

Purgatory: A Primer

Tradition, Scripture, Saints, Church Fathers, Apologists and Poets all contribute to the Church's patrimony.

by Joseph O'Brien

Perhaps more than any other teaching of the Catholic Church, the doctrine of purgatory sets Catholics apart from other Christian professions. While all Christians acknowledge the Four Last Things — heaven, hell, death and judgment — only Catholics understand that between hell and heaven lies a third, temporary possibility for many souls who, while dying in a state of grace, must still reform their souls — purge them — of the residual effects of sin. The reality of purgatory speaks to both God's mercy and God's justice, but also and especially to God's love for souls.

As a formal teaching of the Church, purgatory has had a long paper trail among the Church Fathers and saints and is ultimately grounded in scriptural evidence honed by Tradition through development of doctrine. So, while it is easy to see why Protestant thinkers — for whom no truth of the faith can exist outside of Scripture alone — might exclude purgatory from the necessary tenets of the faith, once the full teaching of the Church on this aspect of God's mercy and justice is understood, it becomes more difficult to see purgatory as anything but essential to understanding — and even anticipating with great joy — our ultimate and most felicitous destiny after death: heavenly enjoyment of God's eternal loving presence.

Straight Teaching

The Catechism of the Catholic Church presents the teaching on purgatory as a matter of "final purification."

All who die in God's grace and friendship," the Catechism states, "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" (1030). Furthermore, the Church calls this final purification "purgatory ... which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned (1031).

The Catechism then notes that the doctrine on purgatory developed through the interplay of Tradition and Scripture, pointing especially to the Council of Florence (1431-144) and the Council of Trent (1545-1563) as instrumental in clarifying the tenets of this doctrine. The Council of Florence, affirming the traditional teaching on purgatory, contributed a further refinement to the doctrine in definitively noting:

The souls of those who have not committed any sin at all after they received baptism, and the souls of those who have committed sin, *but have been cleansed either while in the body or afterwards* ... are promptly taken up into heaven and see clearly the Triune God himself, just as he is, some more perfectly than others according to their respective merits (emphasis added).

Likewise, the Council of Trent, reacting to the wholesale rejection of belief in purgatory as necessary for salvation by leaders of the Protestant Revolt — including Martin Luther and John Calvin — sought to emphasize in its reaffirmation of the doctrine that "souls detained [in purgatory] are helped by the prayers of the faithful and especially by the acceptable Sacrifice of the Altar," that is, the prayers of the Mass.

Purgative Power of Mass

Explicit reference to this belief in the power of the Mass to aid souls in purgatory reaches as far back as the third century. So says Jesuit Father F.X. Schouppe in his book *Purgatory: Explained by the Lives and Legends of the Saints*. "The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass was celebrated for the departed," Father Schouppe writes, "even from the time of the foundation of the Church. 'We celebrate the anniversary of the triumph of

the martyrs,' writes Tertullian in the third century, 'and, according to the tradition of our fathers, we offer the Holy Sacrifice for the departed on the anniversary of their death.'"

Father Schouppe also cites St. Augustine referencing in one of his sermons the Eucharistic Sacrifice as a powerful ally to souls in purgatory:

It cannot be denied ... that the prayers of the Church, the Holy Sacrifice, and alms distributed for the departed, relieve those holy souls, and move God to treat them with more clemency than their sins deserve. It is a universal practice of the Church, a practice which she observes as having received from her forefathers — that is to say, the Holy Apostles.

In fact, as Father Schouppe notes, St. Augustine offered a personal witness in *The Confessions* to this teaching when his mother St. Monica died. Before her death, when she took ill, Monica asked Augustine to remember her in his prayers. "Here you will bury your mother," Monica told her son, adding when others expressed concern that she was not going to die in her African homeland, she said: "Lay this body wherever it may be. Let no care of it disturb you: This only I ask of you, that you should remember me at the altar of the Lord wherever you may be."

Purgatory by the Book

In addition to Tradition, the Catechism also sees the teaching on purgatory "based on the practice of prayer for the dead already mentioned in sacred Scripture, including the Old Testament witness of 2 Maccabees 12:46: 'Therefore [Judas Maccabeus] made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin.'"

But Luther and other Protestant leaders rejected the authority of 2 Maccabees and other Old Testament works they saw as "apocryphal," stating that while these other books were edifying to the faithful, they had no authority to teach Christian doctrine. Yet, as Catholic apologist Patrick Madrid notes in his book *Where Is That In Tradition*:

The doctrine of purgatory was not 'invented' by Catholics in the eleventh or twelfth century as some Protestants and other erroneously assume. This ancient Christian teaching, that there is a process of purification that the souls of some of those who die in the state of friendship with God (cf. Romans 11:22) will undergo, is well attested by St. Paul in his teaching in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15."

In this passage, St. Paul indicates a purgation by fire is necessary for souls not yet prepared to meet the Lord: "Every man's work shall be manifest; for the day of the Lord shall declare it, because it shall be revealed in fire; and the fire shall try every man's work. Of what sort it is. If any man's work abide, which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. *If any man's work burn, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as by fire*" (1 Corinthians 3:13-15, emphasis added).

