

Why Do Catholics Believe in Purgatory?

By Graham Osborne

The Catholic doctrine of Purgatory has been hotly contested but greatly misunderstood over the last few centuries of Christianity. But most that try to refute this doctrine don't actually understand what the church teaches.

The whole concept of purgatory is based on the simple idea in Revelation 21:27 that "nothing unclean shall enter heaven". Coming from the Latin, *purgatorium*, which means to purify or cleanse, Purgatory is simply the name the Church has given to describe the process of purification that God applies to those who die in His grace and friendship, but are still suffering from some form of imperfection, venial sin, or unremitted punishment due to sin at the time of their death –ultimately, some form of self-love that does not allow them to love God perfectly [see the Catechism, sections 1030-1031, 1472-1473].

The Catechism describes this perfectly: "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 [CCC 1030- 1031].

The Church does not specify how God will accomplish this purification, and has never defined Purgatory as a specific place, or as a particular period of time either. Any mention of time you might see connected to Purgatory is a misunderstanding of the practice, particularly common in earlier times in the Church, of reducing a particular period of earthly penance that might have been attached to a forgiven sin. But such time periods would rightly have nothing to do with Purgatory itself, or the amount of time one might "spend" there.

And let us be absolutely clear. Purgatory is not a second chance at Heaven for someone who has died in a state of mortal or "deadly" sin -very serious un-confessed sin, in which the person has willingly turned away from God and broken his relationship with Him, resulting in eternal separation from God –Hell. [see 1 John 5:16]. Anyone who dies and "goes to", or experiences, purgatory is ultimately destined for Heaven. Purgatory is simply a merciful, God-given preparation for Heaven for those who need it. God does this in order that we may be purified of all sin and its effect, so that we may enter into Heaven and stand in His holy presence.

But some may object that the word "purgatory" is not actually in Scripture. But then neither are other key words, such as Bible, Trinity, or Incarnation. Yet no Christian would deny any of these things, and we all clearly understand that these are the words Christianity has adopted over time to describe a reality Jesus has revealed to us, whether those specific words are in Scripture or not.

Others suggest that Purgatory somehow takes away from Jesus' redeeming sacrifice on the cross, making this sacrifice almost unnecessary. But a Catholic would quickly point out that Purgatory takes nothing away from this sacrifice at all, but is completely dependant upon it, and is actually part of Jesus' application of it to us. This is not something extra that *we* do to get into Heaven. This is something that *Jesus does for us*, that we may enter into the heavenly reward He has promised and won for us.

Still, others may claim that the concept of purgatory is nowhere to be found in Scripture, but this would be an oversight at best.

For starters, Scripture is filled with exhortations to the holiness required of us by God. In Heb 12:14, we read that we should "strive for... *the holiness without which* no one will see the Lord." And again, in 1 Thes 5:23, St Paul writes, may "God... *Himself* make you *perfectly* holy and may you entirely -spirit, soul, and body -be preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." And Jesus Himself commands us: "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:43-48).

We are clearly called to perfection in holiness by God, and Scripture is also clear that it is God who will ultimately do this work in us. But if this perfection in holiness is not achieved during our earthly life, Scripture also teaches that God will mercifully do this for us, after we die. Heb 12:22-23 captures this well: "But you have come to... the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem... to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the *spirits* of just men *made* perfect."

But it is St Paul who gives us the clearest description of Purgatory, this process of purification some will undergo. In 1 Cor 2:10-17, 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, 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."

St Paul starts out by saying that the foundation for everything is our faith in Jesus. Everything else is then built on that foundation. He then goes on to describe how we can then "build" on this foundation, and he divides our earthly works essentially into two groups -gold, silver, precious stones, and wood, hay, straw. He then goes on to say that at the end of our earthly lives, these works will be tested by "fire". The good works we do, represented by the gold, silver and precious stones, will survive [such things are actually purified by fire, but not destroyed], and we will be rewarded for them. The evil or sinful things we do, represented by the wood, hay and straw, will be burned up, and a person will suffer "loss" in this process, "but he himself will be

saved, but only as through fire". This is a perfect, Scriptural description of what the Catholic Church means by Purgatory.

Scripture also gives a clear sense of a third "place" or state as well, separate from Heaven and Hell. For instance, St Peter writes that Jesus, "being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit... went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah... For this is why the gospel was preached even to the dead, that though judged in the flesh like men, they might live in the spirit like God" [2 Peter 3:18-20]. And similarly, Jesus speaks of Lazarus in Abraham's "bosom" in Luke 16:22-28. These are not souls in Heaven, and they are not the souls of the damned either, but souls in some third state or place, giving clear Scriptural evidence for the concept of Purgatory as taught by the Catholic Church.

Similarly, in the Old Testament, we also see the idea of souls being in a third place or state, and that earthly prayers for these souls can help atone for their sins, just as the Catholic Church teaches about Purgatory.

For example, in 2 Maccabees 12:44-46 [see my article on the canon or list of books in the Bible, explaining how we know 1 and 2 Maccabees are inspired books and belong in the Bible], we see Judas Maccabeus encouraging prayers for fellow soldiers who clearly died with sin on their souls. Souls in Hell cannot be helped by our prayers, and souls in Heaven don't need them. Yet we read that "he... took up a collection... to provide for a sin offering. In doing this he acted very well and honorably... it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin." Not only do we have souls in a third "place", but we have the inspired Word of God testifying that earthly prayers and sacrifices will help atone for their sins *after* they have died!

And we see this practice right from the beginning of the New Testament Church as well. Prayers for the dead were inscribed very early on in the Roman catacombs, and the doctrine of Purgatory was clearly taught in the writings of the early Church as well.

While the examples are many, no one is clearer than the great St Augustine, who taught unequivocally on Purgatory and the idea of the dead being aided by prayers of the living. He writes: "But by the prayers of the Holy Church, and by the salvific sacrifice [the Mass], and by the alms which are given for their spirits, there is no doubt that the dead are aided, that the Lord might deal more mercifully with them than their sins would deserve. The whole Church observes this practice which was handed down by the Fathers: that it prays for those who have died in the communion of the Body and Blood of Christ." Amen!

When understood correctly, Purgatory is not only Scriptural and reasonable, it is a profoundly merciful gift from God!