

Whatever Happened to Purgatory?

Introduction

One morning, I went to the funeral home near my parish in order to offer my condolences to the next of kin prior to the celebration of the Mass of Christian burial. Upon receiving my expressions of sympathy, the brother of the deceased said to me, “Father, I have a question. Where do we go from here?” Assuming that he meant the question literally, I answered, “Well, in a few moments, the funeral director will organize us in paying our final respects to your brother. We will then leave from here, form the line of cars behind the hearse and drive in procession to the Church where we will celebrate the funeral Mass.”

“No”, said the brother, as he made a more universal gesture pointing to the world around us, “where do we go from *here?*”

Where do we go from here? More than just an idle question of theological speculation, our belief in the existence of an afterlife and our understanding of the nature of that life has a profound influence in how I live my life in the present. Throughout the history of mankind, religions have dealt with the question “where do we go from here?” Common to most religions that maintain the existence of an after-life is the belief that the quality of our future life depends upon how we have lived in the present. Quite simply, these religions propose a system of reward and punishment for my deeds in this life: heaven, for the blessed, hell for the damned.

It is simple to say that the consequence of virtue is reward and the consequence of wrongdoing is punishment; however, life (and the actions that make up our lives) is not quite all that black-and-white simple. In those actions where we were less than totally loving, we see all kinds of degrees of culpability. We’re not pure saints – nor are we horrible sinners. So where do we, the sinning saints or saintly sinners that we are, go from here?

The existence of some kind of a “middle state” between heaven and hell makes sense if we were to bring some element of justice into the system of rewards and punishments. On first reading, this need to have a “middle state” would seem to be at the source of the Catholic belief in Purgatory. Popularly, purgatory is thought of as a way of “doing time” for sins that don’t deserve eternal damnation. Knowing that we are not pure saints, justice would seem to demand some kind of system where we are purified of our minor imperfections, imperfections that prevent us from meriting the pure happiness of heaven. But beyond the logical argument for an intermediate state, we Catholics maintain that the existence of purgatory is a revealed doctrine of faith proposed by Sacred Scripture and consistently taught in the Tradition. Why do we Catholics believe in purgatory? How do

we understand purgatory in light of a God who is all loving and forgiving? What effect do my prayers have for those who have died and may be in this state of purgation? These are the questions which I hope to address through this article.

A brief history of the teaching:

Christian belief in purgatory seems to have a long history stemming from the earliest days of the Church. Origen, a theologian of the third century, speaks about the process of meeting the Lord after death when our light faults are burned away. He cites St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, a text which would later become one of the major scriptural supports for the existence of purgatory:

“If anyone builds on this foundation (Jesus Christ) with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, the work of each will come to light, for the Day will disclose it. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire (itself) will test the quality of each one's work. If the work stands that someone built upon the foundation, that person will receive a wage. But if someone's work is burned up, that one will suffer loss; the person will be saved, but only as through fire.” (1 Cor 3:12-15).

Origen did not have in mind the idea of a *place* of purgation where, over the course of time, one's sins were purged away. In his thinking, fiery purgation takes place at the moment of one's particular judgment immediately after death itself. Later Church Fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa (d. 394), St. Ambrose (d. 397), and perhaps most notably St. Augustine (d. 430) continued to develop this idea of a fiery purgation which would prepare us to enjoy eternal. Augustine was to write that the pain of such fire is graver than what man could even suffer in this life.

In addition to early witnesses regarding a belief in a state of purgation, there is evidence that from the earliest times Christians prayed for those who have died. From as far back as Tertullian (d. 225), we have numerous Fathers of the early Church writing about the practice and the efficacy of such prayers. These witnesses commonly cite the Old Testament witness of 2 Maccabees 12:38-46 which talks about the situation of the fallen Jewish warriors:

“On the following day, since the task had now become urgent, Judas (Maccabeus) and his men went to gather up the bodies of the slain and bury them with their kinsmen in their ancestral tombs. But under the tunic of each of the dead they found amulets sacred to the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear. . . Turning to supplication, they prayed that the sinful deed might be fully blotted out. The noble Judas. . .took up a collection among all his soldiers, amounting to two thousand silver drachmas, which he sent to Jerusalem to provide for an expiatory

sacrifice. . . Thus he made atonement for the dead that they might be freed from this sin.”

Throughout the earliest centuries of the Church, the efficacy of such prayers for the deceased was generally taught. The texts of ancient liturgies as well as the inscriptions on tombs and catacombs presume the widespread practice of praying for our deceased.

