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Purgatory



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Purgatory

The Particular Judgment and Purgatory

Immediately after death comes God's judgment. Natural reason can grasp that since man has moral responsibility, he will be judged according to the law revealed to him in his conscience. We must make an accounting to God—author of the moral law—for the use of our freedom during the whole of our life. Evidently, this accounting must be made at the moment of death. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1021, states that “death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ.” At the moment of death, we will be judged by the level of our charity, or its lack. As Benedict says, “With death, our life-choice becomes definitive—our life stands before the judge. Our choice, which in the course of an entire life takes on a certain shape, can have a variety of forms.”¹

As we saw in the last talk, at death there can be three sorts of souls. There are souls who descend immediately into hell because they have loved themselves above all to the point of contempt of God, living in grave sin against charity for which they never repent. There are also souls who enter immediately into heaven, “people for whom communion with God even now gives direction to their entire being and whose journey towards God only brings to fulfilment what they already are.”

However, Benedict continues,

We know from experience that neither case is normal in human life. For the great majority of people—we may suppose—there remains in the depths of their being an ultimate interior openness to truth, to love, to God. In the concrete choices of life, however, it is covered over by ever new compromises with evil—much filth covers purity, but the thirst for purity remains and it still constantly re-emerges from all that is base and remains present in the soul.

Such souls have true contrition for their grave sins, through which they obtain forgiveness from God. However, Benedict asks, “What happens to such individuals when they appear before the Judge? Will all the impurity they have amassed through life suddenly cease to matter? What else might occur?”²

Such souls, who die in a state of grace but whose affection for sin is insufficiently purified, undergo purgation in Purgatory before ascending to heaven. For Luther and his followers in the Protestant Reformation, who denied the doctrine of Purgatory, all that impurity does simply *cease to matter*. However, Benedict is trying to help us to see that such it would be unfitting for God simply to overlook

all the impurity and compromise with evil in our souls that has not yet been sufficiently expiated.

Jewish Tradition on Purgatory

Although Jews do not use the word “Purgatory,” orthodox Judaism recognizes the necessity for most of the faithful departed of a period of purification before they can enter into the blessings of the world to come. For this reason, it is the duty of sons to pray the Mourner's Kaddish for the souls of their parents for the space of 11 months.³

Two weeks ago we heard a passage from the Talmud speaking about this purgation of the faithful departed. The school of Shammai taught:

“[There will be] three groups on the Day of Judgment [when the dead will rise]: one comprised of the thoroughly righteous, one comprised of the thoroughly wicked, and one of middling [people].

[C] “The thoroughly righteous immediately are inscribed and sealed for eternal life.

[D] “The thoroughly wicked immediately are inscribed and sealed for Gehenna,

[E] “as it is written [Dan. 12:2]: ‘And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to eternal life and some to shame and everlasting contempt.’

[F] “Middling [people] go down to Gehenna, scream [in prayer], and rise [again],

[G] “as it is written [Zech. 13:9]: ‘And I will put this third into the fire and refine them as one refines silver and test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name, and I will answer them.’

[H] “And, concerning this group, Hannah said [1 Sam. 2:6]: ‘The Lord kills and brings to life. He brings down to Sheol and raises up.’”⁴

Jewish tradition thus recognizes four elements that are key components of the Catholic understanding of Purgatory. First, it is reasonable to hope that the faithful departed who die in the practice of the faith die in the grace of God (for if they do not, then no prayers can help them). Secondly, it is reasonable to think that most of the faithful

3 The website, *Judaism 101*, explains this as follows: “Then why is Kaddish recited for only 11 months, when the mourning period is 12 months? According to Jewish tradition, the soul must spend some time purifying itself before it can enter the World to Come. The maximum time required for purification is 12 months, for the most evil person. To recite Kaddish for 12 months would imply that the parent was the type who needed 12 months of purification! To avoid this implication, the Sages decreed that a son should recite Kaddish for only eleven months.” Accessed on Feb. 25, 2015 at <http://www.jewfaq.org/death.htm>.

