

Toward a Better Understanding of Purgatory

There is a degree of confusion and misunderstanding regarding Purgatory that is often shared by Catholics and non-Catholics alike. The purpose of this essay is address the subject of Purgatory so that all of God's faithful will come to a deeper understanding of His love, divine mercy and tender care for the souls of each one of us.

Common Misconceptions

Let us frankly examine the common misconceptions regarding the subject of Purgatory as expressed in the following statements that are typically made by Catholics, non-Catholics and non-Christians:

1. Purgatory is something created by the Popes. There is no mention of "purgatory" in the Bible.
2. Purgatory is simply a scheme concocted by the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages to squeeze more money out of the ignorant masses.
3. If you are "born-again" when you die you go straight to heaven. You have no need for a Purgatory.
4. Jesus' blood covers our sins and praying for the dead is a waste of time; you are either a believer and go to Heaven or you are not saved and you go to Hell.
5. There is no scriptural support for Purgatory.
6. Purgatory is just a Catholic invention.
7. I do not believe in God, and I think everything you Christians believe is a collection of fairy tales.

There may be other misconceptions voiced by Catholics, non-Catholics and non-Christians, but essentially the argument in opposition comes down to (a) there is no Biblical support for the idea of Purgatory or (b) Purgatory is a recent invention concocted by the Catholic Church for ulterior motives.

What is Purgatory and How Does it Relate to Heaven and Hell?

We presently live as human beings created in the image and likeness of God. As such, we live at the very crossroads where the material and spiritual universes intersect. Accordingly, we presently live bounded by matter and space and time. Although through original sin we find that

our nature as beings created in His image and likeness is presently wounded and for a time we live a little lower than the angels (Psalm 8), we are destined through confession of our faith in Jesus Christ and the holy work that flows from such faith and the sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist, to be raised to the full statute of Christ and partake, through His grace, in His divine nature.

The Catholic Church teaches and it exclusively has the sacraments to prepare us to become the Sons of God and to share in and partake of the divine nature. This is the process of theosis. We do not become God or Gods, but God as our Father grants that we may become his Sons:

1. My dear people, we are already the children of God but what we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed; all we know is, that when it is revealed we shall be like him because we shall see him as he really is. —St. John, I John 3:2
2. Jesus answered: Is it not written in your Law: I said, you are gods? So the Law uses the word gods of those to whom the word of God was addressed, and scripture cannot be rejected. Jesus, John 10:34-35
3. He has given us all the things that we need for life and for true devotion, bringing us to know God himself... through them you will be able to share the divine nature. — II Peter 1:3-4a
4. In this way we are all to come to unity in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God, until we become the perfect Man, fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself. —St. Paul, Ephesians 4:13

Heaven, Hell and Purgatory are not places. They are states of being of spiritual beings whether an angel, demon or human soul. The Holy Father, Blessed John Paul II, noted that “[t]his language of *place* is inadequate to describe the realities involved, since it is tied to the temporal order in which this world and we exist.” In this he is applying the philosophical categories used by the Church in her theology and saying what St. Thomas Aquinas said long before him:

"Incorporeal things are not in *place* after a manner known and familiar to us, in which way we say that bodies are properly in *place*; but they are in *place* after a manner befitting spiritual substances, a manner that cannot be fully manifest to us." [St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Supplement, Q69, a1, reply 1]

Heaven is the fullness of communion with God as noted in the Holy Father's catechesis at the General Audience of July 21, 1999. Heaven "is neither an abstraction nor a physical place in the clouds, but a living, personal relationship with the Holy Trinity. It is our meeting with the Father which takes place in the risen Christ through the communion of the Holy Spirit," the Pope said.

When the form of this world has passed away, those who have welcomed God into their lives and have sincerely opened themselves to his love, at least at the moment of death, will enjoy that fullness of communion with God which is the goal of human life. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, "this perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity this communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, the angels and all the blessed is called 'heaven'. Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfilment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness.

