

## **PURGATORY** (The Catechism Explained)

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**Purgatory is a place where the souls of those must suffer for a time, who, though dying without grave sin on their souls, have not done complete penance for their offences against God.**

Judas Machabeus was convinced that the souls of those who had died in battle with idols on them had to be punished, and for that reason ordered sacrifices to be offered for them in Jerusalem (2 Mach, xii. 43). “The stains which the soul has received during its sojourn in the body must be removed by the purging fire,” says St. Gregory of Nyssa; and St. Gregory Nazianzen tells us that in the future life there is a baptism of fire, a hard and weary baptism, to destroy what is earthly in man. As to the situation of purgatory, most of the saints seem to think it is beneath the earth; hence the prayer of the Church: *A porta inferi*, etc. (“From the gates of hell deliver him, O Lord!”) and the *De Profundis* (“Out of the depths I have cried to Thee, O Lord”). Some also believe that many souls, for a time at least, suffer their purgatory in those places on earth where their sins were committed, and that they are often present at the prayers which are offered for them. It is certain also that the holy souls have appeared to many saints, e.g., to St. Teresa, St. Bridget, St. Philip Neri. As to the state of the holy souls, the saints are of opinion that they suffer in all resignation to God’s will. St. Catherine of Genoa tells us that God fills them with His love, so that their greatest pains become tolerable. Moreover the knowledge that they will finally attain the vision of God and that they are secure of their eternal salvation, gives them great consolation. “Besides,” as St. Frances of Rome tells us, “they are comforted by the prayers of the faithful on earth, and the blessed in heaven, and by the visits of holy angels.” “The consciousness that they are making atonement to God and suffering for Him makes them courageous as martyrs” (St. Catherine of Genoa).

**The holy souls suffer in purgatory to expiate either their venial sins, or those mortal sins, which, though absolved, have not been completely atoned for.**

Venial sins are visited with temporal punishment, as in the case of Zachary who doubted the angel, or Moses. Mortal sins also, though repented of and put away, are often visited with temporal punishment, as in the case of Adam and David. The Council of Trent (6, 30), teaches that whoever does not satisfy completely for his sins on earth, must do so in purgatory. So on earth a man may be punished by a fine; if he does not pay it he must go to prison. Hence we should not be satisfied with the penance given us by our confessor; we should add something of our own. Much may be done by patient enduring of sickness or willing acceptance of death. Not even the least sins should be neglected; they must all be atoned for.

**The sufferings in purgatory include exclusion from the vision of God and other great pains.**

Hence the prayer: "Grant rest to the souls of the faithful departed, and let perpetual light shine upon them." When we burn candles by the coffins or on the graves of the dead, we pray that the poor souls may be admitted to the sight of God. Apart from the duration, there is no distinction between the torments of hell and those of purgatory (St. Thomas). "The same fire," says St. Augustine, "burns the lost and the saved." Hence we see why the Church, in the Requiem Mass, prays God to deliver the souls from the pains of hell (Benedict XIV.). St. Augustine tells us that the pains of purgatory are greater than the sufferings of all the martyrs; and St. Thomas teaches that the least pain in purgatory is greater than the greatest on earth. "All the tortures that one can conceive of in this world are," says St. Cyril of Alexandria, "refreshing, compared with the least pain of purgatory."

**The greatness and duration of the sufferings in purgatory vary according to the gravity of the sins.**

St. Augustine tells us that those are longer in the purging fire who have been more attached to the goods of this world; that those who have grown old in sin take longer to pass through the cleansing stream. The foundation Masses going on for centuries, lead us to suppose that some souls have to suffer through many generations of men; were this impossible the Church would have abolished such Masses. Catherine Emmerich, in her revelations, says that Our Lord descends into purgatory every Good Friday, and frees one or more souls of those who had been witnesses of His Passion. Even where the punishment has lasted only an hour, we are told by St. Bridget, that it appears intolerably long. Those who wear the scapular are assured of a considerable shortening of their sufferings. Several saints hold the view that some souls suffer no pain but are merely excluded from the vision of God. According to St. Mathilda the sufferings in purgatory are in intimate relation to the past sins. St. Bridget saw souls suffering most in those things in which they had sinned most; and St. Margaret of Cortona saw some who could not be released till the evil done by them on earth had been made good.

## **2. That there is a purgatory we learn from the teaching of Christ, and especially from the practice and doctrine of the Church.**

**Moreover, it is a remarkable fact that nearly all the nations of the earth believe in a purging fire. In addition we know from sound reason that there must be a purgatory.**

Christ's words are: "He that shall speak against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world nor in the world to come" (Matt. xii. 32); He compares purgatory to a prison: "Amen, I say to thee, thou shalt not go out from thence till thou repay the last farthing" (Matt. v. 26). And St. Paul adds that many shall be saved, yet so as by fire (1 Cor. iii. 15). The practice of the Church in the following points reminds us of purgatory: the prayer for the dead said in every Mass (the Memento after the Consecration); the Masses for the dead, in particular those on

