Dear People Whom God Loves,

**A Thought about Suffering**

**and the Doctrine of Purgatory**

 I believe that the more we are drawn into love by the Infinite Love we call God, the more we will hurt when we see people suffer. In contrast to this, we also have in us an energy that wants people to suffer. The name for this energy is the wish for revenge. I believe this energy is the result of evolutionary survival. Just because we have this energy does not make us bad, but, when we knowingly and willingly choose to act in a way that is meant to hurt people, we not only do damage to them, but we poison our souls.

 I do believe however, that there are times when suffering can be a blessing for us. For example, suppose that we have great wealth, we have been able to buy ourselves out of every difficulty, and we have no compassion for people who struggle to find food. I think of the story of the little boy who when asked by the missionary about what he had had to eat that day, replied that his day to eat was not until tomorrow. Often we don’t really understand something in a deep way until we experience the pain. If we personally experience the suffering of having nothing to eat for an extended period of time, we may be graced with compassion.

 This is just a background for my story about purgatory. How our God works is always a mystery. The words we use to speak about God are always frail. For example, even the words of scripture are limited. The scripture tells us that God is love. That word is, for me, the best word possible; however, the word just points to what God is. The love that is God is something like the love we know and is also not like the love we know. God is infinitely beyond the love we know. Still, knowing that God is love is a wonderful gift.

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 My little story about what will happen after I die, gives me a frail hint of what purgatory is. It is suffering with purpose. The purpose is to give meaning and healing. Because suffering in this case brings healing, compassion, and love, it is good. It hurts, but it makes sense to me and fits with God who is love. Remember, this is a story.

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 Here is my idea of what will happen when I die. I believe that I will meet God and God will say to me: “Welcome home John, I love you, but we do have to have a little talk. I am going to let you see all the people that you have hurt during your 64 years as a priest. You are going to feel the hurt, the confusion and turmoil they felt. The pain that seared them will sear you. You will have to face yourself with total, naked honesty. Your ego is big and you are still as stubborn as you were on earth, but I will be with you and work in you until you get it right. As you are being transformed with compassion and peace, you will meet all those that you have hurt and you will apologize and tell them that you are to blame and that it wasn’t their fault. You will be a part of their healing as you are being healed. You will all be full of love, compassion, and peace. You will all be fully in the reign of God.”

 God’s final words: “You are all healed, loving, happy, and at peace. I am happy too.”

 Smile, God loves you,

 Father Clay

P.S. This story is an example of what I mean when I say that suffering makes sense to me when it has purpose and value.