Hell, as the Holy Father stated, "is the ultimate consequence of sin itself. Rather than a place, hell indicates the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy". God is the infinitely good and merciful Father. But man, called to respond to him freely, can unfortunately choose to reject his love and forgiveness once and for all, thus separating himself for ever from joyful communion with him. It is precisely this tragic situation that Christian doctrine explains when it speaks of eternal damnation or hell. It is not a punishment imposed externally by God but a development of premises already set by people in this life. The very dimension of unhappiness which this obscure condition brings can in a certain way be sensed in the light of some of the terrible experiences we have suffered which, as is commonly said, make life "hell".

In a theological sense, hell is the ultimate consequence of sin itself, which turns against the person who committed it. It is the state of those who definitively reject the Father's mercy, even at the last moment of their life. In the Old Testament the condition of the dead had not yet been fully disclosed by Revelation. Moreover it was thought that the dead were amassed in Sheol, a land of darkness (cf. Ez. 28:8; 31:14; Jb. 10:21f.; 38:17; Ps 30:10; 88:7, 13), a pit from which one cannot re-ascend (cf. Jb. 7:9), a place in which it is impossible to praise God (cf. Is 38:18; Ps 6:6).

The New Testament sheds new light on the condition of the dead, proclaiming above all that Christ by his Resurrection conquered death and extended his liberating power to the kingdom of the dead. Redemption nevertheless remains an offer of salvation which it is up to people to accept freely. "Eternal damnation", therefore, is not attributed to God's initiative because in His merciful love He can only desire the salvation of the beings He created. In reality, it is the creature who closes himself to his love. Damnation consists precisely in definitive separation from God, freely chosen by the human person and confirmed with death that seals his choice for ever. God's judgement sadly but simply ratifies this state

Purgatory. God desires that all souls share in the holy, joyful and beatific life in communion with the Trinity, but some human souls choose Hell. Some human souls leave this life desiring life eternal with God, but at the moment of death are still stained by sin; living in sin; and with a continued propensity to sin. Putting aside the state of the souls of those martyrs and saints who have died in a holy state and immediately awake from death and stand in the presence of the Lord and our Blessed Mother, the angels and saints, many of us would concede that we are not "heaven-ready". Do we, nevertheless, immediately awake from death and stand in the presence of the Lord?

Scripture tells that “nothing unclean shall enter heaven.” Revelation 21:27. In the Letter to the Hebrews, we are cautioned to strive “for that holiness without which no one will see the Lord” but also comforted by the knowledge that God, the judge of all, will assemble in heaven the spirits of the just [baptized] made perfect.” Hebrews 12:12, 23.

How are we made clean and made perfect and holy so that we may “see” God? The author of the Letter to the Hebrews answers this question by telling us that “our God is a consuming fire.” Hebrews 12:29.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul explains that “if any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.” 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. The phrase for "suffer loss" in the Greek is "zemiothesetai." The root word is "zemioo" which also refers to punishment. The construction “zemiothesetai” is also used in Exodus 21:22 and Proverbs 19:19 which refers to punishment (from the Hebrew “anash” meaning “punish” or “penalty”). These verses point to the fact that there is an expiation or temporal punishment after our death, but the person is still saved. This cannot mean heaven (there is no punishment in heaven) and this cannot mean hell (the possibility of expiation no longer exists and the person is not saved).

Further, Paul writes “he himself will be saved, "but only" (or “yet so”) as through fire.” “He will be saved” in the Greek is “sothesetai” (which means eternal salvation). The phrase "but only" (or “yet so”) in the Greek is "houtos" which means "in the same manner." This means that man is both eternally rewarded and eternally saved in the same manner by fire. 1 Corinthians 3:15.

Is There Scriptural Authority for Purgatory?

Some Fundamentalists charge that the word Purgatory is nowhere to be found in Scripture. This is true, and yet it does not disprove the existence of Purgatory or the fact that belief in it has always been part of Church teaching. The words *Trinity* and *Incarnation* are not in Scripture either, yet those doctrines are clearly taught and revealed in the Old and New Testaments. Let us examine several scriptural passages that teach us about Purgatory.

1. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says: “And anyone who says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but no one who speaks against the Holy Spirit will be forgiven either in this world or in the next.” Jesus thus clearly provides that there is forgiveness after death. The phrase “in the next” (from the Greek “en to mellonti”) generally refers to the afterlife. Matthew 12:32.