All Souls' Day, on the day of death and burial, and on anniversaries; the passing-bell (which calls upon us to pray for the departed), and the solemnities on All Souls' Day, which were first introduced in 998 by the abbot Odilo of Cluny, and later extended by the Popes to the universal Church. St. John Chrysostom reminds us that "the practices of Christians are not meant for mere show, but that they are ordained by the Holy Spirit." The bishops of the Church at Florence (1439), and Trent (1445-1463) expressly defined that there is a purgatory. The idea of purgatory is common among the nations. The Egyptians believed in the transmigration of souls into animals. Among the Greeks we have the story of Prometheus, condemned to be bound to a rock and his liver gnawed by a vulture, because he stole fire from heaven. The Jews had the same belief, for they offered sacrifice for the dead, as we saw in the case of Judas Machabeus. The early Christians were accustomed to pray for the dead during the holy sacrifice. St. Augustine relates that his mother St. Monica, on her death-bed, said to him and his brother: "Bury me where you will; only, I pray you, think of me always at God's altar." St. John Chrysostom declares that the Christians from the very beginning prayed during Mass for the dead by order of the apostles. St. Cyril of Jerusalem writes: "It is of great service to pray for the dead when the holy sacrifice is being offered." Hence the oldest Mass-books contain prayers for the dead. Reason also teaches that there must be a purgatory. We know, for instance, that nothing defiled can enter heaven (Apoc. xxi. 27); yet there is many a man not so wicked as to be lost forever; and if he can enter neither heaven nor hell there must be a third place where he can be purified.

### **3. The faithful on earth can help the holy souls in purgatory by good works; in particular by prayer, fasting, almsdeeds, by offering or being present at Mass, by receiving the sacraments and gaining indulgences.**

The holy souls cannot help themselves, since they can no longer do good works to satisfy for their sins. After death "the night cometh when no man can work" (John ix. 4). Hence they must pay off their debt by

enduring the pains which God has laid upon them. Yet we on earth can help to diminish their pains by Masses, by prayer and almsgiving, and other works of piety (Council of Lyons, ii., 1274); the holy sacrifice is of all things the most helpful to them (Council of Trent, 25), and according to St. Bonaventure the offering of holy communion is of very great assistance. "Not by weeping," says St. John Chrysostom, "but by prayer and almsgiving are the dead relieved." No pompous funeral nor profusion of wreaths are of any avail without good works; it is far more to the purpose to give to the poor the money which is spent on idle show. As to the prayers, God does not regard so much their length as their fervor. Christ once said to St. Gertrude: "A single word from the heart has far more power to free a soul than the recital of many prayers and psalms without devotion; the hands are cleaned better by a little water and much rubbing than by merely pouring a large quantity of water over them." We are not to conclude from this that in ordinary cases a short prayer, an Our Father, for instance, will at once set free a soul. "For," says Maldonatus, "God would be very cruel if He kept a soul, for which He had shed His own blood, in such terrible suffering for the sake of an Our Father which had been omitted." The Church uses holy water in the burial service because it has great efficacy for the holy souls. But the greatest help which we can give is the Heroic Act, that is, the resignation in their behalf of all the satisfaction made to God by our good works. Those who make this act gain, every time they approach the Holy Table, a plenary indulgence applicable to the holy souls; and priests, who make the Heroic Act, have, every day they say Mass, the personal privilege of a privileged altar (Pius IX., Sept. 10, 1852).

### **The relatives of the departed are bound to help them.**

To them apply the words of Holy Writ: "Have pity on me, at least you my friends, because the hand of the Lord hath touched me" (Job xix. 21). God sometimes reveals the unhappy state of the dead to their relatives. In the year 202 St. Perpetua saw in a dream her young brother imprisoned in a dark place, all covered with dirt, and parched with thirst. She began to offer up fervent prayer for him, and soon after he appeared again to her but this time beautiful and happy (Meh. vi., 413).

When St. Elizabeth of Thuringia received news of the death of her mother Gertrude, Queen of Hungary, she began to pray and scourge herself with disciplines, and soon she had the satisfaction of seeing her mother in a vision, and of knowing that she was delivered from purgatory. Yet we should not rely too much on the good works which our relatives may do for us after death; for the proverb comes often only too true: "Out of sight, out of mind;" and besides, after all, the works done for us after death can avail us only to a limited extent. "One Mass devoutly heard during life," says St. Anselm, "is of more value than a great sum left for the celebration of a hundred Masses after death." "God," says St. Bonaventure, "values more a little voluntary penance done in this life than a severe and involuntary satisfaction in the next."

**Prayer for the dead is of great benefit to ourselves, for it is a work of mercy.**

It might be objected that by doing too much for the holy souls, a man neglects himself. But this is not true. Prayer confers a blessing on him who is prayed for, and on him who prays. He who has pity on the holy souls will find in God a merciful Judge: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Matt. v. 7); Christ accepts every deed of mercy as a favor done to Himself (Cf. Matt. xxv. 40); the departed also display their gratitude when they get to heaven. Says Marie Lataste: "Thou canst do nothing more acceptable to God or profitable to thyself than to pray for the holy souls; for they will be mindful of your favors in heaven, and will pray unceasingly for you . . . that you may become holier in life and be freed from purgatory soon after death." "It is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins" (2 Mach. xii. 46).

Rev. Fr. Francis Spirago. The Catechism Explained (pp. 347-354).