

# PURGATORY

## The Biblical Roots of a Sensible Teaching

The Catholic teaching of Purgatory is one of the teachings of the Church that many today struggle to understand. Non-Catholics have generally rejected this teaching, calling it unbiblical. Actually, it is quite biblical and the biblical roots of the teaching will be shown in this flyer. Many Catholics however, influenced and embarrassed by the protests of non-Catholics have been led to downplay, question or even reject this teaching. The task of this reflection is to set forth the Catholic teaching on Purgatory as both biblical and reasonable. It is perhaps best to begin with a description of the teaching on Purgatory, then show its biblical roots. Finally it will be good to show why the teaching makes sense based on what God has said to us about holiness and heaven.

### What is Purgatory?

The Catechism says the following on purgation and Purgatory: *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 attain 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.* (Catechism 1030-1031). Hence Purgatory is more of a process than a place. Jesus declared that we must be *perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect* (Matt 5:48, Rev 3:2). Other Scriptures also teach that we are called to ultimate perfection (e.g. 2 Cor 7:1; James 1:4) Further heaven is described in the Bible as a place of those who have been made perfect (Heb 12:23; Rev 21:27). The Church takes these promises of ultimate perfection and heaven as the place of that perfection very seriously. If that perfection is not attained by the time of death then, before entering heaven, the Church understands from the Word of God that we must undergo a final purification that brings to completion the good work that God has begun in us (cf

Phil 1:6). The need for purgation thus flows from the promises of God that we shall one day be perfect. Exactly how this purgation (or purification) is carried out is not revealed explicitly. Some have used the image of fire based on certain scripture texts (e.g. 1 Cor 3:13-15, Isaiah 6:5-7; Malachi 3:2-3). However, as can be seen in the quote already supplied, the Catechism is careful to point out that this is entirely different from the punishment of fire experienced in hell. Thus to summarize, Purgatory is a place and a process of final purification which the elect undergo after death, if necessary, before entering heaven.



### A Biblical Teaching

Some have dismissed the Catholic teaching on Purgatory calling it unbiblical. It is true, the word "Purgatory" does not appear in the Bible, but neither does the word "Trinity." Despite the fact that the word "Trinity" does not appear in the Bible every Christian still accepts the teaching since the Scriptures contain the truth of the teaching the word conveys. It is the same with Purgatory. Though the word does not appear in the Bible, the teaching does. We do well then to examine some

Bible texts and thereby learn that Purgatory is a Biblical teaching.

Consider the following passage from the Gospel of Luke: *You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky; but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? "And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? Settle with your opponent on the way to court, 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 not get out till you have paid the very last penny."* (Luke 12:56-59) The context of this passage seems clearly to be one of judgement, and in particular the judgement we will one day face. We may ask who is the judge? It is Jesus for Scripture says, *The Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son* (John 5:22). We may also ask, what is the "prison" referred to in this passage? We may instinctively think of Hell. But that could not be correct in this instance for the text clearly indicates that one will emerge from the prison after the last penny is paid. Hell is a place from which no one emerges (cf Mk 9:48, Lk 16:26 etc). Thus the "prison" cannot be hell, surely it is not heaven. There must then be some place, after judgement, wherein an individual may be detained for a time and then released, after "paying the last penny." Our Catholic tradition calls this place Purgatory. Though the Lord in this passage clearly urges us to settle our accounts before facing the judge, there does seem to be a chance to settle accounts later if this be deemed necessary.

Consider another passage from the First Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians: *Each man's work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, 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 [of Christ] 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. 3:13-15). This is surely a complicated passage but again there seems to be a judgment scene described here. Each person's work will be judged, their works will be tested by fire. Some shall receive reward. Others will suffer loss. Ultimately they are saved but "only as through fire" according to the text. Thus there seems to be a sort of purification accomplished for some. On the day of judgement what is imperfect or unbecoming will be burned away. Now this entry unto salvation "through fire" cannot be in heaven since there is no pain and loss is not suffered there. Nor can it be Hell since that is an eternal fire from which there is no escape (cf Matt 25:41). Hence there must be some place of purifying fire through which some pass in the life to come. Our Catholic tradition calls this Purgatory.

Consider yet another passage. In Matthew 12:32 our Lord says *Whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.* This text implies that there is the forgiveness of some sins to be had in the world to come. But where could this place be? It cannot be heaven since there is no sin to be forgiven there (cf Rev 21:27). It cannot be hell since forgiveness is not granted there and there is no escape (Lk 16:26). Hence there must be some third place in the "age to come" where the forgiveness of sin can be experienced. Catholic tradition and teaching calls this Purgatory. Here individuals in a state of friendship with God and faith in Him may receive forgiveness for certain sins committed in life and be purged of the injustices and effects of those sins.

There is also a teaching in Scripture from the Book of Maccabees: *It is therefore a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins.* (2 Mac 12:43-46) Although most non-Catholics do not accept Maccabees as a Book of the Bible it does give us historical evidence that

praying for the dead was a Jewish practice. Christ nowhere condemns such prayers nor does any New Testament text dismiss such practices.

These scriptural texts have been reviewed to show that the Catholic teaching on Purgatory does have Biblical basis. The claim that Catholic teaching on this matter is "unbiblical" is thus unfounded. There is a biblical basis and foundation for the Church to teach that after death a purification is both available and in many cases necessary.

#### **A Sensible Teaching.**

Not only is there a Biblical basis for the teaching on Purgatory, there is an argument for the fittingness of this teaching based on Biblical teaching. In other words, the teaching makes sense based on the promises contained in scripture to those who have been called to be saints.

Scripture teaches that Heaven is a place of perfect happiness where there is no more sorrow or pain, no more death, no more tears (cf Rev 21:23-24). The saints in heaven are perfectly holy and we are thus exhorted here on earth to *Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord* (Heb 12:14). And regarding heaven Scripture says, *But nothing unclean shall enter it, nor any one who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.* (Rev 21:27) Christ also teaches us very solemnly, *You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect* (Mat 5:48).

Now this raises a question: What happens to those who die in a state of grace and friendship with God but are not yet perfect? Most of us will admit, if we were to die at this very moment, we could not honestly say that we are perfect. Even assuming that we are in a state of grace and friendship with God, we can likely see there are still some rough edges to our personality and that we still struggle with certain habitual sins

and shortcomings. Likewise, most of us carry within us certain sorrows, regrets or misunderstandings from the past. Despite effort, we may have not been able to fully let go of these things. It is clear that we cannot take any of this with us to heaven. If we did, it would not be a place of perfect joy and total sinlessness.

Obviously we must be purged of any final imperfections, sins, and sorrows before entering heaven. Every tear must be wiped from our eyes (Rev 21:4), every sorrow left behind, every wound healed. Only then will we be able to experience heaven. Ideally this takes place here on earth as we read in James 1:4 *And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.* Yet many of us know that this process is seldom complete at death. Thus, presuming that we die in a state of grace and friendship with God, Christ will surely complete his work in us (for he is faithful to his promises) by purging us of whatever imperfections, venial sins, or sorrowful effects of sins that still remain. Further, all punishments due to sin are completed.

Thus, the teaching on Purgatory seems quite fitting based on the promise of Jesus that we would one day be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect, lacking in nothing. If we die before this process is complete, then something must happen after death to transform us into the glory which we have been promised and to which we have been called. Catholic teaching and tradition assigns the term "Purgatory" to this process of completion and transformation.

Perhaps, in this light, it is good to conclude with a prayer and blessing from St. Paul: *In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion at the day of Christ Jesus.* (Phil 1:4-6)