

Purgatory & Penance

prepared by: Michael Helbert

Catechism

1030 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.

1031 The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned. The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence and Trent. The tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire: As for certain lesser faults, we must believe that, before the Final Judgment, there is a purifying fire. He who is truth says that whoever utters blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will be pardoned neither in this age nor in the age to come. From this sentence we understand that certain offenses can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come.

1032 This teaching is also based on practice of prayer for the dead, already mentioned in Sacred Scripture: "Therefore (Judas Maccabeus) made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin." From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God. The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead: Let us help and commemorate them. If Job's sons were purified by their father's sacrifice, why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them.

1472 To understand this doctrine and practice of the Church, it is necessary to understand that sin has a double consequence. Grave sin deprives us of communion with God and therefore makes us incapable of eternal life, the privation of which is called the "eternal punishment" of sin. On the other hand every sin, even venial, entails an unhealthy attachment to creatures, which must be purified either here on earth, or after death in the state called Purgatory. This purification frees one from what is called the "temporal punishment" of sin. These two punishments must not be conceived of as a kind of vengeance inflicted by God from without but as following from the very nature of sin. A conversion which proceeds from a fervent charity can attain the complete purification of the sinner in such a way that no punishment would remain.

1054 Those who die in God's grace and friendship imperfectly purified, although they are assured of their eternal salvation, undergo a purification after death, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of God.

Early Church Fathers

Tertullian, *The Soul* 58, 8 (inter 208-212 AD)

“In short, if we understand that prison of which the Gospel speaks to be Hades, and if we interpret the last farthing to be the light offense which is to be expiated there before the resurrection, no one will doubt that the soul undergoes some punishments in Hades, without prejudice to the fullness of the resurrection, after which recompense will be made through the flesh also.”

St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 23 (Mystagogic 5), 10 (c. 350 AD)

“Then we make mention also of those who have already fallen asleep: first, the patriarchs, prophets, Apostles, and martyrs, that through their prayers and supplications God would receive our petition; next, we make mention also of the holy fathers and bishops who have already fallen asleep, and, to put it simply, of all among us who have already fallen asleep; for we believe that it will be of very great benefit to the souls of those for whom the petition is carried up, while this holy and most solemn Sacrifice is laid out.”

St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Sermon on the Dead* (383 AD)

“After his departure out of the body, he gains knowledge of the difference between virtue and vice, and finds that he is not able to partake of divinity until he has been purged of the filthy contagion in his soul by the purifying fire.”

St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians* 41, 5 (c. 392 AD)

“Let us help and commemorate them. If Job’s sons were purified by their father’s sacrifice, why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them.”

St. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* Bk. 9, 2 (400 AD)

St. Augustine’s mother, St. Monica, on her death-bed said to him: “This one request I make of you, that, wherever you be, you remember me at the Lord’s altar.”

St. Augustine of Hippo, *The Care that Should be Taken for the Dead* 1, 3 (421 AD)

“We read in the book of Maccabees that the sacrifice was offered for the dead. But even if it were found nowhere in the Old Testament writings, the authority of the universal Church which is clear on this point is of no small weight, where in the prayers of the priest poured forth to the Lord God at His altar the commendation of the dead has its place.”

St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Philadelphians* 3 (c. 107 AD)

“For as many as are of God and of Jesus Christ are also with the bishop. And as many as shall, in the exercise of penance, return into the unity of the Church, these, too, shall belong to God, that they may live according to Jesus Christ.”

St. Cyprian of Carthage, *The Lapsed* 17 (251 AD)

“The Lord alone is able to have mercy. He alone, who bore our sins, who grieved for us, and whom God delivered up for our sins, is able to grant pardon for the sins which have been committed against Him ... Certainly we believe that the merits of the martyrs and the works of the just will be of

great avail with the Judge—but that will be when the day of judgment comes, when, after the end of this age and of the world, His people shall stand before the tribunal of Christ.”

St. Cyprian of Carthage, *Letters 9, 2* (c. 253 AD)

“...sinners may do penance for a set time, and according to the rules of discipline come to public confession, and by imposition of the hand of the bishop and clergy receive the right of communion.”

Commentary

Let’s first start with understanding that Purgatory is not a place like earth, but a state of being, that is the transformation after death once eternal life has begun where you are being transformed and purified. Knowing what the scriptures state and what has been taught in the early Church brings us to the understanding that restitution will be made for everything that we do whether good or evil see (2 Corinthians 5:10 ***“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive recompense, according to what he did in the body, whether good or evil.”*** Paul states this more than once see Colossians 3:25 ***“For the wrongdoer will receive recompense for the wrong he committed, and there is no partiality”*** and yet again in Romans 2:6 ***“who will repay everyone according to his works.”***) Jesus Christ in the presence of the twelve apostles informs the twelve of the time of judgment in (Matthew 16:27 ***For the Son of Man will come with his angels in his Father’s glory, and then he will repay everyone according to his conduct.”***) notice Christ tells them everyone, not just the saved or damned but everyone will receive payment at that time. We also see a similar proclamation in (Matthew 12:36 ***“I tell you, on the day of judgment people will render an account for every careless word they speak.”*** See Revelation 2:23b ***“Thus shall all the churches come to know that I am the searcher of hearts and minds and that I will give each of you what your works deserve.”***) again we see a now Glorified Jesus Christ give this message to the Church of Thyatira. Now last of all statements we see John get a final message through his vision in Revelation about this subject in (Revelation 22:12-13 ***“ Behold I am coming soon. I bring with me the recompense I will give to each according to his deeds. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”***) First let us look at Death and Life according to (Romans 6:23 ***“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life***

