



PURGATORY

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“If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as through fire.”

- 1 Cor. 3:15

"Let us help and commemorate them. If Job’s sons were purified by their father’s sacrifice [Job 1:5], why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them"

-St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians* 41:5, c. 392 AD

The Often Misunderstood Doctrine

Like devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, belief in purgatory is something that sets Catholics (and Orthodox) apart from Evangelical Protestants. All the Reformers rejected belief in purgatory, and to this day purgatory is a sticking point between Protestants and Catholics. Many Catholics are confused on the issue as well; some Catholics believe that purgatory is no longer a teaching of the Church – others believe purgatory is a “third place” for people too good for hell but too bad for heaven. Both of these are erroneous concepts.

The Word “Purgatory”

The word “purgatory” is not found in the Scriptures but was developed to explain the process of purification that a righteous soul undergoes after death but before entering heaven. The word comes from the Latin, “purgare,” which means to make clean or to purify. The suffix –ory (Latin: *-orium*) indicates a physical place (like the similar words *Dormitory* and *Laboratory* denote physical places), but it is easier to conceive of purgatory as a process rather than as a location. The Church Fathers do not always use the word purgatory to describe the process, but the concept is certainly there. By the time of St. Bernard (c. 1130) the term purgatory had taken on the specific, theological meaning that it has today.

Definition of the Doctrine

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that “all who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. The Church gives the name *Purgatory* to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned” (CCC 1030-1031).

The Church has made three important infallible declarations on purgatory, at the Councils of Lyons (1274), Florence (1439) and Trent (1563). Lyons and Florence taught that “the souls of those who depart this life with true repentance and in the love of God, before they have rendered satisfaction for their trespasses and negligences by the worthy fruits of penance, are purified after death with punishments of purification.” The Council of Trent, in the Twenty-Fifth session, declared: "Whereas the Catholic Church, instructed by the Holy Ghost, has from the Sacred Scriptures and the ancient tradition of the Fathers taught in Councils and very recently in this Ecumenical synod that there is a purgatory, and that the souls therein are helped by the suffrages of the faithful, but principally by the acceptable Sacrifice of the Altar; the Holy Synod enjoins on the Bishops that they diligently endeavor to have the sound doctrine of the Fathers in Councils regarding purgatory everywhere taught and preached, held and believed by the faithful."

Man, in his current state, is not able to be in God’s presence, for nothing that is in any way impure can dwell with God (see Rev. 21:17). Those who die in a state of mortal sin cannot be with God and thus are deprived of His presence in the next life (damnation). On the other hand, those who die in a state of grace go to heaven. Now, some who die in a state of grace are so perfectly conformed to God’s image that they go immediately to heaven when they die. Many people, however, though they die in a state of friendship with God, nevertheless still retain minor attachments to earthly things and have many unconfessed little sins that have taken their toll on the soul. These disordered attachments and their effects on the soul are what are purified through the process of purgatory.

It would be good to go into the difference between a mortal and venial sin.¹ A *mortal sin* is a grave sin (usually a sin against one of the Ten Commandments) that deprives one of sanctifying grace. Anyone who dies in a state of unrepented mortal sin goes to immediately to hell after death. *Venial sin*² refers to smaller sins that are more of habit than of intent; venial sins do not deprive one of sanctifying grace, but they do weaken the soul’s resistance to temptation, and seldom is there a mortal sin that does not start as a venial sin. One can die with unconfessed venial sin and still go to heaven ultimately.

We also must distinguish between the sin itself and the consequences of sin. All sin has consequences. It is not difficult to see the physical consequences of sin (broken families, anger, loss of faith, etc.), but there are also spiritual consequences that affect the soul. Mortal sin carries an eternal consequence: deprivation of the beatific vision. Purgatory has no bearing on the eternal consequences of sin: whoever dies in mortal sin is lost, period.

Purgatory does come into play when discussing the temporal effects of sin, however. It is these temporal effects of sin on the soul that purgatory removes. Just because one has been forgiven of a sin does not mean that the temporal consequences of the sin do not still remain. One can, through prayers and works of charity done in the grace of God, purify one’s soul on earth of the temporal effects of sin. If this is not sufficiently done by the time of death, then it must be done in purgatory.

¹ There will be more on this in the class on the Sacrament of Penance.

