

Purgatory

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THE doctrines of the existence of a state of punishment and purgation for souls after death and that of the utility of praying for the dead have been taught and cherished since the remotest ages of civilization. Among the ancient Jews, a future state of purification was a firm belief. The following celebrated passage taken from the Second Book of Machabees gives ample proof of this. It is upon this self-evident fact that the Church stakes her authority in giving credence to the existence of Purgatory. "And making a gathering, he (Judas Machabeus) sent twelve thousand drachms of silver to Jerusalem for sacrifice to be offered for the sins of the dead, thinking well and religiously concerning the resurrection. . . . It is, therefore, a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins." Here is clearly evidenced the faith of Judas Machabeus, his soldiers, the priests and consequently the whole Jewish people in the existence of Purgatory. With increasing fervor, the faithful followers of Christ, from the days of their secret worship in the hidden recesses of the Catacombs down to our own time, have been tenderly mindful of the spiritual needs of their dear departed ones.

The Catholic Church teaches as a certain truth of Faith that there is a Purgatory. The Council of Trent has decreed that "the Church, inspired by the Holy Ghost, has always taught, according to the Holy Scriptures and apostolic tradition, that there is a Purgatory, and that the souls there detained receive comfort from the prayers and good works of the faithful, particularly through the Sacrifice of the Mass, which is so acceptable to God." The Church has her doctrine of Purgatory in the clear and forcible words of the Second Book of Machabees. A denial—on the part of Protestants—that this Book is inspired offers little argument against the existence of Purgatory. But, even were we to grant them this, the Book in question certainly carries with it the all-sufficient weight—of an historical book. Most Protestants refuse to admit the authority of Tradition and the testimony of the Fathers. Many non-Catholics express a sincere belief in an intermediate state after death for such of their deceased

brethren who they hold neither merited immediate admission into Heaven nor deserved the eternal tortures of Hell. Few of them, however, will accept the name "Purgatory" as designating this future state of punishment, despite the fact that their conception of this state embodies the idea of a process of cleansing or purgation. This is but one of many instances in which the same idea can be expressed by a number of terms. The majority of the Protestant sects, by departing from the ancient and efficacious practice of praying for their dead, have violated one of the most sacred of Nature's laws—which bids the tender and intimate affections of the human heart to follow its loved ones—even beyond the grave.

The doctrine of Purgatory receives a timely support from the New Testament. St. Matthew writes (xii: 32), "but he that shall speak against the Holy Ghost—it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world nor in the world to come." From which is clearly inferred—that there are some sins which will be forgiven in the life to come. Besides the text just quoted, the Fathers were wont to deduce the existence of Purgatory from the words of St. Paul to the Corinthians (I Cor. iii: 11 and 15), "for other foundation no man can lay, but that which is laid; which is Christ Jesus. . . . If any man's work burn, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as by fire." From these words we rightly conclude that his soul will finally be saved, but he himself will have to undergo for a time the purifying punishment of Purgatory.

Among the early Fathers of the Church, we find Tertullian in the second century making mention of prayers for the dead. The epitaphs of the Catacombs supply weighty testimony that the early Christians held this belief. We may instance among the Greeks: Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius, St. Gregory Nazianzen and St. Ephrem. Among the Latins: St. Cyprian, St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, St. Gregory the Great, St. Augustine and the Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas, clearly testify to the doctrine of Purgatory and also to the ancient custom of praying for the dead.

The Council of Trent defined the doctrine of Purgatory (as given above) and the same doctrine was set forth in the Fourth Council of Lyons and in the Decree for the Armenians drawn up in the Council of Florence.

And so it was that from the earliest dawn of Christianity—

the Church impressed her infallible approbation on the existence and necessity of Purgatory. Divine Justice demands that "the last farthing" of debt be paid before the soul can enjoy Eternal Beatitude. Hence, it necessarily follows that the guilt of venial sin shall be punished and the debt of punishment due for sins committed—be paid. Consequently, since there are many persons who depart this life in the state of grace but with the guilt of venial sin upon their souls and with a debt of punishment due to their sins, Divine Justice requires that there shall be some place after death wherein this guilt will be punished and this debt paid. And therefore, since "nothing defiled can enter Heaven" and the imperfections of some are too trivial to deserve Hell, the justice of a Just God necessitates the existence of an intermediate state—which we call Purgatory.

Purgatory is a state in which the souls of the just who died in the state of grace are cleansed from the stain of venial sin and atone for the temporal punishment due to their sins. Or in the words of the Catechism, "Purgatory is a place of punishment in the other life where some souls suffer for a time before they can go to Heaven." It is a transitory state of separation and suffering and souls detained there form one of the three great divisions of the Church—the Church Suffering. Certain it is—that all the souls suffering in the purgatorial state will one day form a part of the Church Triumphant in Heaven. And no less true is the fact that the charity of their friends living upon earth, who comprise the Church Militant, can hasten the happy day of their release. Into Purgatory those souls enter who leave this life either with the stain of venial sin upon their souls or without having sufficiently satisfied for the temporal punishment due to their sins, but who died in the state of grace and therefore in the favor and friendship of God. Friends of God they are—and one day they will live with Him in Heaven. But before this can be accomplished—they must be cleansed as gold from all dross—by the fires of Purgatory and in this way satisfy God's justice to "the last farthing." Then, whole and spotless, they will pass from suffering to glory—into the presence of their all-Pure and all-Holy God.