in Christ Jesus our Lord.”) So one’s initial understanding could be the wages of sin was death and the wages of acceptance of Jesus’s words and testimony is eternal life (believing in Jesus Christ, conforming to his teachings, and living as Christ would have to the best of your ability). But upon further study many readings including one particular in 1 Corinthians added to the equation, adds much more about the process that will take place during our Eternal Life which is **(1 Corinthians 3:13-15 “The work of each will come to light, for the Day will disclose it. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each one’s work. If the work stands that someone built upon the foundation, that person will receive a wage. But if someone’s work is burned up, that one will suffer loss; the person will be saved, but only as through fire.”)** This particular reading speaks of a wage as well as one who didn’t get a wage and suffered loss, and knowing the wages of sin is Death the Loss of a Wage would seem to imply eternal damnation, and would initially lead one to think the wage received for work that remained after being tested by fire is eternal life. We see here where each one’s works will be tested by fire, and if it remains we receive a wage speaking about Eternal life and instant entrance into the kingdom of heaven because his work allowed him to be conformed to Christ by giving all he had on earth and detaching himself from the world, but then **(verse 15)** comes right after stating if someone’s work is burned up, that one will suffer a loss. However, Paul then makes a remarkable statement following, **“the person will be SAVED, but only as through fire.”** telling us the loss is only temporary, not permanent. This has one whom might have believed that a wage is eternal life and loss of a wage is eternal damnation reconsider and look deeper into understanding there is just more to it. For example, the wage is eternal life and instant transformation to move on into the kingdom of heaven, but the loss that is suffered is temporary, yet includes eternal life as well, but only after a process of transformation to purge the stains of sin and imperfection so that our spirits can be made perfectly holy to be allowed entrance into heaven see **(Hebrews 12:22-23 “Now, you have approached Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and countless angels in festal gathering, and the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven, and God the judge of all, and the spirits of the just made perfect.”)** Now know even if one’s works were not fruitful and failed through the test of fire; say he failed to act prudently as well as failed to act to the best of his ability, his loss

he suffered during this test is not a loss of eternal life but a temporal suffering during a state of transformation that balances out his incurred imperfections created by none other than himself. Because of his faith, and his attempt to act according to the commandments of Christ regardless of his failures to gain perfection he is still allowed to receive salvation, but only through a process of purification and cleansing that will remove all the stains of venial sin, yes that is right forgiveness after death on earth, does this sound unusual see **(Matthew 12:32 “And whoever speaks 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.”)** Christ implies that certain sins that are not forgiven now may be forgiven in the age to come because he tells us that blasphemy against the holy Spirit will not be forgiven in this age nor the age to come, leading to the conclusion that some sin can be forgiven in the age to come. How do we know that this age is our lives on earth in the present time and the age to come is Eternal life, well let’s look at another statement he made in **(Luke 18:29-30 “Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God who will not receive [back] an overabundant return in this present age and eternal life in the age to come”)**. We see that in this present age, as referred to in this passage, is life on earth, and the age to come is our next life hopefully one of eternal life with God. So to recap, if nothing sinful or unclean can enter heaven and sin’s can be forgiven in the age to come, one must logically conclude there is a process in which we will be cleansed of whatever stains of sin remain before entering the kingdom of heaven. Once again, this is Purgatory a process that can cleanse, purify, refine and perfect ourselves so we can be perfectly holy so that we may enter into the kingdom of heaven see **(Revelation 21:27 but nothing unclean will enter it, nor any[one] who does abominable things or tells lies. Only those will enter whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.)** Now let us not forget that once our life ends here our ability to repent is gone, so it is good that we pray for those in Purgatory who cannot pray for themselves that their sins be forgiven as in **(2 Maccabees 12:40-42 “But under the tunic of each of the dead they found amulets sacred to the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear. So it was clear to all that this was why these men had been slain. They all therefore praised the ways of the Lord, the just judge who brings to light the things that are hidden.**

