

“TESTED BY FIRE—MORE PRECIOUS THAN GOLD” OUR BOND OF SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

I confess that I am not a great vacationer. I tend (surprise, surprise) to seek to plan out the day with various activities and am not inclined to change plans on the spur of the moment. But several years ago, while visiting **Nova Scotia**, I did just that. What began with an intriguing sign advertising a “Glass-blowing Demonstration” quickly turned a planned five-minute pit stop into a 40-minute class on making glass. It was like nothing I had quite seen before and it was obvious that this skill takes, not months, but years to learn. As I reflected, the connection of that process with our own process of spiritual purification was impossible to ignore. Saint Paul used the imagery of a purifying fire, a process that would have been familiar to people of his time. In its document *Lumen Gentium* #51, Vatican Council II speaks of a “vital fellowship with our brethren who are in heavenly glory or who having died are still being purified” and accepts with great devotion the perennial teaching of the Church.

Glass-blowing is an amazing process, one I have really only seen perhaps twice in my life. Thankfully, the glassblowers knew what they were doing, and those who invested the time to watch the process in its entirety were rewarded with a magnificent work of art that, sadly, we all take for granted. The furnace needs to be kept **above 1000°F** and the glass is held inside a crucible. It makes its way to a long iron rod called the **punty** where it gathers some molten glass on one end. The artist manipulates this glass and it is simply mesmerizing to watch. I had no idea it was this complicated. I did not have the heart to leave before the demo was over. Not only would it have been rude, I would have been much less informed about how it all takes shape. Some pieces are so large, as well as complex in shape, that the process really requires multiple people to carry out effectively. The process is complex, it requires time, it requires patience, and above all, it cannot be rushed. Wearing special gloves made of Kevlar, the artist picks up the scorching hot piece and transfers it to an oven for cooling over a period of many hours. There is simply no way to speed up the process.

This process requires perseverance and even some dexterity, but most of all, it is the antithesis of our “Google” age. It requires time. To me, it is the **perfect metaphor** for the Communion of Saints, our **spiritual bond of friendship** that transcends bodily death and the ages. While many people seek to receive an indulgence for the benefit of their own spiritual life, it is also possible to apply the indulgence to the dead by way of suffrage, that is, in the manner of a prayer. To refresh the key points from the 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.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, # 1030)

We must see purgatory as a process of preparation for an individual, who having been freed from all temporal punishment due to sin whose guilt has been forgiven, is now preparing to enter into God’s loving presence for eternity. With the exception of those souls deemed to have lived extraordinary lives of faith and who have been raised to the glory of the altar through the canonization process, we cannot know with certitude if our deceased loved ones are in heaven or purgatory. But that is not the point, is it? It is a logical inference that God who created us to live in community will also create us to be with Him for eternity in community. Recall, **Judas Maccabeus** deemed it worthwhile to pray for his fallen soldiers as a form of expiation: “(they) turned to prayer, beseeching that the sin which had been committed might be wholly blotted out.” (2 Macc. 12:42) We may have confidence that God will apply indulgences to the dead in some way, though the precise manner and degree of application remains a mystery of our faith. Though I’d like to offer more clarity, sometimes we must embrace the mystery.

Our belief in the **Communion of Saints** assures us that there is a vital link between those on earth, in heaven, and those deceased faithful “on the way to heaven.” We Catholics rightly believe that our prayers and good works are efficacious. Good works that flow from our faith help to restore the good order damaged through our sins. This is at the core of the theology of indulgences. Applying spiritual gifts to the deceased gives voice to our belief that the bonds that unite us in life do not end with bodily death. Good works have been offered to God for the salvation of sinners since the earliest days of the Church. The Fathers of the Church were

convinced that the entire Catholic Church as a body united to Christ its head, was bringing about satisfaction for the sins of her members.

Vatican II reminds us that “the authentic cult of the saints consists not so much in the multiplying of external acts, but rather in the greater intensity of our love, whereby, for our own greater good and that of the whole Church, we seek from the saints ‘example in their way of life, fellowship in their communion, and aid by their intercession.’” (Lumen Gentium #51) The words of **Tertullian** (ca. 200 A.D.) provide for appropriate closure: “The body cannot rejoice when one of its members suffers, but the whole body must needs suffer with it and help to cure it. The Church is in both one and the other; the Church however, is Christ.” (*On Penance, 10, 5-6*) The Church’s aim is both to assist the faithful in expiating the punishment due to sin and in urging them to perform works of piety, penitence and charity. (Next Week: Catholic Teaching on Burial Practices)

- Following a meeting of the G7 in Milan, and in no small part due to the U.S. Administration’s objection to any inclusion of abortion rights, the diplomatic communique did not include the loaded phrase “sexual and reproductive health.” Recall, **United Nations** agreements on the books explicitly do not include abortion as an international right. This is due to objections by the Holy See (i.e., the Vatican, a permanent observer at the UN) and predominantly Muslim nations. Do not be naïve— is a fierce battle going on, all couched in professional and diplomatic language, but still very real!
- **Venerable Solanus Casey**, OFM Cap. was beatified yesterday in a Mass offered by Cardinal Amato, Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in Detroit, MI. His cause was initiated in 1976. The beloved and simple Franciscan Friar was the porter (the doorman!) at St. Bonaventure’s Friary in Detroit from 1924-45. He hailed from Prescott, WI, just down river from here. He was born in 1870, sought to enter the priesthood, but was dismissed due to his poor grades. So, he joined the Capuchin Franciscans and lived the Gospel simply, without fanfare. He visited with the countless people who dropped by to seek spiritual advice or to pray with this holy man.
- We welcome Brian Luckner and the Choir from the **Cathedral of Saint Joseph the Workman** into our midst at today’s 10:00 a.m. Mass. I so enjoyed going to La Crosse last Sunday, and we hope to extend the same hospitality to our visitors today.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector