

I get that Purgatory exists. But why?

Great question. Most of the time Catholics talk about Purgatory, it is when we are trying to defend the doctrine to other Christians. But many people might not understand the necessity of Purgatory. I think this is because we don't quite get the goal of the spiritual life...or the goal of life, for that matter.

The goal of life is God Himself. And Purgatory makes complete sense once one grasps two more concepts. First, free will and grace. God initiates and we cooperate. This exchange might be termed "grace" and "free will". God is always the one who moves first; He always invites us. We are free to either say no to that invitation or to say yes...which is to cooperate. This exchange is always "organic". That is to say, it is never imposed on us; God never forces us to change. We are always free.

The second concept is love. More to the point: true love. Loving God for His own sake (not for what He gives or can do for us).

The thing is, many of us come to Jesus because we want to avoid punishment, or because we are desperate and need God's help, or because God has given us some kind of gift (a blessed life, a family, physical or mental ability). This is why many people imagine Heaven to be the place where they get everything they've ever wanted. Because, if God is the Giver, then to be with God is basically to go and live with Daddy Warbucks, right? Nope. God is the giver of all good things, but the goal is Him. The goal is to finally reach the maturity where we love the Giver more than His gifts. The gifts merely help us get to know and trust the Giver.

What do we do when the gifts are gone? What do we do when all of those things about God that console us disappear? This is the test of love. With husband and wife, the real "test of love" happens organically as well.

Consider how "organic" a romantic relationship seems. At first, there is something that attracts. Based on this good attraction, a person enters into relationship; they get to know the other person. Then, as this deepens, they love "how they make me feel". They learn who the person is and that they can trust them (or that they can't trust them). Based on this, there is a chance to make a decision: will I commit my life to this person or not? If a man and woman get married, they then enter into a new purification of their love. They have the chance to choose to love the other even when they don't "feel like it". They have the choice to love the other (or to not love the other) even when they don't get anything out of it. And there comes the moment (more likely "moments") when they would rather leave than stay. When staying seems pointless; when they are getting nothing out of all of their efforts and trust for the other person.

This moment is crucial. If a person leaves at this point, then they forfeit true love. Love is only true when it chooses the other person for their own sake; not because of their beauty or their charm or how they make me feel. But when it

seems like the only reason to stay is because I made a promise or because the other person is a person worth loving.

All of this is an analogy for our relationship with God. We are initially attracted to God because of some blessing (or because of fear, everyone is different). Based off of this, we begin to enter relationship with God. We learn that we can trust Him. And then, as the relationship progresses (according to His grace), there are the ups and downs. The times when the blessings are felt and the times when God's presence is utterly silent and unperceivable. There are almost always a series of moments when God seems absent. This has been called the "dark night". Essentially, when all the blessings are gone, what will I cling to? The question: is God worth loving for His own sake? More personally, will I love the Giver even if there aren't any gifts? Will I choose Daddy Warbucks just because he is himself, even if he has nothing to give me?

This journey of becoming a true lover must happen in this life. If it doesn't, but a person has still chosen God (even if for a selfish motive), their love must be purified before they enter into God's presence. This process of learning to love cannot be forced, remember? It is God's initiative and our response. The process of learning to love is much the same in Purgatory as it is on earth. If a person were forced into Heaven and they weren't ready (they didn't yet love God for His own sake), would Heaven be Heaven for them? If they had placed their hope in getting their puppy back or in being thin or healthy or famous or seeing their family, they would be missing the entire point of puppies and health and family. Those things are God's gifts. God is the one who is worthy of your heart. And really, He is the only one worthy of your heart. Getting your heart ready to truly love is the purpose of this life...and Purgatory.