We—members of the Church Militant—can aid and relieve the souls in Purgatory—members of the Church Suffering—by prayers, alms-deeds and, as the Council of Trent has defined, "particularly through the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, which is

so acceptable to God." We have it within our power to help the souls in Purgatory, by our prayers and satisfactory works, to pay the debts they still owe to God's justice. By our charity towards them we can send new saints into Heaven. But who can call our prayerful intercessions for our near and dear departed ones mere charity? Such sacred acts of prayer for the dead is our sacred and bounden duty. The universal appeal to man to pray for the dead is as insistent as it is comforting, since he can be assured that by his prayers, relief will be given to those who have passed to sleep in the Lord. Father Faber in a comment on the subject of the length of time that the holy souls are detained in Purgatory, says very justly that "we are apt to leave off too soon praying for our parents, friends or relatives, imagining with a foolish and unenlightened esteem for the holiness of their lives, that they are freed from Purgatory much sooner than they really are." The souls in Purgatory can no longer merit anything for themselves, since their time of probation on earth has passed. They can no longer receive the Sacraments, give alms or pray for themselves. The Holy Ghost says, "He who stoppeth his ear against the cry of the poor, shall also cry himself and shall not be heard." And St. Vincent Ferrer says, in expounding that passage, that the holy souls in Purgatory cry to God for justice against those who on earth refuse to help them by their prayers, and that God will most assuredly hear their cry. Therefore, all faithful Christians should endeavor to do whatever may be within their power towards the assistance of those suffering souls.

The souls in Purgatory, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, by divine ordination are able to know what transpires here upon earth. This knowledge is obtained by the holy souls from other souls recently deceased, from the angels, the devils, or as divinely revealed by God. However, the souls in Purgatory do not always and of necessity know what takes place here, but only when the Divine Wisdom—through special revelation—sees fit to afford them this knowledge. Moreover, the holy souls, by divine dispensation can appear to the living. We know from the Lives of the Saints and from the testimony of many reliable witnesses that souls have, at times, been permitted to appear and plead their own cause for prayerful aid, and especially that of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. From equally trustworthy sources, we learn that some souls have returned to

thank those through whose intercession their release from Purgatory had been hastened.

St. Liguori says that "though the souls in Purgatory are unable to pray or merit for themselves, they can obtain many favors for those who pray for them on earth." This ought to be an incentive to us all—for by aiding them in their dire necessity, we ourselves are eliciting their powerful intercession in our own behalf. Their prayers for us will most assuredly be heard—for God as a merciful Father has ever a ready ear for the pleadings of His afflicted children. The holy souls are still God's friends and their prayers for us are most acceptable to Him. Moreover, they are very grateful for any assistance we may give to them in gaining their admission into Heaven and so they will not forget us when they see Him "face to face." Holy Mother Church is ever mindful of her children who are suffering in Purgatory and, with tender love and maternal solicitude, has dedicated to the suffering souls in Purgatory the entire month of November. Every day in the year she remembers "the souls of the faithful departed" in the Mass and in her Office, but as a mark of especial love for them—she has made the month of November—their month.

The doctrine of Purgatory is one of the most consoling of the Church's articles of Faith. In the saddest of our sorrows and afflictions in this life—Death—the Catholic Church does not abandon us to "mourn as those who have no hope," but fills us with divine hope and consolation by telling us that by our prayers and good works and particularly by the Sacrifice of the Mass, we can shorten their sojourn in Purgatory and lessen their intense pain. We should co-operate with the Church in her frequent prayers that "the souls of the faithful departed through the mercy of God may rest in peace." Knowing, as we do, that the sufferings of the poor souls are far greater than any we could ever experience here below—we should make the month of November—a month of earnest and continued effort in their behalf. For surely, they must look forward to special help during that month.

Although we are certain that the sufferings of the souls in Purgatory are almost beyond the confines of description, the Church has made no official pronouncements concerning the nature and intensity of the purifying punishments of Purgatory. St. Thomas Aquinas says that there is no difference between the

fire of Hell and that of Purgatory, and St. Gregory the Great calls Purgatory "a penitential fire harder to endure than all the tribulations of this world." Regarding the pain of sense, St. Thomas further teaches that it is a pain more bitter than all the pain of his life. The souls in Purgatory suffer also another kind of punishment known as the "pain of loss," which is the absence of the supreme joy of seeing God "face to face"—and the indescribable yearning for this Beatific Vision. The pain of loss as suffered by the poor souls is most keen—because of the Supreme Good of which they are deprived. This, as St. Thomas Aquinas teaches, is a greater evil than any loss in this life.

Devotion to the dead has ever been dear to all our Dominican saints. In the lives of them all—this blessed thoughtfulness—shines out so boldly that it cannot be lost sight of. The Holy Constitutions of our Order demand that we be continually mindful of those who have passed before us in the sign of Faith and who are now resting in the Sleep of Peace; that we continually turn to the Father of Mercies and beseech Him in supplicating prayer to have pity upon them and grant them soon a place of Eternal Rest. Devotion to our holy dead is so interwoven in the life of every Dominican that it becomes, as it were, a part of his very being.

Though we upon earth cannot see and appreciate the continual struggle going on between the poor souls and their intense desire of being united to their God, we know that there is One who certainly sees these holy souls as they really are while undergoing their purgatorial punishment. Mary, the Mother of Mercy, sees those suffering souls and is longing to have them admitted into the Kingdom of her Son. Her love and compassion for them is great—because she knows they are unable to help themselves. They are her children and she is ever mindful of them. They were ransomed by the Precious Blood of her Divine Son—the Blood taken from her own pure veins. By invoking the powerful intercession of the Queen of Heaven, aid will surely be given to the holy souls, since she is ever their most faithful advocate at the throne of Divine Mercy. Great indeed will be the reward given to those who have heard and heeded the sorrowful accents of that unceasing, heart-rending cry coming from the dread realm of Purgatory, "have pity on me, have pity on me, at least you my friends, for the hand of the Lord has touched me!"