

Purgatory

ISSUE: What does the Church teach concerning purgatory? What is its biblical basis? What are common misconceptions to the doctrine and how can they be refuted?

RESPONSE: Purgatory is a doctrine of the Catholic Church. It refers to the state of being after death in which people do penance for sins not atoned for on earth. It's biblical basis is found in both the Old and New Testaments. Just as the doctrine of purgatory flows from the Catholic understanding of grace, so misconceptions flow from a misunderstanding of grace. Errors concerning this doctrine are most prevalent among Protestants due to their teaching of *sola fide*.¹

DISCUSSION: Pope Innocent IV (1243-1254) provided a synthesis of the doctrine of purgatory and declared its name for the Universal Church. He wrote to the Bishop of Tusculum stating:

Finally, in the Gospel the Truth declares that whoever speaks blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this world or in the world to come (*see Matt. 12:32*). By this it is to be understood that certain faults are pardoned in this life, and certain others in the life to come, and the Apostle says that “the fire will assay the quality of everyone’s work,” and “if his work burns he will lose his regard, but himself will be saved, yet so as through fire” (*I Cor. 3:13, 15*). And 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. For sins are truly purified by that temporal fire—not grievous or capital sins which have not first been remitted by penance, but small and slight sins which remain a burden after death, if they have not been pardoned during life.²

The Second Council of Lyons (1274), the Council of Vienna (1311-1312), the Council of Florence (1438-1445) and the Council of Trent (1545-1563) affirm this definition of doctrine.

When we sin, there are both eternal and temporal consequences. Through the ministry of forgiveness, the eternal consequences of sin—namely, hell—are remitted simultaneously with the guilt of sin. Temporal consequences remain, requiring one to atone for or repair the sins we have committed. When a man dies without having atoned for these sins, he requires purification before entering heaven (Rev. 21:27). This purification takes place in purgatory.³

Though the word “purgatory” is not found in the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments provide textual support of the doctrine. Matthew 12:32 offers a strong point on which to begin. “And whoever says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.” *This age* obviously refers to our time on earth now. *The age to come* refers to a time after death. It cannot refer to hell because hell is an eternal state and no sins are forgiven there. It cannot refer to heaven, because when we enter heaven we will already be cleansed of all sin.⁴ There is an implied temporal, third state after death where sins may be forgiven. In the “Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus teaches that those who do not live according to the New Law in this life, even by being unduly angry, will be liable to judgment and imprisonment in the next. But in saying this, Jesus also implies that this punishment is not necessarily eternal: “Truly I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny” (Mt. 5:21-26).

Both Sts. Peter and Paul write about a cleansing fire which tests a man and his works (1 Cor. 3:10-16; 1 Pet. 1:7). In 1 Cor. 3:11-15, the gold refers to righteous works which will be purified and remain while the straw (sin and sin’s consequences) will be burned away. “If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:15). This test man will undergo cannot be hell since it also states that the man who builds on the foundation of Christ will be saved. It cannot be heaven since there is no suffering in heaven (cf. Rev. 21:4). St. Paul teaches us that “God is a consuming fire” and that through Him we are purified.⁵ As noted

in the *Catechism*, the Catholic Church teaches that those who have not been completely purged of sin and its consequences here on earth can be purged of sin and its consequences after death.⁶

The tradition of praying for the dead is not practiced solely by Catholics. Jews offered such prayers since before Christ. As recorded in 2 Mac. 12:45⁷, “[I]t was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin.” They still offer prayers for the dead for one year after their death and on the anniversaries of their death. This prayer is known as the “kaddish.”⁸ The early Christians, including those living at the time of St. Paul, already had a well developed tradition of praying for the dead.

Two, common misconceptions exist concerning the Church’s doctrine of purgatory. The first has root in the Protestant concept of faith and works. Proponents allege that Catholics made-up the idea of purgatory. Those holding this view believe no biblical basis exists for the teaching. They contend that the existence of purgatory would contradict the work of Christ; His suffering and death in atonement for our sins. They believe once we accept Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior, nothing can keep us from heaven. Therefore, a belief in purgatory is superfluous. The second misconception is held by some who believe in Purgatory and focuses on our call to holiness. Believing sainthood is only for really holy people like Mother Theresa, these people believe it sufficient to make purgatory our goal in this life.

Regarding the first misconception, Protestants often claim that purgatory was fabricated by Catholics. However, they do not agree as to when this fabrication actually occurred. Protestants have claimed that the Council of Trent, the Council of Lyons, and the Council of Nicea were individually responsible for making up purgatory. As noted above, there is a wealth of reference in Scripture supporting the existence of purgatory.

Many Protestants also claim that purgatory contradicts the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Since through Christ the demands of justice were totally fulfilled, they argue that purgatory would render Christ’s death incomplete. This assumes a contradiction between redemption and our own suffering in reparation for our sins. In reality, as the teachings on grace and free will affirm, there is no contradiction. Christ did accomplish all of our salvation for us through His death on the cross. However, He did not preclude us from taking part in our own salvation through personal sufferings while here on earth, or in purgatory.⁹ God has chosen the best way for us to get to heaven and that is to participate with His Son in our own salvation. He does this, in part, by allowing us to carry personal crosses, by allowing us to suffer.¹⁰ He created purgatory as the last stage of sanctification to help us complete our journey to heaven.

