

The Doctrine of Purgatory

by Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J. From *The Catholic Faith*, pp. 5 – 11. Ignatius Press, San Francisco, CA, Nov/Dec 2001.

God created man that he might possess his Creator forever in the beatific vision. Those who die in the state of enmity toward God are deprived of this happiness. Between these extremes are people who are neither estranged from God nor wholly dedicated to Him when they die. What will be their lot after death?

The response of faith is that nothing defiled can enter heaven (Rev 21:27), and therefore anyone less than perfect must first be cleansed before he can be admitted to the vision of God.

If this doctrine of Catholicism is less strenuously opposed than the one on hell, over the centuries it has nevertheless become something of a symbol of Rome. Historically, the Reformation was occasioned by a dispute over indulgences, with stress on indulgences for the souls in purgatory. Since that time, the existence of an intermediate state between earth and heaven has remained a stumbling block to reunion and its final acceptance by the Protestant churches would mean a reversal of four hundred years of divergence.

Too often the eschatology of the Catholic Church is considered her own private domain, when actually the whole of Eastern Orthodoxy subscribes (substantially) to Catholic teaching on the Last Things, including the doctrine on purgatory.

Those in Purgatory

When we speak of the souls of the just in purgatory we are referring to those that leave the body in the state of sanctifying grace and are therefore destined by right to enter heaven. Their particular judgment was favorable, although conditional: provided they are first cleansed to appear before God. The condition is always fulfilled.

The poor souls in purgatory still have the stains of sin within them. This means two things. First, it means that the souls have not yet paid the temporal penalty due, either for venial sins, or for mortal sins whose guilt was forgiven before death. It may also mean the venial sins themselves, which were not forgiven either as to guilt or punishment before death. It is not certain whether the guilt of venial sins is strictly speaking remitted after death, and if so, how the remission takes place.

Whereas before death a soul can cleanse itself by freely choosing penance for its sins, a soul in purgatory cannot so choose and therefore gains no merit.

The Catholic practice of offering prayers and sacrifices for the dead is known as offering suffrages. These suffrages are offered both by the individuals and by the Church. They are intended to obtain for the poor soul, either partial or total remission of punishment still to be endured.

Who are the faithful that can pray effectively for the poor souls? They are primarily all baptized Christians but may be anyone in a state of grace. At least the state of grace is probably necessary to gain indulgences for the dead.

The angels and saints in heaven can also help these souls in purgatory and obtain a mitigation of their pains. When they do so, the process is not by way of merit or of satisfaction, but only through petition. A study of the Church's official prayers reveals that saints and the angelic spirits are invoked for the Church Suffering (i.e., those in purgatory), but always to intercede and never otherwise.

Contrary Views

Since patristic times there have been many who have denied the existence of purgatory and have claimed it is useless to pray for the dead. Arius, a fourth-century priest of Alexandria who claimed that Christ is not God, was a prime example. In the Middle Ages, the Albigenses, Waldenses, and Hussites all denied the existence of purgatory. Generally, the denial by these different groups of heretics was tied in with some theoretical position on grace, or merit, or the Church's authority. But until the Reformation, there was no major reaction to Catholic doctrine on the existence of purgatory.

With the advent of the Reformers, every major Protestant tradition took issue with Roman Catholicism to disclaim a state of purification between death and celestial glory.

John Calvin set the theological groundwork for the disclaimer, which he correctly recognized to be a part of the Protestant idea that salvation comes from grace alone in such a way that it involves no human cooperation:

We should exclaim with all our might, that purgatory is a pernicious fiction of Satan, that it makes void the cross of Christ, that it intolerably insults the Divine Mercy, and weakens and overturns our faith. For what is their purgatory, but a satisfaction for sins paid after death by the souls of the deceased? Thus the notion of satisfaction being overthrown, purgatory itself is immediately subverted from its very foundation.

It has been fully proved that the blood of Christ is the only satisfaction, expiation, and purgation for the sins of the faithful. What, then, is the necessary conclusion but that purgation is nothing but a horrible blasphemy against Christ? I pass by the sacrilegious pretenses with which it is daily defended, the offences, which it produces in religion, and the other innumerable evils, which we see to have come from such a source of impiety. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III, 5.

Calvin's strictures have been crystallized in the numerous Reformed Confessions of Faith.

An unexpected development in contemporary Episcopalianism is the verbal admission of Article XXII of the *Thirty-nine Articles* alongside a belief in prayers for the dead sanctioned by the *American Book of Common Prayer*. Among others, one oration reads: "O God, whose mercies cannot be numbered, accept our prayers on behalf of the soul of thy servant, and grant him (her) an entrance into the land of light and joy, in the fellowship of thy saints" (p. 34). Masses for the faithful departed are also offered in the High Church Episcopalianism.