There is evidence that Luther himself believed in purgatory, but since in his view it was not a doctrine solely grounded in Scripture, he believed it was unnecessary for salvation.

But another Protestant, C.S. Lewis, thought that purgatory and praying for the dead were sensible doctrines (even if he quibbled with fellow English writers — and Catholic saints — Thomas More and John Fisher on the quality, severity and nature of the suffering a soul experiences in purgatory). "I believe in purgatory," Lewis states in one of his letters, in which he also notes, "Of course I pray for the dead. The action is so spontaneous, so all but inevitable, that only the most compulsive theological case against it would deter me. And I hardly know how the rest of my prayers would survive if those for the dead were forbidden. At our age the majority of those we love best are dead. What sort of intercourse with God could I have if what I love best were unmentionable to Him?"

Lewis notes that purgatory is a way to prepare our own souls — and anyone who truly loves God ought to desire for the sake of that love such a time for preparation. “Our souls demand Purgatory, don’t they?” Lewis asks. “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.’”

Purgatory and the Poets

Lewis also notes that without purgatory, literature would be bereft of two great works that focus on this essential element among the Four Last Things: Dante’s *Purgatorio* and St. John Henry Newman’s *The Dream of Gerontius*. For Lewis, Newman’s long poem, considered his masterwork in verse, serves as a modern corrective to viewing purgatory as a “temporary hell.”

“The right view returns magnificently in Newman’s *Dream*.” He writes. “There, if I remember it rightly, the saved soul, at the very foot of the throne, begs to be taken away and cleansed. It cannot bear for a moment longer ‘With its darkness to affront that light.’” In Newman’s poem, Lewis declares, “Religion has reclaimed Purgatory.”

But even Newman’s imaginative work on purgatory is only possible because of the work of another Catholic poet and one of the greatest in history — Dante Alighieri. According to Catholic writer Anthony Esolen, who translated the Modern Library edition of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, in a certain sense, Dante was the first Catholic poet to provide a place in the human imagination for the reality of purgatory to come alive. As Esolen writes in the introduction to his translation of the *Purgatorio*, “For sheer inventiveness, the *Purgatorio* is arguably the product of Dante’s most brilliant poetic conception. There is no denying the grim, oppressive majesty of his hell, full of the terrible sights of human nobility and beauty ruined.”

But, Esolen adds, “Purgatory is not hell, not even a lighter version of hell. It is a completely new kingdom.” It was from the “bare tenets” of purgatory, a place of finite suffering where those being purged can no longer sin and are assisted by prayer to eventually reach heaven that “Dante has created a kingdom, and remarkably, a kingdom that brings to life the heart and soul of that doctrine.”

Thomistic Take

Yet even Dante had to start somewhere to build this kingdom, and as with most of his *Divine Comedy* to ensure that his inspiration was grounded firmly in sound doctrine, the poet likely relied on his favorite theologian: St. Thomas Aquinas, who in his *Summa Theologiae* provides the Church with a profound and succinct statement on the doctrine of purgatory. After examining objections against the doctrine of purgatory, Thomas concludes that “it is sufficiently clear that there is a Purgatory after this life. For the debt of punishment is not paid in full after the stain of sin has been washed away by contrition, nor again are venial sins always removed when mortal sins are remitted, and if justice demands that sin be set in order by due punishment, it follows that one who after contrition for his fault and after being absolved, dies before making due satisfaction, is punished after this life.”

While it might seem strange to think of purgatory as “punishment,” as Thomas says in his *Compendium of Theology* (a kind of summary of the *Summa*), punishment is “a medicine for guilt,” which sets a soul’s will in order “since by guilt man transgresses the limits of the natural order, giving more to his will than he ought. Hence he is led back to the order of justice by punishment, through which something is taken away from his will.”

A great modern student of Thomas Aquinas, Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen summarized Thomas’ view of purgatory as “that place in which the love of God tempers the justice of God, and, secondly, where the love of man tempers the injustice of man.”

Means to an End

Purgatory is, above all, God's last act of mercy for souls bound for eternal glory because only in that way can those souls be restored in a way that God will recognize them. "It will be an extremely serious business when we meet God face-to-face," writes Catholic apologist Dave Armstrong in his book *Catholic Verses*, adding that, "to stand in his presence, we must be literally, actually sinless, because that is how we were created to be in the first place, in his image."

As Dante notes throughout his *Purgatorio*, purgatory is itself only a means, a way station, a depot on the way to someplace and, more importantly, Someone: God reigning in eternal glory — the same place and same person on which Dante sets his sights as he emerges from the purgative waters in the closing lines of his poem:

From its most holy waters I returned
as remade as a new young plant appears
renewed in every newly springing frond,
Pure, and in trim for mounting to the stars.

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Joseph O'Brien writes from Soldiers Grove, Wisconsin.

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