

FATHER MARK SCHULTE
HOMILY
TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (C)
September 28, 2025

“Heaven Yes – Purgatory Maybe – Hell No”

My brothers and sisters, in today's gospel Jesus tells the story about the rich man and Lazarus, and in doing so Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees. The Pharisees believed in an afterlife, a life after death as well as a belief in angels, whereas the Sadducees did not believe in either. And so, the story that Jesus describes is geared toward the Pharisees (Lk 16:19-31).

He said there was a rich man who lived an opulent lifestyle. Near his doorway lay a beggar named Lazarus, who the rich man paid little attention to. They both died. The poor man Lazarus went to the bosom of Abraham, where he was finally being comforted. But the rich man was buried and went to a place of torment in the afterlife.

The Church teaches that when a person dies, he is judged immediately and sent by God to one of three possible destinations, heaven, hell, or purgatory. The story that Jesus tells us about the rich man and Lazarus gives us an opportunity to reflect upon the life after death destiny of a soul.

Upon first glance one would think that the poor man, Lazarus, went to the bosom of Abraham who is in heaven. But did he? No human soul was in heaven prior to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Heaven was closed off by the sin of Adam (Gen 3:24) (Rom 5:17-21) (CCC 332). And since Jesus is still alive and telling the story, Lazarus, and Abraham as well as all the other Holy Patriarchs of the Old Testament are not in heaven yet. They are in a place of waiting for Jesus to die, descend into hell or Sheol (as we hear in the Creed), give them the news of His resurrection, and then lead them into heaven. So, Lazarus and Abraham are not in heaven yet (CCC 631-637).

Others think that the rich man, because he is being tormented in a place of flames is now in hell. But is he? Jesus describes a conversation that takes place between Abraham and the now dead rich man. The contents of this conversation gives us some clues. The rich man is concerned about the spiritual welfare of his brothers who are still living. Souls in hell are consumed with rage and hate and do not love or care about the welfare of anyone, even family members. Souls in hell are in complete isolation and do not communicate with anyone outside of hell.

Abraham calls the rich man “my child” a term of endearment. Abraham would not refer to anyone in hell as “my child”. And a soul in hell would not call Abraham “Father Abraham”, which is also a term of endearment. The rich man is asking for “pity” from Abraham. A soul in hell would not ask for pity and cannot receive pity. The rich man was able to see Abraham and call out to him. Once again, a soul in hell cannot see much less communicate with souls outside of hell. The souls of the damned are in a permanent eternal state of torment and hatred for other souls and especially hatred of God.

However sinful the rich man may have been, even with his apparent disregard for someone suffering from poverty, the details that Jesus describes do not seem to indicate

that the rich man is in hell. In great torment yes, but probably not in hell. Jesus affirms the existence of hell in other places, in the gospel but He has never indicated who is in hell specifically, other than the devil and evil spirits (Mt 10:28, 25:30-46).

Hell is indeed an evil place of much suffering. Souls who have died in a persistent, unrepentant state of mortal sin, and have refused God's mercy, in so doing choose to go to hell. The existence of hell is a dogma of the faith (CCC 1033-1037, 1861).

So where then is the soul of the rich man. Based upon the information Jesus has given in this passage, he is probably in purgatory. Purgatory is a place of purification of the soul after death, prior to entry into heaven. Purgatory is a temporary place. Souls in purgatory will eventually be released into heaven. Whereas hell is permanent, eternal. Once in hell no soul leaves. And souls in purgatory are sometimes permitted by God to communicate with the living.

Purgatory is a place of suffering in varying degrees. Saints have described different levels of suffering in purgatory with the worst suffering being much like hell itself. The level of suffering in purgatory is dependent upon the state of the soul after death. If there are many unrepentant venial sins that have not been atoned for in this life, the length of time in purgatory is much longer and the cleansing suffering more intense. The worst suffering is separation from God, who the soul longs to be with. Purgatory is a merciful gift from God. If a soul ends up in purgatory, he or she will eventually be with God in heaven (CCC 1030-1032).

Nothing can be done for souls that are in hell, and only God knows for sure who is in hell. But much can be done for the poor souls in purgatory. Their suffering and length of time in purgatory can be greatly mitigated by the prayers of the living, especially the offering of Holy Mass for poor souls in purgatory.

The Christian should live his life as best he can with God's grace such that when he dies, he will go straight to heaven. But it is a great comfort to know that should we be assigned to purgatory first, we are assured of a place in heaven with the Holy Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And we will see our family and friends who are waiting for us in heaven (CCC 1023-1029).

There is a saying that if you shoot for the stars, you might land on the moon. But if you shoot for the moon, it is very possible that you will land back on earth.

In a similar way our spiritual goal should be eternity in heaven immediately after our death. If God does not send us straight to heaven we will certainly land in purgatory and then eventually go to heaven. But, if all we do is strive for purgatory through a mediocre spirituality, we could end up in hell. So, shoot for the stars in your spiritual life.

Ultimately we put our trust in God and then rely on His mercy. We can repeat the words of the blind man, Bartimaeus: "Jesus, son of David have mercy on me" (Mk 10:47-48).

NOTE: CCC = Catechism of the Catholic Church