An analogy we can use is that of the sick man and the charitable rich man. There was a man who lived a meager life, eking out a living collecting cans. One night he fainted and was found laying unconscious along the side of the road. A rich doctor found him. The doctor could tell that the poor man was in need of a heart transplant but he also knew that even if the poor man collected hundreds of trash bags of cans, he would never be able to make enough money to save his own life and pay for the transplant. The doctor took pity on the man and carried him to the hospital. He then paid for the operation out of his own pocket. To stop the story there would make it incomplete. For this story to have a happy ending, the poor man must still undergo the operation and receive a new heart.

Just as the poor man had to have his chest cut open and his bad heart removed and replaced by the charitable doctor, so we too must be healed and made holy by God. To say that the generous man’s gift—comparable to Christ’s objective redemption 2000 years ago—means the poor man need not have the lifesaving operation—comparable to our subjective redemption here and now—is silly. Yet that is the reality at the heart of the claim that Catholics don’t think Christ’s suffering and death was sufficient for us. Christ’s gift was complete. He paid the full price for our sins. However, we must still undergo the operation or application of the payment: the sanctification, the purification for our sinfulness.

Some also argue that in light of Christ’s death we do not have to make reparation for our sins. The Bible tells us otherwise. 2 Samuel relates a conversation between the prophet Nathan and King David after David had committed grave sins against God. “The Lord also had put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child that is born to you shall die” (12:13-14). David, though he repented of his sin and was forgiven by God still had to make reparation for his sins. The reparation, in this case, took the form of the death of David’s son by Bathsheba.

We know that God is the most perfect Father. How, then, could He be irresponsible in matters regarding our discipline and formation? No earthly father would pay off his neighbors so his children could run wild through the neighborhood, breaking into homes, stealing cars, and scandalizing people without concern for their actions. One of the ways God cares for us is by giving us free will and then making us responsible for our actions. The responsibility includes making reparation to our neighbors and to God for the homes we break into, the cars we steal, and the people we scandalize. If God did not require reparation of us we would become like children of a lax parent, wild and wanton and selfish. Having to bear some of the burden of our own sinfulness makes us into responsible Christians. Purgatory exists for that very purpose. It has been given to us by God so that we may participate actively in our own salvation and enter into heaven as pure and clean as God intended when He created Adam.

Fundamentalist Christians would have us believe that once we accept Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior, neither good works nor sins can affect our salvation. They believe that, upon death, all who have been born again are covered in the mercy of God and allowed into heaven no matter the quality or quantity of their sinfulness. C.S. Lewis refuted this argument in his book, *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer*: “Our souls demand purgatory, don’t they? Would it not break the heart if God said to us, ‘It is true, my son, that your breath smells and your rags drip with mud and slime, but we are charitable here and no one will upbraid you with these things, nor draw away from you. Enter into the joy?’ Should we not reply, ‘With submission, sir, and if there is no objection, I’d rather be cleaned first.’ ‘It may hurt, you know.’ ‘Even so, sir.’”

Why must this be? Paul says “[f]or now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then (after death) face to face.”¹¹ After death, the truth of the state of our souls will be radiantly clear to us. We will see ourselves and those around us as God sees us. If we are not really clean, but remain in wretchedness with souls not purified but merely covered, how can heaven be everything God promised? It simply cannot.

Regarding the second misconception, there are two reasons why purgatory should not be our goal in spiritual life. First, the suffering and purification we go through while we are alive are meritorious. The pain and suffering we go through in purgatory are not. While alive, if we cooperate with God’s plan for us and “offer up” the pain we experience, we merit grace not only for ourselves but for the Church, both living and suffering in purgatory. After death, our suffering in purgatory can only be applied to ourselves. It would behoove us to follow the example of the saints and offer up our prayers and sacrifices to ease the pain and suffering of those who must go through the sanctifying fires of purgatory. Most important, as the Church teaches and Scripture affirms, God created us for Himself. He desires to share heaven’s glory with us. In His will, our goal must be God.

¹ Understanding the teachings of the Catholic Church on grace, the Communion of Saints, indulgences and the reality of mortal sin allows for a greater understanding of purgatory. See CUF’s FAITH FACTS on these topics.

² Pope Innocent IV, Letter to the Bishop of Tusculum, translation found in: *The Church Teaches*, translations by Rev. John F. Clarkson, S.J., et al., Tan Books and Publishers, 1973, pp. 347-348.

³ *Catechism*, no. 1030, 1031.

⁴ Rev. 21:27

⁵ See also Mal. 3:2, where the Lord is compared to refiner’s fire and fuller’s soap (both cleansing agents). “Purgation” literally means “cleansing,” and purgatory is a state in which Christ’s merits are applied to men to make them fit for heaven.

⁶ Cf. *Catechism*, nos. 1030-1032. The only sins which are forgiven in purgatory are venial sins.

⁷ Though Protestants do not accept Maccabees as part of their canon of scripture, they certainly do not dispute its place as an historical account; that it is a factual record of Jewish practice and belief.

⁸ Jews have historically believed, and many still believe, that the souls of the faithful departed undergo a period of purification which may be aided by the prayers and charity of the living. The Kaddish Foundation is a modern example of this ancient belief in action.

⁹ Rom. 5:3-5

¹⁰ Col. 1:24

¹¹ 1 Cor. 13:12

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