Turning to supplication, they prayed that the sinful deed might be fully blotted out.”) Also almsgiving and other penance for them on their behalf is beneficial see **(2 Maccabees 12:43-46 *He then took up a collection among all his soldiers, amounting to two thousand silver drachmas, which he sent to Jerusalem to provide for an expiatory sacrifice. In doing this he acted in a very excellent and noble way, inasmuch as he had the resurrection of the dead in view; for if he were not expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been useless and foolish to pray for them in death. But if he did this with a view to the splendid reward that awaits those who had gone to rest in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Thus he made atonement for the dead that they might be freed from this sin.*)** We know that God is God of the living and not the dead see **(Matthew 22:31 *“And concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”)*** so we know that our brothers and sisters who died in Jesus Christ are not dead but alive; therefore, when we pray, it is not for the dead but the living and our prayers are beneficial for them see **(James 5:16b *“The fervent prayer of a righteous person is very powerful”* and James 5:14 *“and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven”.*)** If we know prayer for our brothers and sisters living on earth is this beneficial see **(1 John 5:16a *If anyone sees his brother sinning, if the sin is not deadly, he should pray to God and he will give him life.*)** then we should understand that our departed brethren who live by eternal life are also just as important to pray for. Now back to purgatory, the purification and process of restitution which completely settles our debts and purges all stains of sin, making us perfectly holy, is truly a blessing and part of the guarantee of eternal life. The other verses when they speak of one being repaid according to his conduct, receiving recompense according to his deeds, receiving what our works deserve, receiving recompense for the wrong we committed, and receiving recompense according to what we did in the body whether good or evil, seem to have more meaning than just eternal life and eternal damnation, it seems to imply we will be justly repaid for everything that we have done whether good or evil see **(Romans 2:5-8 *“By your stubbornness and impotent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself for the day of wrath and revelation of the just judgment of God, who will repay***

everyone according to his works: eternal life to those who seek glory, honor and immortality through perseverance in good works, but wrath and fury to those who selfishly disobey the truth and obey wickedness.”) How can our works be repaid to us if the gift of Faith shown by our works is eternal life, well easy. What is purgatory again, it is a transformation that purifies, cleanses and refines our souls to perfection to be completely Holy. So when we do good works – **penance**- we restore what we have taken and make restitution for our actions on earth rather than making restitution in eternal life during purgatory see **(Luke 19:8 Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over.”)** It was the Law among the Jews to make restitution, but for us it is an opportunity to speed up our transformation in the age to come and when we do so even today we benefit from it, for what we have gained by sin and not returned after being forgiven will be paid before we enter heaven during judgment see **(Luke 12:57-59 “Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? If you are to go with your opponent before a magistrate, make an effort to settle the matter on the way; otherwise your opponent will turn you over to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the constable, and the constable throw you into prison. I say to you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny.”)** notice he didn’t say in this parable we will suffer death, but only we will remain until we pay the last penny of what is owed. Remain in Prison, where have we heard that before, well let us look at **(1 Peter 3:19-20 In it he also went to preach to the spirits in prison who had once been disobedient while God patiently waited in the days of Noah during the building of the ark, in which a few persons, eight in all, were saved through water.)** When we suffer a loss of what we gained by the means of a sin, it shows our repentance was not just words but action, we meant it. When we return what we have taken (when possible to the source we took from or another if that were to jeopardize our lives) we suffer a loss on earth, but gain a treasure in heaven see **(Matthew 6:19 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and decay destroy, and thieves break in and steal. But store up treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor decay destroys, nor thieves break in and steal”)** Everything we suffer on earth is not in vain we are gaining by every act of kindness, every dollar given up for Christ, every minute devoted to prayer, every second of scripture read,

every day of fasting throughout the year, every time we suffer ridicule for his name, etc., these are our means of storing up treasures in heaven. The more we give up on earth the closer we come to God , (1 Peter 4:1b ***“for whoever suffers in the flesh has broken with sin”***, by detaching ourselves from the world see Mark 8:36 ***“What profit is there for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life”?*** and 1 John 2:15 ***“Do not love the world or the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him”***). So know that when we gain by sin, we should suffer a loss to restore it, so it is as if we never gained at all and restitution is made and an act of Penance performed see (Tobit 12:8a ***“Prayer and fasting are good, but better than either is almsgiving accompanied by righteousness”***,. and Judith 4:9 ***“All the men of Israel cried to God with great fervor and did penance.”***) For those things we have done, that we have forgone restitution, they are still owed and our process through purgatory could be longer than we would prefer. Our salvation is not taken away, for we are forgiven by the blood and sacrifice of Jesus Christ not because we earned it, but because we held Faith in Christ and acted on it accordingly, not by accomplishing perfection in our works, but by attempting to act and be transformed into Christ see (1 John 2:6 ***“whoever claims to abide in him ought to live [just] as he lived”***). Now once sanctified and made perfect we then go to heaven to be in the full presence of God to continue living out our eternal life as promised, accomplished because of our faith in Jesus Christ which is shown by our works which cannot be separated from one another see (James 2:17 ***“So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead”*** and 1 John 3:18 ***“Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth”***.) So now when you think of purgatory, think of the gift it is, for us who are all imperfect and unable to live as we really should, but are trying desperately to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. Think of those who have not taken the time to know and live the fullness of the message of God because they are too busy in the world, thinking they will get to it later, yet calling upon his name and attempting act as best as they know how by the knowledge they have of God, which sometimes may be minimal. Be at peace, be comforted and never lose Hope in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who established salvation for the entire world, even the very imperfect.

References

<http://www.catholic.com/thisrock/2005/0501fea4.asp>

New American Bible ISBN 978-0-89942-950-2

Catechism of the Catholic Church Second Edition ISBN 1-57455-110-8