride into heaven on the soul of the faithful departed. The place of cleansing for the departed soul is purgatory; it is where all sin is purged away. Purgatory expresses in human terms the incredible love and care our God shows us. It could be said it is God's way of providing an *overtime* for those stifled by sin during the *regulation* time of this world.



John Henry Newman

For those who doubt purgatory is an expression of God's love, I recommend the poem, "The Dream of Gerontius" by 19th century convert, Cardinal John Henry Newman. In the poem, we find Gerontius (Greek for "old man") dreaming of his death. Gerontius is guided by his guardian angel to the Judgment Seat of God, where he is so awestruck by the light emanating from it, that he darts toward it. But unready to enter into such brilliant light, the soul of Gerontius is "scorched and shriveled; and now it lies passive and still before the awful Throne." While this is a purifying encounter for the soul, it becomes so weakened by the experience that a time of healing is needed in the recuperative waters of purgatory. The poem ends with the guardian angel laying Gerontius gently into the penal waters and whispering to Gerontius' soul:

"Sinking deep, deeper, into the dim distance.
Angels, to whom the willing task is given,
Shall tend, and nurse, and lull thee, as thou liest;
And Masses on the earth and prayers in heaven,
Shall aid thee at the Throne of the most Highest.

Farewell, but not forever! Brother dear,
Be brave and patient on thy bed of sorrow;
Swiftly shall pass thy night of trial here,
And I will come and wake thee on the morrow

In this month of November, let us join the angels and saints praying for our loved ones who have passed and yet wait to enter into the splendid light of heaven.

Fr. Brian A. Mee