Biblical Elements of Purgatory

The definition of the Catholic Church on the existence of purgatory is derived from Sacred Scripture and the Sacred Tradition, which Christ promised would enable the Church to interpret Scripture without error. In particular, the Church relied on the writings of the early Fathers in defining this article of faith.

The classic text in the Old Testament bearing witness to the belief of the Jewish people in the existence of a state of purgation where souls are cleansed before entering heaven is found in the Book of Maccabees. Judas Maccabeus (died 161 BC) was a leader of the Jews in opposition to Syrian dominance, and Hellenizing tendencies among his people. He resisted a Syrian army and renewed religious life by rededicating the temple; the feast of Hanukkah celebrates this event.

In context, Judas had just completed a successful battle against the Edomites and was directing the work of gathering up the bodies of the Jews who had fallen in battle. As the bodies were picked up, it was found that every one of the deceased had, under his shirt, amulets of the idols of Jamnia, which the Law forbade the Jews to wear. Judas and his men concluded that this was a divine judgment against the fallen, who died because they had committed this sin of disobedience. The sacred writer describes what happened next:

So they all blessed the ways of the Lord, the righteous Judge, who reveals the things that are hidden and fell to supplication, begging that the sin that had been committed should be wholly blotted out.

And the noble Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves from sin, after having seen with their own eyes what had happened because of the sin of those who had fallen. He also took a collection, amounting to two thousand silver drachmas, each man contributing, and sent it to Jerusalem, to provide a sin offering, acting very finely and properly in taking account of the resurrection. For if he had not expected that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead; or if it was through reward destined for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be set free from their sin (2 Mac 12:42-46).

The Maccabean text shows that Judas, and the Jewish priests and people believed that those who died in peace could be helped by prayers and sacrifices offered by the living. Luther denied the canonicity of seven books of the Old Testament (the Deuterocanonical books), including the two books of Maccabees. But even if the text were not inspired, as an authentic witness to Jewish history in pre-Christian times it testifies to the common belief in a state of purgation after death and in the ability to help the faithful

departed by prayers of intercession on their behalf. Jewish tradition since the time of Christ supports this view.

The Fathers on Purgatory

During the first four centuries of the Christian era, the existence of purgatory was commonly taught in the Church, as seen in its universal practice of offering prayers and sacrifices for the dead.

The most ancient liturgies illustrate the custom in such prayers as the following: "Let us pray for our brothers who have fallen asleep in Christ, that the God of the highest charity towards men, who has summoned the soul of the deceased, may forgive him all his sin and, rendered well-disposed and friendly towards him, may call him to the assembly of the living" (*Apostolic Constitutions*, 8:41).

Equally ancient are the inscriptions found in the catacombs, which provide numerous examples of how the faithful offered prayers for their departed relatives and friends. Thus we read from engravings going back to the second century such invocations as: "Would that God might refresh your spirit . . . Ursula, may you be received by Christ . . . Victoria, may your spirit be at rest in good . . . Kalemir, may God grant peace to your spirit and that of your sister, Hildare . . . Timothy, may the eternal life be yours in Christ."

Writers before Augustine explicitly teach that souls stained with temporal punishment due to sins are purified after death. St. Cyprian (died 258) taught that penitents who die before the Sacrament of Penance must perform the remainder of any atonement required in the other world, while martyrdom counts as full satisfaction (*Epistola* 55, 20). St. Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386) described the sacred rites of the Liturgy with the comment, "Then we pray also for the dead, our holy fathers, believing that this will be a great help for the souls of those for whom the prayer is offered" (*Catechesis*, 32).

St. Augustine not only presumed the existence of purgatory as a matter of divine faith, but also testified to this belief from the Scriptures. Among other statements, he said, "some believers will pass through a kind of purgatorial fire. In proportion as they loved the goods that perish with more or less devotion, they shall be more or less quickly delivered from the flames." He further declared that the deceased are "benefited by the piety of their living friends, who offer the Sacrifice of the Mediator, or give alms to the Church on their behalf. But these services are of help only to those lives had earned such merit that suffrages of this could assist them. For there is a way of life that is neither so good as to dispense with these services after death, nor so bad that after death they are of not benefit" (*Enchiridion* 69, 110).

Augustine's most beautiful tribute to purgatory occurs in the book of his Confessions, where he describes the death of his mother Monica and recalls her final request, "Lay this body anywhere at all. The care of it must not trouble you. This only I ask of you, that you remember me at the altar of the Lord wherever you are." Augustine complied with his mother's desire and admits that he did not weep "even in those prayers that were poured forth to Thee while the sacrifice of our redemption was offered for her" (*Confessions*, IX, 11).

