



Sovereign Order of Saint John of Jerusalem ©
* *Knights of Malta* *

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Chancellor's Update

Purgatory

“We are commanded not only to *do good* but to *be good*. Our obligation is to become good, to grow in goodness. Whatever we are or have is the raw material for this growth in goodness - our body and soul, our will, heart and understanding, our character, our potentialities, our strength and weakness, our personality, our relations with others, our belongings, our environment. As the intention passes into action, so must the action, in turn, pass into an attitude of the mind until every separate action grows from this attitude. This mental attitude has to become the inner form of the human being, molding his whole character, so that moral obligations acquire the grace and ease of the spontaneous, natural action. What is demanded is the final fusion which makes the good man into the perfect man - perfect as "the Father in Heaven is perfect." The material furnished us to work on is, however, worse than formless. It is resistant, rebellious, in large part corrupt and chaotic. The intention must penetrate it through and through. As direction it must introduce order; as goodness it must leaven the whole; as purpose it must find expression in everything. If we examine ourselves with this in mind, we perceive what a thin upper surface the intention has affected; what lies beneath is like soil as yet untouched by the plow. It is hard work to become good. What labor to become a saint! A saint is one whose whole being has been stirred, in whom the light of God has penetrated the darkness, layer by layer, and transformed it all. How is it with us? How shall we appear before God?

“And we have not yet reached the end. In its full meaning, being good is an endless process. We believe we are under God's providence. Each day brings us the tasks that God has assigned to us. Toil, work, effort, self-conquest, sacrifice, heavy unceasing demands are made upon us, and we know how rarely we fulfill them adequately. To be really good would mean perfectly to achieve what every hour demands, so that life might rise to the full accomplishment of what God has asked of us. What has been left undone can never be recalled, for each hour comes but once, and the next brings its own demands. What is to be done about these gaps and omissions in a life that is so fleeting?

“What, also, of the actual wrong-doing? We can gain insight into it and try to do better; but what is done is done and continues to exist. What will be done about that?”

“His (God's) work of love is not to wipe out the earthly deficiencies, but to bring them all under the action of truth, and to consume them, one by one, down to the smallest, in their entirety, down to their roots.

“But how is this to be done once time is past and man can do no more? - He can do one more thing, says the Church - he can suffer. His suffering is both the outcome of his condition and its cure.

“When such a man enters into God's light, he sees himself as God sees him. He loves God's holiness, and hates himself because he contravenes it. He feels his condition fully. What he has been, what he may have vaguely guessed about himself, he now experiences clearly. He experiences himself as the thing he is in God's sight. **The pain of this realization is inconceivable, but it is effective.** In this pain man's disposition is purified and expanded until it reaches its full measure of good will. It penetrates into the vital forces of man's being with a cleansing fire, until he attains the state of readiness for communion with God. It acts upon man's being until he not only desires the good but has made goodness itself his own form. In this process of becoming, dying and living again are bound up in an astounding, terrifying mystery. Death upon death has to be endured so that new life may arise.

“The process extends even to the gaps, the omissions. These are not reconstituted as if by a magical trick. In the surrender of the creature to the re-creating will of God, however, his negligences are repaired. Otherwise, there would always remain the dregs of resignation and despair. The pain that was refused must be accepted; the truth that has escaped cognition must be learned; the imperfect love must be made full and perfect. The past is not substituted for, since there is no substitute for a unique event. We are given some hints as to the mystery of man's restoration, most of all in our understanding of contrition. True contrition is not merely sorrow over our failures, for that would but emphasize the gaps. It is not merely the resolve to do better next time, which leaves the past as it was. **The contrite man returns to the past act and enters into it until he knows and judges it with his reason, his will, his intention, and does so in the presence of the living, holy God.** Contrition is more than facing the past act. The past act is frankly defined and taken up into the beginning of the new creation, the creation wrought by the power of the Holy Ghost, and the act is by Him formed anew... And there is no remedy except to reconstruct the wrong action. The person must bring the whole action back into consciousness, face what he did amiss, make amends where possible, and so restore his life to order...

“When he is judged, the man sees himself entirely in the holy light of God, sees the circumstances, the causes, the accidental and the essential, sees the outside and the inside, sees to the very bottom, what was known to him or what was hidden from him because it lay too deep, or had been forgotten, suppressed, or slighted. And he sees it all without a shadow of protection. Pride, vanity, evasion, indifference are gone. He is exposed, sensitive, collected. **He is on the side of truth in opposition to himself.** He is prepared to face his own life with its undone duties, its loose ends, its muddle. In a mystery of suffering the heart adjusts itself to contrition and delivers itself up to the power of the holy Creator-Spirit. Opportunities misused are re-bestowed, wrong turns retraced and taken rightly. **Evil, by being lived again, is made over into good.** The improvement is not an external matter. The whole nature, plunged into re-creating grace, through the mystery of effectual repentance, comes out new-made.

“This is what the Church calls Purgatory.” (All quotes taken from Romano Guardini [The Last Things](#), New York, New York, 1954, pp 41 – 48)

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