

Purgatory, the Final Purification

In our reflections on the teachings of faith about life after death, today we'll consider purgatory. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: '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. The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned...The tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire.' (nn. 1030-31)

The main Scriptural text referred to is from St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. He writes: 'For no other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any one builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble – each man's work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. 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* 3:11-15)

So: there is 'fire' experienced by some of those on the way to heaven, burning up their imperfect works (symbolised by 'wood, hay, stubble'). The doctrine on purgatory casts light on that. We also recall that we don't go just by Scripture, but also by Apostolic Tradition, which includes the understandings of faith handed down from generation to generation. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the teachings of both Scripture and Tradition are understood more deeply over the centuries, and stated with increasing clarity by the Magisterium. The word 'purgatory' isn't in Scripture, but neither is the word 'Trinity'. The Church has developed language down the ages to help express the realities that *are* contained in Scripture.

The *Catechism* also tells us: 'This teaching [on purgatory] is also based on the practice of prayer for the dead, already mentioned in Sacred Scripture.' (1032) It quotes the *Second Book of Maccabees* from the Old Testament: 'Therefore [Judas Maccabeus] made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin.' (*2 Macc* 12:46)

Souls in hell *can't* be delivered from their sin, and souls fully at rest *don't need* to be. So, these prayers for the dead 'that they might be delivered from their sin' can only be for those deceased who are in an intermediate state in which they *can* be purified from sin – and indeed, helped by our prayers. (If you're in a discussion with Protestants, who don't accept purgatory, keep in mind that the *Books of Maccabees* were among the seven Old Testament books discarded from Scripture by the Protestant reformers. So we can use them to help our own faith and understanding, but they might be of more limited value in that discussion.)

The way in which the Church prays is itself guided by the Holy Spirit, making that another path to deeper doctrinal understanding. The Holy See stated in its 1979 *Letter* on eschatology (i.e. the theology of 'the last things' – life after death): 'The Church excludes every way of thinking or speaking that would render meaningless or unintelligible her prayers, her funeral rites and the religious acts offered for the dead.' (DS 4654)

Turning to the most solemn teachings of the Magisterium on purgatory, the *Catechism* tells us, 'The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of

Florence and Trent.’ (n. 1031) The Council of Florence pronounced (1439) in a series of definitions of faith: ‘If those who are truly penitent die in the love of God before having satisfied by worthy fruits of penance for their sins of commission and omission, their souls are cleansed after death by purgatorial punishments. In order that they be relieved from such punishments, the acts of intercession of the living faithful benefit them, namely, the sacrifices of the Mass, prayers, alms, and other works of piety...’ (DS 1304)

And the Council of Trent, responding to the Protestant Reformation, declared infallibly that even when sins are forgiven and sanctifying grace restored, there can still remain a debt of temporary punishment in this life or the next. It pronounced this condemnation (1547): ‘If anyone says that after the grace of justification has been received the guilt is so remitted and the debt of eternal punishment so blotted out for any repentant sinner that no debt of temporal punishment remains to be discharged, either in this world or in the future one, in purgatory, before access can be opened to the kingdom of heaven, let him be anathema.’ (DS 1580)

The Council also declared (1563): ‘If anyone says that the sacrifice of the Mass...should not be offered for the living and the dead, for sins, punishments, satisfactions and other necessities, let him be anathema.’ (DS 1753)

And on the basis of all that, Trent stated in its *Decree on Purgatory* (1563): ‘The Catholic Church, instructed by the Holy Spirit and 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 acts of intercession of the faithful, and especially by the acceptable Sacrifice of the Altar. Therefore, this holy council commands the bishops to strive diligently that the sound doctrine of purgatory, handed down by the holy Fathers and the sacred councils, be believed by the faithful and that it be adhered to, taught, and preached everywhere.’ (DS 1820)

Vatican II, in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (1964), reaffirmed: ‘Until the Lord shall come in His majesty...some of His disciples are exiles on earth, some having died are purified, and others are in glory...but all in various ways and degrees are in communion in the same charity of God and neighbour and all sing the same hymn of glory to our God...The pilgrim Church from the very first ages of the Christian religion has cultivated with great piety the memory of the dead, and “because it is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins”, (2 Macc 12:46) also offers suffrages for them...This Sacred Council 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; and it proposes again the decrees of...the Council of Florence and the Council of Trent.’ (49-51)

For ourselves, we avoid purgatory firstly by avoiding sin in the first place, as much as possible. But for those sins we *have* committed, once their guilt is forgiven we then try to ‘pay our remaining debt’ for them while here on earth. Baptism, indeed, fully remits even purgatorial punishment for past sins. The Sacrament of Reconciliation doesn’t fully do this as a general rule, but the penance given in the sacrament does have special effectiveness towards that end. Beyond this, we do other voluntary penances; we offer up to God the inevitable sufferings of life; we gain indulgences. And of course we pray also for those already in purgatory – offering prayers, penances, indulgences, almsgiving; above all, the Sacrifice of the Mass. And so, we express our charity for those still united with us in the Body of Christ, and we receive in return from the prayers they offer in gratitude.