4 *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*, trans. Jacob Neusner (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011), vol. 6b, p. 83–84.

1 Benedict XVI, encyclical *Spe Salvi* 45.

2 *Spe Salvi* 46.

departed who die in the grace of God still need a period of purification before they can enter into the vision of God. Third, the period of time of purification varies from person to person according to the degree of their sins and habits of sin. We do not limit it, however, to twelve months. That is a symbolic number. God alone knows the time that each soul is allotted in Purgatory. Fourth, the prayers and sacrifices offered by the faithful can shorten the time that the suffering souls spend in Purgatory.

Sacrifice Offered for the Deceased in 2 Maccabees 12:39-45

This traditional Jewish doctrine on the necessity of purification after death for souls who die imperfectly prepared is witnessed by an episode in the Maccabean war recorded in the second book of Maccabees 12:39–45:

On the next day, as by that time it had become necessary, Judas and his men went to take up the bodies of the fallen and to bring them back to lie with their kinsmen in the sepulchres of their fathers. ⁴⁰ Then under the tunic of every one of the dead they found sacred tokens of the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear. And it became clear to all that this was why these men had fallen. ⁴¹ So they all blessed the ways of the Lord, the righteous Judge, who reveals the things that are hidden; ⁴² and they turned to prayer, beseeching that the sin which had been committed might be wholly blotted out. And the noble Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves free from sin, for they had seen with their own eyes what had happened because of the sin of those who had fallen. ⁴³ He also took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. ⁴⁴ For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. ⁴⁵ But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin.

Once again we see the hope of final salvation, the necessity of purification for those who died with some unexpiated sins (which we have to assume was not mortal), and the efficacy of prayer and sacrificial offering to hasten the process of purification.

Scriptural Texts on Purgatory in the New Testament

The New Testament alludes to Purgatory in several texts. The most important (and difficult) is 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, in which St. Paul says:

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and another man is building upon it. Let each man take care how he builds upon it. 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, straw — 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.

Each Christian builds up an edifice that is based on the foundation of Christ received in Baptism, consisting in the gift of sanctifying grace, faith, hope, and charity. Each man builds the edifice of his life on top of this gratuitous foundation through his free acts of virtue and vice. As long as mortal sin is avoided, the foundation remains. Nevertheless, the acts which each one builds on the foundation of sanctifying grace may be very different, which St. Paul compares with “gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, and straw.” Acts of heroic virtue will be gold and silver; acts of venial sin (and attachment thereto) will be hay and straw.

Furthermore, St. Paul makes it clear that the way in which each person has built up their Christian life will be manifested in judgment, consisting in a kind of test of fire. The fire will burn up the works of hay and straw, whereas the works of gold and silver will not be damaged but rather purified by the fire. What kind of fire is this? It is clear that St. Paul is not speaking about the fire of hell, for here he is referring only to those who retain the foundation which is Christ and His sanctifying grace. Therefore, the fire spoken of here can only be that of Purgatory and the exacting particular judgment of God. Everyone who suffers this “fire” will be saved, “but only as through fire.”

Another text that alludes to Purgatory is Matthew 12:32 on the sins against the Holy Spirit: “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 implies that some sins can be forgiven after this life. Now we know that this does not apply to unrepented mortal sins, which carry an eternal consequence. Therefore this reference to sins forgiven after this life should be taken to apply to the forgiveness of venial sins which occurs after this life in Purgatory.

Another text implying purification after death is Luke 12:58–59: “As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison. I tell you, you will never get out till you have paid the very last copper.”

