

Can you skip purgatory and go straight to heaven?



Question: Much of Catholic teaching and literature focuses on nearly every one of us going to purgatory directly after death instead of heaven. Clearly, some of us live more devout lives than others, but does anyone actually go directly to heaven?

– **Name withheld**, North Hills, California

Answer: We ought to begin by recalling the promise made to us by the Lord Jesus: “So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). This is not a threat; it is a promise. When the Lord’s cross and grace have had their full effect, we will not just have a human perfection but a Godly perfection. St. Paul says, “[We are] confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:6). He also writes, “He will keep you firm to the end, irreproachable on the day of our Lord Jesus [Christ]” (1 Cor 1:8).

It is hard to imagine that most of us, even very saintly people, die in a state of utter and godly perfection. Along with venial, habitual sins, many of us carry hurts, sorrows and pains that are not fully healed. Scripture says of the dead that God “will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain” (Rv 21:4). We can’t bring sorrows of any kind to heaven; it wouldn’t be heaven. These things need to be purged.

Hence, while it is possible to go straight to heaven, it seems more plausible that most of us will need a bit of finishing work and some tears wiped from our eyes. St. Paul speaks of a kind of fiery judgment that we will all pass through on the

day of judgment. The fire will both test and purify our works (cf. 1 Cor 3:13). God is very holy and perfect, and possessed of a joy beyond telling. Hence, even our great saints may have needed something to bring them to this utter and godly perfection we can barely imagine.

God alone knows and judges every soul. And, while we know that the canonized saints are surely in heaven now, it does not mean they needed no purification after death. God alone knows this.

Reviling the devil

Question: At Michaelmas, I have seen the practice of celebrating with a devil piñata promoted in various outlets. The idea is that it is a fun way to share the story of St. Michael with children and profess our Catholic faith in the victory over evil. I am hesitant to have children create representations of the devil or to “battle” with them in this way. Is there anything inherently wrong with this custom?

– **Paul Belmonte**, via email

Answer: I would recommend against this tradition. Scripture teaches us not to revile even the demons who hate and contend with us: “Yet the archangel Michael, when he argued with the devil in a dispute over the body of Moses, did not venture to pronounce a reviling judgment upon him but said, ‘May the Lord rebuke you!’” (Jude 1:9) For, when we do this, we sink to their level. Exorcists are taught to exercise care to stick to the words of the rite of exorcism and not adopt their own sarcasm, ridicule or revilement. To do this is to become like the demons. Jesus sternly cast out demons, but there is no evidence he ever personally reviled them.

And it may be surprising, but it is true that demons are God’s creatures, though fallen, and tainted with sin and hatred. We can hate what they do and the harm they cause. We can refute

their errors and reject any incursions they seek to make. But we ought not hate them, for in doing so we become like them.

The tradition to which you refer did not likely emerge in hatred. More likely it is intended as a playful reminder that Satan and other demons have been defeated and their power is limited. Nevertheless, striking an effigy of our opponents also signifies a kind of personal animus against them that is unfitting for Christians.

Further, as you mention, it is not usually a good idea to dabble with images of demons or to invoke their wrath. While Satan's power is limited, he is no one to provoke or engage even in playful battle. It is best to remain vigilant to his incursions and tactics, but largely to ignore him and focus on Jesus and the saints.

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