

*Fr. Perozich comments —*

*Everything that ever happens in a human life is stored in the memory. Often it is recalled not out of will, rather out of emotion or reaction to some event.*

*For me, I often recall a song associated with a pleasant event.*

*At other times, the pain of a betrayal by another or of my own failure will rise up and cause a reaction of anger or other uncomfortable emotion.*

*This pain steals the joy of the present in my life, and makes me live once again the pain of the past.*

*The only way I know to heal is to forgive both others who might have hurt me and to forgive myself for what I may have done to others which hurt them. Certainly asking for forgiveness when it is possible is also important. Demanding it from someone else as a condition of forgiveness is futile.*

*Without forgiveness, I would allow the trespasser to “live rent free in my head” as is popularly said these days, sucking out the joy of the present moment with the recall from the past.*

*All will stay as a part of my life experience. How I choose to deal with the experience will determine my joy in the present moment or continued pain in desires for righteousness when past betrayals resurface into the present moment.*

*If Jesus on the cross forgave those who crucified Him, and if He forgives me, then my forgiveness of others and of myself, as many times as the events resurface in my consciousness, is the way to bring peace, not only to myself but to those who have wronged me, whether they are still in this life or have passed over to judgment and who may not yet enjoy the fullness of the vision of God.*

*My New Year resolution: forgiveness.*

## THE AFTERLIFE

# **What 'A Christmas Carol' taught me about Purgatory**

*'It may ... be possible that forgiving those who have wounded us  
— even after they have died — frees them as well'*



By  
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December 27, 2025

There is a doctrine in Catholicism that not all souls are prepared for heaven at death, and that some must undergo a spiritual purification in a state or location the Catholic Church calls "Purgatory."

There are a number of biblical references that undergird the notion of Purgatory, including in the Old Testament. In **2 Maccabees 12:46**, it says, **"It is therefore a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins."** Souls in the eternal torment of damnation (complete and total separation from God) could not benefit from prayers, nor would souls already in the fullness of the Beatific Vision need them; thus, the concept of a place of purification was discerned and handed down over thousands of years.

As a child, the idea of Purgatory seemed incomprehensible (and I admit that even today, I'm uncertain how I feel about it). But Charles Dickens' classic Christmas story, "A Christmas Carol," shed light on it that has held sway for me ever since.

When I was young, one of our local TV stations played the 1951 film version of the story, "Scrooge," starring Alastair Sim (the best, in my opinion!), every Christmas Eve after the 10 p.m. news. Because we were supposed to be in bed by that time, I would sneak downstairs every Christmas Eve and watch it all by myself in a darkened room. Over time, my brothers and sisters sneaked

down with me, and eventually my parents discovered our little secret, whereupon it became an annual family tradition.

The scene to which I am referring takes place when the ghost of Ebenezer Scrooge's deceased former business partner, Jacob Marley, appears to Scrooge. Marley is there to warn Scrooge of the condition of his soul, and to inform him that three spirits will be visiting Scrooge that very night, to try to sway him to change his ways. Just before he leaves, Marley takes Scrooge to the window and shows him a homeless woman and child, sitting exposed on the sidewalk on that bitterly cold winter evening. The two are surrounded by spirits who are wailing loudly and pointlessly throwing invisible "money" at the woman and her babe.

Scrooge asks, "Why do they lament?" Marley explains, "They seek to interfere for good in human matters and have lost their power forever." Marley then disappears from Scrooge's sitting room and appears on the street below, crying piteously along with the other spirits. The din grows so loud that Scrooge covers his ears and slams shut the window sash. Inside Scrooge's poorly lit and dusty London townhouse, it is silent once more.

I still remember the night that the powerful meaning of this scene hit me like a thunderbolt.

Every human being makes mistakes in life: things we ought to have done that we did not do, and things we ought not to have done that we did do. But **some errors are graver than others, and the consequences of the worst decisions can outlive us.** This, it seems to me, is the meaning of the biblical verse that the "sins of the father will be visited on the sons until the third or fourth generation"; not that God punishes later generations, but that they are negatively affected by decisions and actions taken by their forebears.

In the 21st century, we better understand than did those of Dickens' day how this dynamic plays out psychologically. Adults who were victims of sexual or physical abuse or neglect are more likely to abuse their own children. Those who grow up in the

chaos of drug or alcohol abuse often have emotional scars that impede their ability to form healthy relationships with friends, colleagues, spouses or children. Infidelity and divorce can wreak havoc on children's sense of self-worth and stability.

Thus, we come back to the suffering of the selfish spirits in "A Christmas Carol," and the idea of Purgatory.

Notwithstanding the imperfections of every human being, not everyone makes the kinds of destructive decisions that have generational consequences. But some of us definitely do. And **it is difficult to imagine how anyone in that situation could be blissfully happy in the afterlife, while simultaneously having perfect understanding that those who live on are immersed in misery created by our decisions, our mistakes, our selfishness and shortcomings.** Viewed in that light, **Purgatory could be a state of imperfect joy – until such time as the negative consequences of our earthly errors are no more.**

To be clear, this isn't about denying Christ's redemption or God's forgiveness. To accept Christ as one's Lord and Savior is to be redeemed and forgiven – by God. But **we must nevertheless still accept responsibility for the earthly consequences of our choices, and – again – it seems counterintuitive that one could exist in a state of perfect joy while those we have hurt still suffer.**

All of which points to the importance of forgiveness.

Christ spoke often about the need for forgiveness. The apostle Peter asks Jesus, "How many times should we forgive those who sin against us? Seven times?" Christ replies, "Not seven times, but seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:21-22). As the number seven had the connotation of divine perfection, completeness or eternity for Hebrews in Christ's day, the implication is clear: **We must forgive as often as we are wronged.**

**To truly forgive those who have hurt us frees us and can empower us to avoid becoming the next generation of walking wounded who further inflict pain on others.** If my view of Purgatory has any merit at all, it may therefore also be possible that forgiving those who have wounded us – even after they have died – frees them as well.

Merry Christmas one and all. May we find the grace to forgive those who have hurt us, and may God bless us, everyone.