² “Venial”, from Latin *venialis* "pardonable," from *venia* "forgiveness, indulgence, pardon,"

Furthermore, it has always been Catholic teaching that the prayers and sacrifices of those on earth can help those in purgatory. The Council of Florence taught: “For the alleviation of the punishments these are profitable to the poor souls, namely: The Sacrifice of the Mass, prayers and alms and other works of piety, which the faithful are accustomed to perform for one another according to the institution of the Church.” The Church can aid those in purgatory because of the reality of the communion of the saints, which we will discuss in a later class.

What Purgatory is *Not*

At the beginning of this lesson, we briefly mentioned some faulty views of purgatory. It is therefore important at this point to clarify what the Church does *not* teach concerning purgatory. Misconceptions about purgatory are unfortunately very common among Protestants, uneducated Catholics and the world at large.

Purgatory is not a second chance at salvation after death. At the moment of death, every soul is judged (Heb. 9:27) to either heaven or hell based on whether or not they died in a state of grace. There is no second chance after death. Purgatory is for people who are going to heaven but require prior purification before being able to enjoy the beatific vision of God.

Purgatory is not a place for those too bad for heaven but too good for hell. There is no “third option” for departed souls; everyone winds up eventually in heaven or hell; purgatory is just a detour for those destined for heaven. Also, we must keep in mind that nobody is really good enough to deserve heaven on their own merits; nobody has a *right* to heaven on their own, but only through participation in the grace of God.

Purgatory is not a place where people “work off their sins.” Two points to remember: first, souls in purgatory are completely passive and cannot “do” anything; the ability to merit or to “work off” anything is lost when one passes into death. Secondly, even if a person could be active in purgatory, it is not their “working” off their sins that purifies them, but rather the love of God. The love of God, because of its intensity and purity, is able to refine the soul and prepare it for heavenly glory. Purgatory is not something that we in any way do ourselves; it is God’s mercy towards us.

The Catholic Church no longer teaches the reality of purgatory. This is certainly not the case. It was reaffirmed in and after Vatican II and is explicitly taught in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 1030-1032, 1471-1479).

Scriptural Evidence

The doctrine of purgatory, while not explicitly taught in Scripture, is certainly taught implicitly. Here are some Scriptural texts that imply the doctrine of purgatory:

- 2 Macc. 12:42-46: Here the Jews prayed for their fallen on whom had been found certain superstitious trinkets to false idols, that their sins might be forgiven them. Then they sent twelve thousand drachmas of silver to Jerusalem for sacrifice to be offered in expiation. The sacred writer approves of this course: “It is therefore a

holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from their sins.”

- Matt. 12:32: “Whoever speaks a word against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world nor in the world to come.” Our Lord’s words here indicate the possibility of sin being remitted in the world to come. St. Gregory the Great comment: “In this sentence it is given to understand that many sins can be remitted in this world, but also many in the world to come.”
- Matt. 5:26: Christ says, “Amen I say to thee, you shall not get out of there [prison] until you have paid the last penny.” Here He threatens, in the form of a parable, the person who does not fulfill the commandment of Christian brotherly love, with just punishment from the divine Judge. The Fathers understand “last penny” as the petty transgressions which must be expiated there by the postponement of the beatific vision.
- I Cor. 3:12: St. Paul teaches, “If any man’s work burn, he shall suffer loss: yet he himself shall be saved, yet as through fire.” Paul is here speaking of a temporary punishment of the Day of General Judgment. The Latin fathers take the passage to mean a transient purificatory punishment in the other world.
- Rev. 21:27: “But nothing unclean shall enter it [the heavenly city].” By this verse we see that only souls that have been completely purified (i.e., possess “nothing unclean”) can enter heaven; but we also know that the justice of God forbids souls that are united in love with Him to be cast into hell. Therefore, an intermediate state is assumed, whose purpose is final purification.

Historical Belief

- ❖ Belief in purgatory came from the Old Testament Jewish practice of praying for the souls of the departed. To this day, Orthodox Jews recite a prayer for the departed called the *Kaddish* for eleven months after a loved one’s death and every year on the anniversary of their passing.
- ❖ Christians continued this practice in praying for their dead, and numerous prayers for the dead are inscribed in the early Roman catacombs. These prayers were especially connected with the Sacrifice of the Mass, which is the most efficacious prayer one can offer. Tertullian, writing around 216, bears witness to this when he says, “A woman, after the death of her husband . . . prays for his soul and asks that he may, while waiting, find rest; and that he may share in the first resurrection. And each year, on the anniversary of his death, she offers the sacrifice” (*Monogamy* 10:1–2]).
- ❖ St. Cyprian teaches that penitents who die before receiving the sacrament of penance must perform the remainder of any atonement demanded in the other world, while martyrdom counts as full atonement (Ep. 55).