Now, forgiveness is not necessary in heaven, and there is no possibility of forgiveness in hell.

This proves that there must be another state after death, and the Church for 2,000 years has called this state purgatory.

2. In a parable Jesus tells in Luke's Gospel, when the Master comes (at the end of time), some will receive light or heavy beatings but will live. This state is not heaven or hell, because in heaven there are no beatings, and in hell we will no longer live with the Master. Luke 12:47-48.
3. In the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, Jesus describes the story of the dead rich man is suffering but still feels compassion for his brothers and wants to warn them of his place of suffering. But there is no suffering in heaven or compassion in hell because compassion is a grace from God and those in hell are deprived from God's graces for all eternity. So where is the rich man? He is in purgatory. Luke 16:19-31.
4. In Paul's First Letter to the Church at Corinth, Paul mentions people being baptized on behalf of the dead, in the context of atoning for their sins (people are baptized on the dead's behalf so the dead can be raised). These people cannot be in heaven because they are still with sin, but they also cannot be in hell because for those souls in hell their sins can no longer be atoned for. Where or in what state must they be? They must be in purgatory. 1 Corinthians 15:29-30
5. In Paul Epistle to the Philippians, Paul concludes one of the early and beautiful doxologies of the Church by noting that at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bend in heaven, on earth, and "under the earth." The phrase "under the earth" cannot mean hell since those souls have rejected God and totally separated themselves from His mercy, love and worship. It must refer to the realm of the righteous dead or Purgatory. Philippians 2:10.
6. In Paul's Second Letter to Timothy, he asks for prayer for the family of Onesiphorus who had died. Paul asks for mercy on him "on that day." Paul's use of "that day" demonstrates its eschatological usage. There is no need for mercy in heaven, and there is no mercy given in hell. Where is Onesiphorus? If he is not in Heaven or Hell, then he must be in Purgatory. 2 Timothy 1:16-18 .
7. Jesus preached to the spirits in the "prison." These are the righteous souls being purified for the beatific vision. 1 Peter 3:19; 4:6.
8. We learn in Revelation 21:4 that God shall wipe away our tears, and there will be no mourning or pain, but this is only after the coming of the new heaven and the passing away of the current heaven and earth. Note the elimination of tears and pain only occurs at the end of time. But there is no mourning or pain in heaven, and God will not wipe away their tears in hell. This passage must refer to the souls experiencing the cleansing and refining fire of His love in Purgatory.
9. In this same Chapter from Revelation, the writer tells us that nothing unclean shall enter heaven. The word "unclean" comes from the Greek word "koinon" which refers

to a spiritual corruption. Even the propensity to sin is spiritually corrupt, or considered unclean, and must be purified before entering heaven. Purgatory exists because of the mercy of God. If there were no purgatory, how are we refined so that even the propensity to sin in our fallen natures is removed? Without such an avenue for most of us, there would also likely mean no salvation for us. God is merciful indeed.

10. In the Old Testament, there are many examples of ritual prayer and penitent mourning for the dead for specific periods of time. The Jewish understanding of these practices was that the prayers freed the souls from their painful state of purification, and expedited their journey to God. Gen. 50:10; Num. 20:29; Deut. 34:8
11. The prophet Baruch, a well-known assistant to Jeremiah, asks the Lord to hear the prayers of the dead of Israel. Prayers for the dead are unnecessary in heaven and fruitless in hell. Where or rather in what state must these dead be? Purgatory. Baruch 3:4.
12. God, through the blood of His covenant, will set those free from the waterless pit, a spiritual abode of suffering which the Church calls purgatory. Zechariah 9:11.
13. In 2 Maccabees 12:43-45, Judas Maccabee asks for prayers for the dead to help free them from sin and help them on to the reward of heaven.

Those in heaven have no sin and have no need for prayer.

Those in hell can no longer be freed from sin and prayers for the dead in Hell are a waste of time.

As St. John Chrysostom, an outstanding homilist of the Third Century exhorts us:

“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.”

Beliefs Held by the Early Church Fathers on Purgatory

Far from Purgatory being some medieval invention, the belief in Purgatory as a state of being for departed souls by which they may be purified, made holy and prepared for heaven may be traced back to the Book of Genesis and especially the Apostles and early Church Fathers.

