

Purgatory

“My son, here may indeed be torment,
but not death.”

--Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*

Prayer before Study

O ineffable Creator, true source of light and wisdom, origin of all things, be pleased to cast a beam of your radiance upon the darkness of my mind.

Take from me the double darkness of sin and ignorance in which I was born. Give me quickness of understanding, a retentive memory, the ability to grasp things correctly and fundamentally, and abundant grace of expression.

Order the beginning, direct the progress and perfect the achievement of my work. You who are true God and true Man and who live and reign forever and ever. Amen.

The Word “Purgatory”

- The word comes from the Latin, “purgare,” which means to make clean or to purify or to purge.
- While we often think of it as a place, it may be easier to conceive of purgatory as a ‘process’ or a ‘state’ 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 (+1153) the term purgatory had taken on the specific, theological meaning that it has today.

Definition of the Doctrine

- “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. ...” (CCC 1030-1031).
- Man, with any stain of sin or attachment to worldliness, is not able to enter 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 (perdition, damnation).

Definition of the Doctrine

- 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 the state of grace and friendship with God, nevertheless still retain attachments to earthly things or have unconfessed 'venial' (lesser) 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.

Why does Purgatory exist?

- Because God is both just and merciful, to an infinite degree at the same time
- Purgatory exists because of two facts: our imperfection on earth and our perfection in heaven
 - At death, most of us are not perfectly sanctified (though we are justified by faith and baptism)
 - But in heaven we *will be* perfectly sanctified
 - Therefore, for many, there must be some additional change, some purification and sanctification, before heaven
 - This is purgatory

Excursus: Mortal and venial sins

- Sins are rightly evaluated according to their gravity
- A *mortal sin* is a serious sin that destroys charity in the heart by a grave violation of God's law. It ruptures one's friendship with God and deprives the soul of the sanctifying grace needed to go to heaven.
- Anyone who dies in a state of unrepented mortal sin goes immediately to hell after death.
- For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must exist:
 - It must be a grave matter
 - It must be committed with full knowledge of its gravity
 - It must be committed freely, with full consent

Excursus: Mortal and venial sins

- The loss of charity – i.e. love of God and neighbor
 - “When the will sets itself upon something that is of its nature incompatible with the charity that orients man towards his ultimate end, then the sin is mortal by its very object...whether it contradicts the love of God, such as blasphemy or perjury, or the love of neighbor, such as homicide or adultery.
 - “But when the sinner’s will is set upon something that of its nature involves a disorder, but is not opposed to the love of God and neighbor, such as thoughtless chatter or immoderate laughter and the like, such sins are venial.”
(CCC 1856)

Excursus: Mortal and venial sins

- *Venial sin* refers to smaller sins that are more of a habit than of intent;
 - venial sins do not deprive one of sanctifying grace,
 - but they do weaken charity and the soul's resistance to temptation, and they impede the soul's progress in the practice of the virtues and moral goodness
 - 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.

Sin and its consequences

- All sin has consequences. It is not difficult to see the physical consequences of sin (broken families, anger, loss of faith, etc.)
- There are also spiritual consequences – either eternal or temporal - that affect the soul.
 - Unrepented mortal sin carries an eternal consequence: the loss of heaven. Purgatory has no bearing on these eternal consequences of sin: whoever dies in unrepented mortal sin is lost.
 - But there are also temporal consequences of sin. Even after receiving forgiveness, sin still leaves its mark: greater propensity to sin, increased attachments to the world, loss of control over the appetites, blurred focus on the ‘things of God,’ etc.
 - Example of a board with nails...
 - It is the temporal effects of sin on the soul that purgatory removes.

Helping those in Purgatory

- One can, through prayers and works of charity done in the grace of God, purify one's own soul on earth, or the souls in purgatory, of the temporal effects of sin.
 - If this is not sufficiently done by the time of death, then it must be done in purgatory.
- The Council of Florence taught: “For the alleviation of (temporal) punishments, these are profitable to the ‘poor souls’: The Sacrifice of the Mass, prayers and alms and other works of piety...”
- The Church can aid those in purgatory because of the reality of the communion of the saints. Because the souls in purgatory are still members of the Church (the Body of Christ) and because of our shared baptism, we can (and should) pray for them.

What Purgatory is Not

- 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.
 - Note: God judges the soul. We do not (and can not) judge the state of a soul
- Purgatory is not a permanent 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, like heaven’s ‘lobby’

What Purgatory is Not

- Purgatory is not a place where people “work off their sins.”
 - 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.
 - 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.

Scriptural Evidence

- 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.
 - The sacred writer approves of this course: “It is therefore holy and wholesome to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from their sins.”
- Matt. 12:32: “Whoever speaks a word against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world nor in the world to come.” The Lord’s words here indicate the possibility of some sins being remitted in the world to come.
 - St. Gregory the Great : “In this sentence we understand that many sins can be remitted in this world, but also many in the world to come.”

Scriptural Evidence

- Matt. 5:26: “Amen I say to thee, you shall not get out of there [prison] until you have paid the last penny.”
 - The Fathers understand “last penny” as the petty transgressions which must be expiated in purgatory by the postponement of the beatific vision.
- Rev. 21:27: “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

- Christians have prayed for the dead since the beginning, and numerous prayers for the dead are inscribed in the early Roman catacombs.
- Tertullian (+240) "A woman, after the death of her husband . . . prays for his soul and asks that he may find rest; and that he may share in the resurrection. And each year, on the anniversary of his death, she offers the sacrifice of the Mass."
- St. Cyprian (+258) teaches that penitents who die before receiving the sacrament of penance must perform the remainder of any atonement demanded in the other world.