- ❖ St. Augustine says, “Some suffer temporal punishments only in this life, others only after death, still others both in life and after death” (De civ. Dei XXI, 13).
- ❖ In the Middle Ages, many charitable works were done with the view of praying for the souls of loved ones in purgatory. Indulgences, pilgrimages, monastic foundations and penance were all performed for the aid of the Holy Souls.
- ❖ The Church continues to encourage the faithful to pray and offer Masses for the Holy Souls, though many of the older forms of piety towards the dead have unfortunately vanished with the Middle Ages. The popular abbreviation “RIP” on a tombstone is short for the Latin, “Requiescam in Pacem”, which means “Rest in peace” and is itself a shorter form of the traditional Catholic prayer, “May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.”

Indulgences

One issue that often comes up in connection with purgatory is the Catholic doctrine of indulgences. It was the abuse of indulgences that led Martin Luther to initiate his break with the Roman Catholic Church in the year 1517, and to this day the doctrine of indulgences is one of the least understood doctrines of the faith. The Catechism defines and an indulgence as:

“[A] remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven, which the faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains under certain prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which, as the minister of the redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints...an indulgence is partial or plenary according as it removes either part or all of the temporal punishment due to sin. The faithful can gain indulgences for themselves or apply them to the dead.”

-CCC 1471

As the Church is the body established by Christ to mediate salvation to men through the sacraments and through the preaching of the Gospel, the Church is the rightful custodian of the treasury of grace given it by Christ and including the merits of the saints and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

An indulgence (from the Latin *indulgentiam* meaning concession or pardon) was originally a declaration by a bishop or pope that a certain penitent was permitted to forego an assigned penance in favor of a milder one. For example, suppose for a certain sin the typical penance assigned was a pilgrimage to Rome. Now, if the penitent was unable to complete the penance for whatever reason (perhaps finances or poor health), the bishop could grant him an *indulgentiam* that commuted the penance to something easier, perhaps going on pilgrimage to a local parish church or saying a fixed amount of prayers. The indulgence was a pardon from a strict penance in favor of a milder one.

There are several conditions set by the Church that one must meet to gain an indulgence:

- 1) A sacramental Confession
- 2) Reception of Holy Communion
- 3) Pray for the intentions of the Pope.
- 4) Be free from attachment to sin, even venial sin.
- 5) Perform the prescribed work exactly.

Since most of these criteria are very subjective, one can never be certain whether the indulgence has actually been gained or not. These five criteria must be met to the best of the penitent's ability. A complete list of all indulgenced prayers and works can be found in the 1968 *Enchiridion of Indulgences* promulgated by the Sacred Apostolic Penitentiary.

Common Questions on Purgatory & Indulgences

If Jesus died for my sins, why do I still need to spend time in purgatory? Doesn't His blood wash away all my sins?

It is entirely correct to say that Christ accomplished all of our salvation for us on the cross. But that does not settle the question of how this redemption is applied to us. Scripture reveals that it is applied to us over the course of time through, among other things, prayer, good works, patient bearing of suffering, participation in the sacraments; all of these are means to our sanctification, through which the Christian is made holy. Sanctification involves suffering (Rom. 5:3–5), and purgatory is the final stage of sanctification that some of us need to undergo before we enter heaven. Purgatory is the final phase of Christ's application of the purifying redemption that he accomplished for us by his death on the cross.

There is no contradiction between Christ's redeeming us on the cross and the process by which we are sanctified. Our suffering in sanctification does not take away from the cross. Rather, the cross produces our sanctification, which results in our suffering, because "[f]or the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Heb. 12:11).

Can indulgences be applied to the temporal effects of future sins not yet committed?

Absolutely not. This would be like having a license to commit future sin, which some people mistakenly think indulgences are. Indulgences can only be applied to the temporal punishments of sins whose guilt has *already been forgiven*. Still, one should never rely exclusively on indulgences for the remission of the effects of sin since we can never be entirely certain that we have met the criteria for gaining them.

Why were indulgences formerly measured in terms of years and days?