1. Saint Augustine said, in *The City of God*, that "temporary punishments are suffered by some in this life only, by others after death, by others both now and then; but all

of them before that last and strictest judgment" (21:13). It is between the particular and general judgments, then, that the soul is purified of the remaining consequences of sin: "I tell you, you will never get out till you have paid the very last copper" (Luke 12:59).

2. Monica, the mother of Saint Augustine asked her son to remember her soul in his Masses. This would make no sense if she thought her soul would not benefit from prayers, as would be the case if she were in hell or in the full glory of heaven.
3. Pope Gregory explains the graffiti found in the catacombs where Christians during the persecutions of the first three centuries recorded prayers for the dead. Indeed, some of the earliest Christian writings outside the New Testament, like the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity* (both written during the second century), refer to the Christian practice of praying for the dead. Such prayers would have been offered only if Christians believed in purgatory, even if they did not use that name for it.
4. "Let us pray for our brethren that are at rest in Christ, that God, the lover of mankind, who has received his soul, may forgive him every sin, voluntary and involuntary, and may be merciful and gracious to him, and give him his lot in the land of the pious that are sent into the bosom of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, with all those that have pleased Him and done His will from the beginning of the world, whence all sorrow, grief, and lamentation are banished." *Apostolic Constitutions*, 8:4,41 (3rd Century).
5. "When he has quitted his body and the difference between virtue and vice is known he cannot approach God till the purging fire shall have cleansed the stains with which his soul was infested. That same fire in others will cancel the corruption of matter, and the propensity to evil." *Gregory of Nyssa, Sermon on the Dead, PG 13:445,448 (ante A.D. 394)*.
6. "Each one will be presented to the Judge exactly as he was when he departed this life. Yet, there must be a cleansing fire before judgment, because of some minor faults that may remain to be purged away. Does not Christ, the Truth, say that if anyone blasphemes against the Holy Spirit he shall not be forgiven 'either in this world or in the world to come'(Mt. 12:32)? From this statement we learn that some sins can be forgiven in this world and some in the world to come. For, if forgiveness is refused for a particular sin, we conclude logically that it is granted for others. This must apply, as I said, to slight transgressions." *Gregory the Great [regn. A.D. 590-604], Dialogues, 4:39 (A.D. 594)*.

Purgatory - Insights of the Saints and Venerables

Saint Catherine of Genoa

Pope Benedict XVI at a recent audience reflected on Saint Catherine of Genoa and her insights on Purgatory. The Pope said that Saint Catherine, a Fifteenth Century Italian mystic, did not focus on the “torments” of purgatory but rather called it an “interior fire” that purifies and inflames our hearts with God's love.

Saint Catherine was born into a wealthy family and was married at the age of 16. Although she received a Christian education at home, she initially lived a worldly existence and experienced difficulty in her marriage, which caused her great bitterness, coupled with a profound sense of emptiness. However, as a result of a unique spiritual experience she realized not only her own sin but also the goodness of God which led her to change her life. She then began what Pope Benedict XVI called a journey of purification and mystical communion with the Lord.

Saint Catherine did not see Purgatory “as a place of transit in the depths of the earth” or as “an exterior fire.” Rather, she saw it as “an interior fire.” Her insights do not “recount the torments of Purgatory and then show the way to purification and conversion,” Pope Benedict XVI explained. Instead, “she began from the interior experience of man on his journey towards eternity.”

For Saint Catherine, the soul in Purgatory “is aware of God's immense love and perfect justice; as a consequence, it suffers for not having responded to that love perfectly, and it is precisely the love of God Himself which purifies the soul from the ravages of sin,” he said.

Pope Benedict recalled that Saint Catherine used the image of a thread of gold linking the human heart to God as a depiction of the relationship between a soul in Purgatory and God. “In this way the heart of man is inundated with the love of God, which becomes his only guide, the only driving force in his life.” “This situation of elevation towards God and abandonment to His will, as expressed in the image of the thread, is used by Catherine to express the action of divine light on the souls in Purgatory, a light which purifies and raises them towards the splendor of the dazzling rays of God,” he said.