Historical Belief

- St. John Chrysostom (+392) "Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them"
- St. Augustine (+430), "Some suffer temporal punishments only in this life, others only after death, still others both in life and after death"
- St. Cyril of Jerusalem (+386) "We make mention, while this holy and most solemn sacrifice is laid out (the Mass) of those who have fallen asleep, for we believe that it will be of very great benefit to those souls
- Praying for the souls of the dead is the primary petition in the funeral Mass.

In common practice today...

- All Souls Day (Nov. 2)
- Mass intentions
- Funeral Masses
- Specific prayers for the dead
- Candles
- Novenas
- Pilgrimages
- Etc.

In common practice today...

- Prayers during the Eucharistic prayer of every Mass...
 - Remember also, Lord, your servants who have gone before us with the sign of faith and rest in the sleep of peace. Grant them, O Lord, we pray, and all who sleep in Christ, a place of refreshment, light and peace (EP 1)
 - Remember also our brothers and sisters who have fallen asleep in the hope of the resurrection, and all who have died in your mercy: welcome them into the light of your face. (EP 2)
 - To our departed brothers and sisters and to all who were pleasing to you at their passing from this life, give kind admittance to your kingdom. (EP 3)

Indulgences

- “[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...” (CCC 1471)
- This means that the Church, as the custodian of means of grace and salvation through the power to “bind and loose” may grant a remission (partial or complete) of the need for purgatory. This remission is called an indulgence
- They are essentially prayers for the dead, though they may be sought for one’s own soul

Conditions

- An indulgence typically consists of certain prayers or works that must be undertaken for the benefit of one's own soul or for the soul of one in purgatory.
- There are several usual conditions set by the Church that one must meet to gain an indulgence:
 - A sacramental Confession
 - Reception of Holy Communion
 - Pray for the intentions of the Pope.
 - Be free from attachment to sin, even venial sin.
 - Perform the prescribed work exactly
- Examples....
 - Rosary in church, Stations of the Cross, pilgrimages, eucharistic adoration, scriptural reading, etc.

Common Questions on Purgatory & Indulgences

Objection: If Jesus died for my sins, why do I still need to spend time in purgatory?

- It is entirely correct to say that Christ accomplished our salvation on the cross. But how is this redemption is applied to us?
- Scripture reveals that it is applied through prayer, good works, patient bearing of suffering, participation in the sacraments, etc. In other words, through a faithful Christian life. All of these are means to our sanctification, through which the Christian is made holy and advances in spiritual perfection.
- Purgatory is the final phase of Christ's application of the purifying redemption that he accomplished for us by his death on the cross.

Question: 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*.

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

- 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?

- The souls in purgatory suffer greatly from their temporary exclusion from the joys of heaven and from the horror of their own sins.
- As for physical pain, there has never been an official statement on it
- The analogy of the dark theater
- Nevertheless, the knowledge 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.
- It would be better to think of the duration in terms of intensity rather than temporal time

Objection: Weren't purgatory and indulgences just invented so the Church could make money?

- No, but there were abuses in the distant past
- Today there are a great number of indulgences in effect, which may be obtained through various prayers and acts of devotion or charity (all of which are free)
- For a Mass intention, a parish will typically request a donation of \$10

Venerable Fulton Sheen said it best...

- For what is Purgatory but a place or condition of temporal punishment for those who depart this life in God's grace, but are not entirely free from venial faults or have not entirely paid the satisfaction due to their transgressions?
- "Purgatory is where the Love of God tempers the Justice of God. The necessity of Purgatory is grounded upon the absolute purity of God. Justice demands that nothing unclean, but only the pure of heart shall stand before the face of a pure God. If there were no Purgatory then the Justice of God would be too terrible for words, for who are they who would dare assert themselves pure enough and spotless enough to stand before the Immaculate Lamb of God? How many millions there are who die with their souls stained with venial sin, who have known evil, and by their strong resolve have drawn (away) from it only to carry with them the weakness of their past as a leaden weight.

Venerable Fulton Sheen said it best...

- “The day we were baptized, the Church laid upon us a white garment with the injunction: ‘Receive this white garment which may thou carry without stain before the judgment seat of Our Lord Jesus Christ that thou may have life everlasting.’
- “How many of us during life have kept that garment unspotted and unsoiled by sin so that we might enter immediately upon death into the white robed army of the King? How many souls departing this life have the courage to say that they left it without any undue attachment to creatures and that they were never guilty of a wasted talent, a slight cupidity, an uncharitable deed, a neglect of holy inspiration or even an idle word for which every one of us must render an account?

Venerable Fulton Sheen said it best...

- “These souls, who have not died in enmity with God, but have fallen wounded on the battlefield of life fighting for the victory of his cause, have not the strength to bind their own wounds and heal their own scars: it remains for us who are still strong and healthy, clad with the armor of faith and the shield of salvation, to heal their wounds and make them whole that they might join the ranks of the victors and march in the procession of the conquerors.”

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.
 - It exists because of God's mercy to purify the "not quite holy"
 - Call a priest before you die (Last Rites)
 - Aim for heaven; if you miss, you'll go to purgatory. But what happens if you only aim for purgatory and miss that?