In the old days, an indulgenced prayer or work might have been labeled "40 days" or "3 years" or with some other kind of temporal measurement. Many mistakenly believe that these times

referred to time off in purgatory gained by the indulgence. *This is false.* The time reference is to compare the indulgence to a similar work under the old penitential system in use prior to the 11th century. For example, suppose a pilgrimage to Rome has the time frame “seven months” attached to it. This means that a pilgrimage to Rome is approximately equivalent to seven months of penance under the old penitential system. A prayer that has a “30 days” indulgence is equal to 30 days of penance under the old system.

However, as time progressed and people forgot about the disciplines of the old system, the Church decided it was no longer clear to rank indulgences in this way. Now an indulgence is either plenary (if it remits all guilt) or partial (if it remits some).

Do the souls in purgatory know they are going to heaven?

Yes. In fact, this is their primary joy. They have a certain and fixed knowledge that they will enjoy the bliss of heaven; it is this certain knowledge which enables them to willingly assent to God’s purification. The souls in purgatory want to be purified because they know it will expedite their entry into heaven.

Is purgatory painful?

While nobody knows exactly what the purifications of purgatory consist of, Catholic tradition has always viewed them as painful. It is certain that the souls in purgatory suffer greatly from their temporary exclusion from God’s presence. As for pain of sense, there has never been an official statement on it; declarations speak only of purifying punishments. However, a constant Catholic tradition has viewed the pains of purgatory as similar to the pains of hell (i.e., separation from God) and more intense than any pain on this earth. Nevertheless, the joy that they have knowing that they will eventually enjoy the beatific vision renders their sufferings bearable and desirable.

How long does purgatory last?

Since purgatory takes place after death and outside the realms of time, it is pointless to speak of temporal duration. However, because some are in need of greater purification than others, it is definitely the case that some spend a “longer time” there. Perhaps it would be better to think of the duration in terms of intensity rather than temporal time; some souls are just in need of a spit-shine, others in need of a full-blown reconstruction from the bottom up.

Weren’t purgatory and indulgences just invented so the Church could make money?

When a Catholic requests a memorial Mass for the dead—that is, a Mass said for the benefit of someone in purgatory—it is customary to give the parish priest a stipend, on the principles that the laborer is worth his hire (Luke 10:7) and that those who preside at the altar share the altar’s offerings (1 Cor. 9:13–14). In the United States, a stipend is commonly around five dollars; but the indigent do not have to pay anything. A few people, of course, freely offer more. This money goes to the parish priest, and priests are only allowed to receive one such stipend per day. No one

gets rich on five dollars a day, and certainly not the Church, which does not receive the money anyway. If it was a get-rich-quick scheme, it was the worst one ever invented.

But look at what happens on a Sunday. There are often hundreds of people at Mass. In a crowded parish, there may be thousands. Many families and individuals deposit five dollars or more into the collection basket; others deposit less. A few give much more. A parish might have four or five or six Masses on a Sunday. The total from the Sunday collections far surpasses the paltry amount received from the memorial Masses for the dead.

The Means of Avoiding Purgatory

The doctrine of purgatory is a great comfort to the faithful and demonstrates God's love for us, as well as His patient care that we are made absolutely perfect before we enter His presence. However, we ought not to use the doctrine of purgatory as an excuse to sin in hopes that we will just "pay it back later"; it is not a divine credit card.

Some things to remember:

- The pains of purgatory are greater than any pains on earth.
- You cannot help yourself in purgatory; the time you spend there depends on God's mercy.
- You cannot be certain that anybody will remember to pray or offer Masses for you after death.
- Aim for heaven; if you miss, you'll go to purgatory. But what happens if you only aim for purgatory and miss that?

Means to avoid purgatory (i.e., ways to remit temporal punishments of sin in this life)

- Frequent confession and communion.
- Diligent performance of all assigned penances.
- Earnest performance of indulgenced works.
- Offering up of sufferings and trials.
- Bearing wrongs patiently for the love of God.
- Study of Scripture and Sacred Doctrine
- Prayer and penance for reparation of sins against Christ
- Good works and prayer on behalf of the dead.

For Further Reading: 2 Macc. 12:42-46; Matt. 5:26; Matt. 12:32; I Cor. 3:12; Rev. 21:27; Fr. Martin Jugie, *Purgatory and the Means of Avoiding It*; Patrick Madrid, *A Pocket Guide to Purgatory*; Dr. Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, V, 5; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §1030-1032, 1471-1479; Canons of the Council of Trent, sess. XXV; Pope Paul VI, *Indulgentiarum Doctrina* (1967); *Enchiridion of Indulgences* (1968)