St. Monica's Last Request

There are plenty of Patristic testimonies to the doctrine of Purgatory and the value of the offering of the Sacrifice of the Mass for the faithful departed who are undergoing that purification. One eloquent witness is given by St. Augustine in his Confessions when he recounts a conversation

with his mother shortly before her death in Ostia, outside of Rome. St. Augustine and his brother were at her bedside when she awoke from a coma. The brother expressed his hope that she would be able to return to North Africa and be buried together with her husband. She had nothing but scorn for that proposal, but made a very different request: “Bury this body anywhere. Let its care give you no concern. One thing only do I ask of you, that you remember me at the altar of the Lord, wherever you may be.”⁵

A few decades earlier, in the middle of the fourth century, St. Cyril of Jerusalem explained to the newly baptized of Jerusalem that the Eucharistic sacrifice is offered also for the souls of the faithful departed: “We offer Christ who has been slain for our sins, and so we appease the merciful God both on their behalf [the faithful departed] and on ours.”⁶

Magisterial Texts on Purgatory

The most important Magisterial text on Purgatory is from the Council of Trent, which defined the existence of Purgatory in reaction to the Protestant rejection of the doctrine:

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 . . . be believed by the faithful of Christ and that it be adhered to, taught, and preached everywhere.⁷

Before this the Council of Florence had already defined the doctrine:

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 that the faithful are wont to do for the other faithful according to the

5 St. Augustine, *Confessions* 9.10.27, trans. V. J. Bourke, (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1953), 254.

6 St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses* 5.10, in Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the RCIA*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 90.

7 Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, 43rd edition, ed. Peter Hünermann, English edition ed. Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), § 1820. See also Council of Trent, Session 6, Decree on Justification, canon 30, DS 1580: “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.”

Church’s practice.⁸

It had already been taught by the First Council of Lyon in 1245, concerning union with the Greeks. This text gives a good summary of the nature of purgatory, and the texts of the New Testament that speak of it:

Because the Truth in the Gospel affirms that if anyone speaks blasphemy against the Holy spirit he will not be forgiven either in this age or the age to come [cf. Mt 12:32]—by which it is understood that some sins are to be loosed in the present age and others in the future age—and, as the apostle says: “The work of each one, whatever it may be, will be tested by fire,” and “he whose work is burned up will suffer loss; though he himself will be saved but only as through fire” [1 Cor 3:13, 15]; and because it is said that the Greeks themselves, truly and without doubt, believe and affirm that the souls of those who die after receiving penance but without having performed it, or who die without mortal sin but with venial and slight sin, are purified after death and can be assisted by the suffrages of the Church: because they say that a certain and proper name was not indicated to them by their doctors for such a place of purgation; and because, according to the tradition and authority of the holy Fathers we call it “purgatory”; we wish that from henceforth it be called by this name among them. For indeed this temporary fire purifies sins, not however mortal or capital sins that were not previously remitted by penance, but small and minor sins that still weigh down after death even if during life they were forgiven.⁹

Eternal and Temporal Punishment for Sin

The existence and fittingness of Purgatory is bound together with the distinction between two types of punishment for sin: eternal and temporal. Every mortal sin, by its very nature, brings about the debt of two kinds of punishments: eternal and temporal. Venial sin, on the other hand, only causes a debt of temporal punishment. The reason for this is that in every mortal sin, as seen above, there is a movement of the will away from God and toward some created object that the will loves more than God because it is willing to break God’s law so as to obtain some created good. In other words, mortal sin carries with it both an aversion from God and a “conversion” to some creature. On account of these two aspects, there is a twofold disorder: (a) turning away from the infinite Good, and (b) turning toward some finite object deemed to be good, although in fact it is contrary to first moral principles. Each of these disorders naturally incurs its proper penalty. The proper penalty for turning away from the infinite Good is to lose that infinite Good. Thus if the will remains turned away from God until the moment of death, one incurs the eternal punishment of loss of God (pain of loss; *poena damni*).

8 Council of Florence, Decree for the Greeks, *Laetentur caeli*, DS 1304. See also the Constitution *Benedictus Deus* of 1336 by Benedict XII, DS1000.