“In their experience of union with God, saints achieve so profound an 'understanding' of the divine mysteries, in which love and knowledge almost become one, that they can even help theologians in their studies,” the Pope noted. [Yes, this is a truth of immense proportions!!!] “St. Catherine's life teaches us that the more we love God and enter into intimate contact with Him through prayer, the more He makes Himself known and inflames our hearts with His love. By writing about Purgatory, the saint reminds us of a fundamental truth of the faith which becomes an invitation for us to pray for the dead, that they may achieve the blessed vision of God in the communion of the saints,” he said.

Sister Maria Simma

Sister Maria Simma was an Austrian mystic nun who was born in 1915 and died in 2004. As with many incredible women of faith such as Saint Catherine of Genoa and Saint Faustina, Sister Maria Simma was visited by many of the souls in Purgatory and recorded these discussions in a booklet entitled: *The Amazing Secret of the Souls in Purgatory*, [an interview with Maria Simma written by Sister Emmanuel of Medjugorje] published by Queenship Publishing Co., P.O. Box 220, Goleta, CA 93116, USA (Phone 800-647-9882, Fax: 805-967-5843).

[I would commend to your further study and meditation the writings of Venerable Mary of Agreda, Saint Faustina the Apostle of Divine Mercy, Sister Maria Simma and many others. Their mystical experiences with the Blessed Mother, the souls in Purgatory and our Savior truly provide spiritual illumination of the first order. Many of these incredible women rest in Shrines around the globe as the Incorruptibles.]

From Sister Maria Simma's personal experiences as an example, we learn the following:

1. The one thing the souls in Purgatory ask of us the most is that we have Masses celebrated for them and be present at the Masses to pray for them because it is Christ who offers Himself out of love for us. It is the offering of Christ Himself to God, the most beautiful offering
2. The souls in Purgatory are visited by our Blessed Mother who consoles them. Mary asks that we say Rosaries and Stations of the Cross for these departed. When the souls in Purgatory hear Mary's name, there is great joy.
3. It is the souls in Purgatory themselves who ask to go to Purgatory so that they may be made pure before going to heaven.
4. Souls go to Purgatory and remain there for such "duration" as is appropriate to that soul's spiritual state and walk with the Lord. Sister Maria Simma tells of the souls of a husband and wife who had died at practically the same time. The soul of the woman was already in heaven but the man's soul was still in heaven. The woman had died while undergoing an abortion, whereas the man often went to church and apparently led a worthy, devout life. The woman had experienced deep repentance, and was very humble, whereas the man criticized everyone; he was always complaining and saying bad things about others. This is why his Purgatory lasted so long. Maria concluded: "We mustn't judge on appearances."
5. The actual duration of a soul in Purgatory may "seem" to us from the accounts Sister Maria Simma shares as being centuries long or mere moments.

6. At the moment of death, the time for us to earn merits is over. For as long as we are living on earth, we can repair the evil we have done. The souls in Purgatory envy us of this opportunity. Even the angels are jealous of us, for we have the possibility of growing for as long as we are on earth
7. The souls in Purgatory of those who have committed suicide profoundly regret what they have done. Often, suicide is due to illness. These souls do regret their act because, as they see things in the light of God, they understand instantly all the graces that were in store for them during the time remaining for them to live and they do see this time which remained for them, sometimes months or years and they also see all the souls they could have helped by offering the rest of their lives to God. In the end, what hurts them most is to see the good that they could have done but did not, because they shortened their lives. But when the cause is illness, the Lord takes this into account, of course.
8. The souls in Purgatory have a great joy and hope in the time of their suffering and purification.
9. Do not waste your earthly sufferings!!!
10. The angels with our Mother of Mercy come to Purgatory to relieve suffering and provide comfort. The souls in Purgatory can see them.
11. The souls we are discussing do not come “out” of Purgatory so much as they enter Heaven, as do the Saints, with Purgatory within them. The humility, contrition, love, obedience, worship, joy and blessings that they have come to know and live in Purgatory are no means left behind in Purgatory but remain within these souls as they enter into the presence of the Most Holy Trinity, the angels and saints and the Blessed Mother.