

31st SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

St. Mark 12:28-34

A Polish Prince, who had been exiled from his native country, bought a beautiful castle in France. Unfortunately, he had lost the faith of his childhood, and now spent his life protesting the Church and was writing a book against God and the existence of life after death.

Walking one evening in his garden, he found a poor woman crying bitterly. He asked her what had made her so sad.

"Your Highness," she replied, "I am the wife of Jean Marie, your former servant who died two days ago. He was a good husband to me, and faithful servant to you. His sickness was long and I spent all our money on the doctors, and now I have nothing left to have Masses said for his soul."

The Prince, touched by her grief, said a few kind words, and though he did not believe in heaven or hell, gave her some gold coins to have Masses said for her husband.

Some time after, it was again evening, and the Prince was in his study working at his book. He heard a loud knock at the door, and without looking up, called out to the visitor to come in.

The door slowly opened and a man entered and stood facing the Prince's desk. On looking up, to the Prince's amazement, he saw Jean Marie, his dead servant, looking at him with a smile.

"Your Highness," he said, "I come to thank you for the Masses you enabled my wife to have said for my soul. Thanks to the saving Blood of Christ which was offered for me, I am now going to heaven, but God has allowed me to come and thank you for your generous donations." But before he left he added: "Prince, there is a God, a life after death, a heaven and a hell." Having said

these words he disappeared.¹

Today, while many people believe in a life after death, they no longer believe in God or hell. To most they think that when they or someone they love dies they go to heaven, however they may have lived their life on earth, for good or for bad. They no longer believe that we are judged at the time of our death. They no longer believe that hell is a real possibility for us all. They no longer believe that we must be purified in Purgatory before we can reach the glory of heaven.

Purgatory is part of our faith. Purgatory is a place of purification where those who have died with venial sins on their soul and who have not done enough penance to make up for their mortal sins. It is a place where souls know more fully than ever God's immense love and perfect justice and so the souls suffer because they realise—maybe for the first time—how they failed in their life on earth to not live a holier life, to not seek the grace of God. And so the soul suffers for failing to love God more perfectly yet desires more fervently to live with God.

When I was living in Rome I visited a museum dedicated to Purgatory. In the museum were books, and clothes, and furniture which had been burned with the hand prints of the souls in Purgatory. On an apron once worn by a woman I could see her hand—the palm and each finger—burned into the fabric. Her soul and the souls of others were allowed to leave the mark of their hand as sign to us who remain on earth that Purgatory is real and the Holy Souls in Purgatory need our prayers so that they may be taken to heaven. On earth, you and I can pray for ourselves, receive the Sacraments, and perform acts of penance to purify our souls. But once we have died we no longer have this ability and so rely on those who remain alive to pray for us. This is why we have Masses said for those who have died, for the Holy Souls in Purgatory, so

¹ O'Sullivan, P. *Read Me or Rue It* (1936) on EWTN (<https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/read-me-or-rue-it-12622>)

that their souls may be washed clean by the Blood of Christ.

Let us never forget the Holy Souls in Purgatory but pray for them, have Masses offered for them, offer our good works for them. And let us never forget that hell, just as much as heaven, is real, and if we do not want to live with God on earth then why would we want to live with Him for ever in heaven.