After the Patristic period, the Church did not significantly develop the doctrine of purgatory for many centuries. Then in the twelfth century, Pope Innocent IV (1243-54), building upon the writings of the Fathers, expounded in detail upon the doctrine. In context, Innocent was concerned with reuniting the Greek Church which had been in schism since the Photian scandal in the ninth century. He appealed to the Greek's belief in a state of purgation as a point of departure from which to bring them into communion with Rome. In a doctrinal letter to the apostolic delegate in Greece, he discussed the common belief:

It is said that the Greeks themselves unhesitatingly believe and maintain that the souls of those who do not perform a penance which they have received, or the souls of those who die free from mortal sins but with even the slightest venial sins, are purified after death and can be helped by the prayers of the Church.

Since the Greeks say that their Doctors have not given them a definite and proper name for the place of such purification, We, following the tradition and authority of the holy Fathers, call that place purgatory; and it is our will that the Greeks use that name in the future. (*DB*, 456).

The Second Council of Lyons, convened in 1274, used the teaching of Pope Innocent IV in its formal declaration on purgatory. This declaration stated:

If those who are truly repentant die in charity before they have done sufficient penance for their sins of omission and commission, their souls are cleansed after death in purgatorial or cleansing punishments . . . The suffrages of the faithful on earth can be of great help in relieving these

punishments, as, for instance, the Sacrifice of the Mass, prayers, almsgiving, and other religious deeds which, in the manner of the Church, the faithful are accustomed to offer for others of the faithful.

Fifteen years after the Decree on Justification, and shortly before its closing sessions, the Council of Trent issued a special Decree on Purgatory, as well as corresponding decrees on sacred images, invocation of the saints and indulgences. It was a summary statement that referred to the previous definition and that cautioned against some of the abuses that gave rise to the Protestant opposition:

The Catholic Church, by the teaching of the Holy Spirit, in accordance with Sacred Scripture and the ancient tradition of the Fathers, has taught in the holy councils, and most recently in this ecumenical council, that there is a purgatory, and that the souls detained there are helped by the prayers of the faithful, and especially by the acceptable Sacrifice of the Altar. (DB 983).

Most recently, the Second Vatican Council in its *Constitution on the Church* renewed the teaching of previous councils on eschatology, including the doctrine of purgatory. "This sacred Council," it declared, "accepts with great devotion this venerable faith of our ancestors regarding this vital fellowship with our brethren who are in heavenly glory or who, having died, are still being purified . . . At the same time, in conformity with our own pastoral interests, we urge all concerned, if any abuses, excesses or defects have crept in here or there, to do what is in their power to remove or correct them, and to restore all things to a fuller praise of Christ and of God" (*Chapter VII, no. 51*).

Meaning of The Doctrine

Although not defined doctrine, it is certain that the essential pain in purgatory is the pain of loss, because the souls are temporarily deprived of the beatific vision.

Their suffering is intense on two counts: (1) the more something is desired, the more painful its absence, and the faithful departed intensely desire to possess God now that they are freed from temporal cares and no longer held down by the spiritual inertia of the body; (2) they clearly see that their deprivation was personally blameworthy and might have been avoided if only they had prayed and done enough penance during life.

However, there is no comparison between this suffering and the pains of hell. The suffering of purgatory is temporary and therefore includes the hope of one day seeing the face of God; it is borne with patience since the souls realize that purification is necessary and they do not wish to have it otherwise; and it is accepted generously, out of love for God and with perfect submission to His will.

Although the souls in purgation perform supernatural acts, they cannot merit because they are no longer in the state of wayfarers, nor can they increase in supernatural charity. By the same token, they cannot make satisfaction, which is the free acceptance of suffering as compensation for injury, accepted by God on account of the dignity of the one satisfying. The sufferings in purgatory are imposed on the departed, without leaving them the option of "free acceptance" such as they had in mortal life. They can only make "satisfaction" for their sins, by patiently suffering the demand of God's justice.

The souls in purgatory can pray, and obtain from God what they pray for (impetrate). The reason is that impetration does not depend on strict justice as in merit, but on divine mercy. It is therefore highly probable that the poor souls can impetrate a relaxation of their own (certainly of other souls') sufferings. But they do not do this directly; only indirectly in obtaining from God the favor that the Church might pray for them and that prayers offered by the faithful might be applied to them.

However, it is not probable but certain that they can pray and obtain on behalf of those living on earth. They are united with the Church Militant by charity in the Communion of Saints. At least two councils approved the custom of invoking the faithful departed. According to the Council of Vienne, they "assist us by their suffrages." And in the words of the Council of Utrecht, "We believe that they pray for us to God." St. Bellarmine wrote at length on the efficacy of invoking the souls in purgatory. The Church has formally approved the practice, as in the decree of Pope Leo XIII granting an indulgence for any prayer in which the intercession of the faithful departed is petitioned (*Acta Sanctae Sedis, 1889-90, p.743*).