9 DS 838.

The disordered turning to creatures against first moral principles and conscience naturally incurs a second penalty, which is the loss of those creaturely satisfactions that one sought in a disordered way. Since these creaturely satisfactions are finite, this penalty is finite by nature, and varies in degree according to the degree of the disorder. This temporal punishment is either suffered during this life, or, if it is not yet completed, in purgatory.

Venial sin only incurs a temporal punishment for sin because, by its nature, it does not involve a direct turning away from God, but only a “detour,” as it were, from His will. Since it involves a disordered attachment to some created satisfactions, it incurs temporal punishment for sin.

St. Thomas explains these consequences of sin in a brilliant article:

In mortal sin there are two things, namely, a turning from the immutable Good, and an inordinate turning to mutable good. Accordingly, in so far as mortal sin turns away from the immutable Good, it induces a debt of eternal punishment, so that whosoever sins against the eternal Good should be punished eternally. Again, in so far as mortal sin turns inordinately to a mutable good, it gives rise to a debt of some punishment, because the disorder of guilt is not brought back to the order of justice, except by punishment: since it is just that he who has been too indulgent to his will, should suffer something against his will, for thus will equality be restored. Hence it is written (Apocalypse 18:7): “As much as she hath glorified herself, and lived in delicacies, so much torment and sorrow give ye to her.”

Since, however, the turning to mutable good is finite, sin does not, in this respect, induce a debt of eternal punishment. Wherefore, if man turns inordinately to a mutable good, without turning from God, as happens in venial sins, he incurs a debt, not of eternal but of temporal punishment. Consequently when guilt is pardoned through grace, the soul ceases to be turned away from God, through being united to God by grace: so that at the same time, the debt of punishment is taken away, albeit a debt of some temporal punishment may yet remain.¹⁰

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1472–73 explains the distinction between eternal and temporal punishment:

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.

10 St. Thomas, *ST* III, q. 86, a. 4. See also *ST* I-II, 87, 4.

The forgiveness of sin and restoration of communion with God entail the remission of the eternal punishment of sin, but temporal punishment of sin remains. While patiently bearing sufferings and trials of all kinds and, when the day comes, serenely facing death, the Christian must strive to accept this temporal punishment of sin as a grace. He should strive by works of mercy and charity, as well as by prayer and the various practices of penance, to put off completely the “old man” and to put on the “new man.”

The Council of Trent infallibly defined that the forgiveness of the eternal punishment for sin does not necessarily mean the forgiveness of the temporal punishment, which will have to be satisfied by works of penance on earth or in purgatory:

The holy Synod declares that it is absolutely false and contrary to the word of God that the guilt is never forgiven by the Lord without the entire punishment also being remitted.¹¹

If anyone says that the whole punishment, together with the guilt, is always pardoned by God, and that the satisfaction of penitents is nothing other than faith, by which they perceive that Christ has made satisfaction for them: let him be anathema.

If anyone says that the keys have been given to the Church only to loose, and not also to bind, and that therefore priests, by imposing penalties on those who confess, act contrary to the institution of Christ; and that it is fiction that, after eternal punishment has been remitted by virtue of the keys, there usually remains a temporal punishment to be discharged: let him be anathema.¹²

Pope Benedict on Purgatory in Spe Salvi

Pope Benedict XVI has a very interesting discussion of Purgatory in his encyclical on Christian hope, *Spe salvi*. He cites the text of 1 Corinthians 3:12–15. He then says:

In this text, it is in any case evident that our salvation can take different forms, that some of what is built may be burned down, that in order to be saved we personally have to pass through “fire” so as to become fully open to receiving God and able to take our place at the table of the eternal marriage-feast.¹³

But of what kind of fire is St. Paul speaking? Benedict mentions the suggestion of some recent theologians that the purifying fire consists in an encounter with Christ:

In the pain of this encounter, when the impurity and sickness of our lives become evident to us, there lies salvation. His gaze, the touch of his heart heals us through an undeniably painful transformation ‘as through fire’. But it is a blessed pain, in which the holy power of his love sears through us like a flame, enabling us to become totally ourselves and thus totally of God. In this way the inter-relation between justice and grace also becomes clear: the way we live our lives is not immaterial, but our defilement does not

