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## The Most Abandoned Soul

by Anthony Esolen

Which among you, asks Jesus, having one lost sheep from a hundred, will not leave the ninety-nine and seek for the one in the wilderness?

That saying has always struck me as strange, as convicting us of hardheartedness. For the fact is, many of us would leave that hundredth sheep to die. I confess that I would. It's only a sheep, after all. Better tend to the ninety-nine, and take some much-needed rest. These things will happen. The man has divorced his wife for another woman, and now, having abandoned her in turn, is drinking his life away in a bar. Well, we may pray for him from a distance, if we remember. But the rest of his family is all right, the ninety-nine of them, and we can take comfort in that. One sheep is only one, and is much like another anyhow.

### The souls of purgatory

That is not Jesus' way. Even if there had been but one sinner to redeem, he would have shed his blood for that one, and suffered the agony to the end. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of each world of sin: of each lost sheep in the wilderness. We calculate advantages to ourselves; calculating sheep are we. But there is no calibration in the love that Jesus gives. It is full measure, shaken together and spilling over. It is life, and that in abundance. Sometimes, when the grace of God pierces our self-satisfied hearts, we feel an impulse of that all-forsaking love. The impulse may be slight enough, but it is precious. One night, during a dark time in my life, I was driving home past a

large maximum security prison, ringed with fences and barbed wire. And the thought came to me that there was someone there whom no one outside cared for, whom no one visited, whom the other prisoners shunned and the guards did not like. Whoever he was, I prayed for him then, because the loneliness weighed upon me like a mountain. But the self-satisfaction returns: "Look here, I've managed to round up at least eighty or so, these stupid and shaggy creatures," never considering my own stupidity, my fleece tangled with filth and dank with the scent of the wolves from whose jaws I was snatched, and whose presence I hardly suspected. Then it might behoove us to remember the souls who have been saved, who are aware of the pain and loss that might have swallowed them up for ever, and who are assisted by our prayers: the souls in purgatory.

### Prayer for the Holy Souls

Here, then, is a beautiful prayer for those members of the Church Suffering:

*O Lord God almighty, I pray thee by the Precious Blood which thy divine Son Jesus shed in the garden, deliver the souls in purgatory, and especially that soul among them all which is most destitute of spiritual aid; and vouchsafe to bring it to thy glory, there to praise and bless thee for ever. Amen.*

The most abandoned soul in purgatory: most forgotten by the living, most alone, most poor in merits, farthest from the sight of God. The prayer reminds us of that terrible hour in the garden of

Gethsemane, when Jesus prayed and sweat drops of blood, while his three chosen friends, Peter, James, and John—even the beloved John—abandoned their Lord and fell asleep. Jesus in his humanity knew no comfort from those friends. He was one with the Father, and the Father’s will was that he should bear upon his shoulders, stretched in agony upon the bitter cross, all the accumulated sins of mankind. An angel was with him, messenger of God; and we may well think of the angel on that first Passover centuries before, who slew the first born of Egypt to set the children of Israel free. This time the victim will be Jesus, Only Begotten Son of the Father: God himself, suffering to unleash the sacraments of love and eternal life.

## One with the most abandoned

When we think of the aloneness of Jesus, it is impossible to say of a fellow sinner, “Well, he has driven everyone away, and now suffers what he deserves.” We are not permitted to speak in that fashion. It may be that in the sinner’s destitution he is drawing close to the heart of Jesus, whose hand even now may be resting upon that lost sheep’s shoulder. Likewise, that least of souls in purgatory enjoys an incomparable gift which we do not yet

enjoy. He, despite his suffering, and also in and through his suffering, is already among the saved, and God’s grace protects him from committing a single sin, while we can hardly endure a day without indulging our pride, or falling back into sloth and cowardice. Sheep indeed.

But to pray for the souls in purgatory is like playing a prelude which begins in darkness and moves always toward light and joy. Consider now this companion to the previous prayer:

*O Lord God almighty, I pray thee by the Precious Blood which thy divine Son Jesus shed in his cruel scourging, deliver the souls in purgatory, and that soul especially among them all which is nearest to its entrance into thy glory: that so it may forthwith begin to praise and bless thee forever. Amen.*

It is a wonderful thing to know that the most abandoned among us, through the blood of Christ, will stand at the doorway to paradise, no less than the greatest of saints will have done before.

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