

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford at Evensong & Benediction
All Souls' Day
November 2, 2014

November is for bonfires. Not in the city of course. We would all choke to death. But for a significant portion of my years my family lived happily in the country. One of the pleasures of country living was raking dead leaves into a huge pile and, on a crisp late afternoon and evening, starting a bonfire. I still miss the experience: the smoky smell, the flickering light in the faces of the children, the warmth of the fire as the night grew colder. Hot cider was in the offing. What was not to like?

There is something theologically satisfying about bonfires in November. The bonfire was part of our tidying up after the summer's life had led to fall colors and then to dead leaves. With the dying there was a tidying up to do. In nature's realm the bonfire was the sacrament of the dying year. And I associated Hallowe'en, All Saints' Day, and All Souls' Day with bonfires.

We think of our beloved dead on their birthdays and the days they went to God. But Holy Church bids us remember them in November, when, at least in the Northern Hemisphere, even in city life, we are tidying up our yards after the year's natural life. The Church teaches that souls no longer connected to physical life still require a work of tidying up. And St Paul says this effort to clean things up in souls can only be done "as by fire."

In one of His parables of the vine Our Lord Jesus promised that "every branch that beareth fruit He will purge, that it may bring forth more fruit." Purging sounds dreadful. But it is a merciful pronouncement. No one ever flunks out of Purgatory! We call this particular part of the Kingdom of God the Church Expectant. Why? Souls in Purgatory *expect* to see God, and all in good time. But we also believe Our Lord's declaration that there is a process of purging which the vast majority of our lives need. The only exception we know for sure was one woman named Mary! For the fact of the matter is that sin has become part of us. And it is not simply a matter of having it scrubbed off with soap and water so that we can see God.

How Almighty God purifies a soul from its sinful attachments is not completely known to us. Both the Old and New Testaments resort to the analogy of refining precious metals by fire. St Peter assures us that "your faith is far more precious than gold which is refined by fire." (1 Peter 1:7) St Paul says the work of purging will

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be “as by fire.” To go further than that is unwarranted in Holy Scripture. Whatever happens, be it burning or some celestial equivalent, *it is not us but our sins* which are burned. And yet this separating out of our sins inevitably involves suffering.

So we pray for the dead. And even as we use that term we recognize that “dead” is a misnomer. For God is God of the living, and *all souls live to Him*. We do not know all God is doing for us in this life and the next. We pray in a beloved prayer that He do for departed souls “better things than we can desire or pray for.” And He has told us He desires not the death of a sinner but that he should turn from his sin and be saved. So we believe.

I miss bonfires in November. There is a burning ban in Boston. But the theological affirmation which is the basis of Christian hope does not depend on where you or I happen to live. After this life, for most of us, there is a work of tidying up to be done. That work is now being done for our departed loved ones and friends. The very fact of its being done is a provision and indication of God’s great love and mercy. And in His good time our loved ones will no longer need Purgatory, and we will no longer need sacraments, and we with them will see our God as He is. The Divine beauty will pass all our previous understanding. And the sight of it will have been worth everything.