11 Council of Trent, session 14, ch. 8, DS 1689, Denz 904.

12 Council of Trent, session 14, canons 12 and 15, DS 1712 and 1715, Denz 922 and 925.

13 *Spe Salvi* 46.

stain us for ever if we have at least continued to reach out towards Christ, towards truth and towards love. Indeed, it has already been burned away through Christ's Passion. At the moment of judgement we experience and we absorb the overwhelming power of his love over all the evil in the world and in ourselves. The pain of love becomes our salvation and our joy. It is clear that we cannot calculate the "duration" of this transforming burning in terms of the chronological measurements of this world. The transforming "moment" of this encounter eludes earthly time-reckoning—it is the heart's time, it is the time of "passage" to communion with God in the Body of Christ.¹⁴

A denial of Purgatory (and hell) would do violence to the human aspiration for complete justice. In a very profound passage, Benedict writes:

The judgment of God is hope, both because it is justice and because it is grace. If it were merely grace, making all earthly things cease to matter, God would still owe us an answer to the question about justice—the crucial question that we ask of history and of God. If it were merely justice, in the end it could bring only fear to us all. The incarnation of God in Christ has so closely linked the two together—judgment and grace—that justice is firmly established: we all work out our salvation 'with fear and trembling' (Phil 2:12). Nevertheless grace allows us all to hope.¹⁵

Another aspect of the fittingness of Purgatory is the fact that the members of the Church on earth are graced with the capacity to aid the souls in Purgatory, especially through the Eucharist, prayer, and almsgiving. Since all the members of the Church form one Body of Christ, it is fitting that the suffering members in Purgatory can be aided by the Sacrifice of Christ, offered daily in the Mass, and through the prayers and sacrifices of the faithful, united to Christ. As we have seen, one of Benedict's concerns in the encyclical is to counter the idea that Christian salvation is something essentially individual. The aid that the living can give to the souls in Purgatory is a beautiful demonstration of the bonds of charity uniting the communion of saints. Furthermore, it is a source of great comfort to the family members of the faithful departed to be able to aid their deceased loved ones. Pope Emeritus Benedict writes:

The belief that love can reach into the afterlife, that reciprocal giving and receiving is possible, in which our affection for one another continues beyond the limits of death—this has been a fundamental conviction of Christianity throughout the ages and it remains a source of comfort today. Who would not feel the need to convey to their departed loved ones a sign of kindness, a gesture of gratitude or even a request for pardon?¹⁶

The idea that the living can aid the souls in Purgatory is often a scandal to the modern mind, especially through the influence of Protestantism. We are accustomed to thinking that each man is responsible for himself alone.

How can the prayer of the living benefit the dead? Yet, as Benedict explains:

No man is an island, entire of itself. Our lives are involved with one another, through innumerable interactions they are linked together. No one lives alone. No one sins alone. No one is saved alone. The lives of others continually spill over into mine: in what I think, say, do and achieve. And conversely, my life spills over into that of others: for better and for worse. So my prayer for another is not something extraneous to that person, something external, not even after death. In the interconnectedness of Being, my gratitude to the other—my prayer for him—can play a small part in his purification. . . . Our hope is always essentially also hope for others; only thus is it truly hope for me too. As Christians we should never limit ourselves to asking: how can I save myself? We should also ask: what can I do in order that others may be saved and that for them too the star of hope may rise? Then I will have done my utmost for my own personal salvation as well.¹⁷

We see how Protestantism, by eliminating the doctrine of Purgatory, indulgences, and the sharing of merits in the treasury of the Church, has unintentionally fostered an excessively individualistic deformation of Christian hope. We have to recover the early Christian (and Jewish) sense of solidarity with the faithful departed undergoing purification who need our prayers, as with the blessed who aid us with their intercession.

14 *Spe Salvi* 47.

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Spe Salvi* 48.

17 *Ibid.*