By the twelfth century there is evidence that Purgatory was thought of as an actual place. The souls consigned to purgatory were those who fundamentally enjoyed union with the Lord but were imperfect due to venial faults or wounded by grave sins which, while forgiven, left a “debt” that still needed to be paid. Freedom from purgatory was made possible through the prayers and sacrifices of the living. Admittedly, the whole process became somewhat juridical and took on the trappings of the legal court system of the day. The “temporal punishment due to sins forgiven” became a formula that described the kind of atonement that needed to be made in order to satisfy the debt created by sin. The first official teaching of the Church regarding the existence of purgatory comes in the Council of Lyons (1274) and later in the Council of Florence (1439). However, the most definitive teaching is found in the council of Trent in 1563 stating: “Whereas the Catholic Church, instructed by the Holy Ghost, has from the Sacred Scriptures and the ancient tradition of the Fathers taught in Councils and very recently in this Ecumenical synod (Sess. VI, cap. XXX; Sess. XXII cap.ii, iii) that there is a purgatory, and that the souls therein are helped by the suffrages of the faithful, but principally by the acceptable Sacrifice of the Altar; the Holy Synod enjoins on the Bishops that they diligently endeavor to have the sound doctrine of the Fathers in Councils regarding purgatory everywhere taught and preached, held and believed by the faithful" (Denziger 983)

The teaching of the Council of Trent comes in response to the questions which were raised by the reformers. Most of us are aware of Luther’s objection to the selling of indulgences along with the notion that somehow good deeds are a way of “buying” our way into heaven. In the classical debate concerning the necessity of faith and works, the reformers rejected the idea that something other than faith in the all-embracing merits of the Cross brought salvation to those in need. Furthermore, the strongest scriptural witness to Purgatory, found in the above-cited passage from Maccabees which speaks of making sacrifices of atonement for the dead, was declared by Luther to be from a book of the Bible which he judged to be apocryphal. The reformers, therefore, saw no scriptural basis to affirm the existence of purgatory.

In the meantime, in the Eastern Church, while there was no wholesale rejection of the doctrine of purgatory, there is no strong affirmation of it either. The East would not share the same juridical framework as the West out of which arose such ideas as “temporal punishment” and “purging fire.” At most, the East would affirm that there might be a

period of time after death in which one's soul might need to grow and mature in its ability to take in the full Mystery of the Godhead.

To sum up the history of the Church's teaching on purgatory we may conclude that the Church teaches:

1. The existence of purgatory – some process which deals with our past and helps us to worthily receive the gift of eternal happiness
2. The fruitfulness of our prayers to help someone move through this transitory state into heaven itself.

What isn't universally taught with clarity is that purgatory is a "place" or that the process involves purgation by fire (at least the East has not accepted the existence of purgatorial fire).

Forgiveness of Sin and our belief in purgatory

In recent times, our Catholic culture has moved away from a fire-and-brimstone image of God who judges and condemns. Our preaching and our piety focus on the mercy, love and forgiveness of God. When thinking about purgatory, most people would ask, "Why does God have to punish us if in fact our sins are already forgiven?" Purgatory is hardly ever the subject of a sermon and the tradition which affirms its existence might even be a source of embarrassment to modern minds. But, does that mean that it is impossible to reconcile our understanding of an all forgiving God and the existence of purgatory?

It would seem that our attempt to understanding our tradition concerning purgatory has led us to a deeper question concerning the nature of sin and forgiveness. Years ago when teaching moral theology, I used to offer this rather simple definition of sin: sin is a free and conscious refusal to love. However, as I reflect upon the nature of sin, it seems to me somewhat inaccurate to speak of these unloving choices as "free." I believe that most sinful choices arise more out of fear than out of pure freedom. Our freedom was created as a freedom *for*, that is, as a capacity to choose for God. Our sinful choices, on the other hand come not as an activation of freedom (as God created this capacity) but as an activation of a fear-infected disposition whereby I am reacting to some situation because of some misguided, misinformed perception of reality. Sinful choices are sometimes the reaction of a fearful mind that says (consciously or unconsciously), "I have to do this. . . I have to have this. . . I have to say this. . . because I am afraid that if I don't act or behave in this way I will be diminished. I will do whatever it takes to protect and defend my turf." My perception that "my turf" is being invaded is a perception that might be based on a partial and woefully incomplete understanding of reality. These biases keep me locked in a state of fear.

Now, to say that fear plays a part in many of our unloving acts is not to deny the possibility that there can be situations where I am able with total clarity and total freedom to choose against God and others. The Pope's recent encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* defends the possibility of such extreme acts of unloving which we, in our tradition, have called mortal sin. In addition, our tradition has said that by such free and conscious acts we deliberately choose a state of God-alienation called hell. Mortal sin and hell would be the subject of another article. Here I simply wish to point out that, in the case of venial sin, our unloving choice often times proceeds from fear and reinforces fear. The process of purgatory, therefore, will have something to do with releasing us from the bonds of fear. I will return to this point when I talk about the salutary effects of prayer for the deceased.

For now, however, let us focus on what I find to be the threefold consequence of all sin:

1. There is an alienation between us and God. The relationship of union which we enjoy with God is in some way damaged or even destroyed. Here there is a need for a healing of that relationship which is mediated through God's forgiveness.
2. There is an alienation between us and our neighbor. Here we think not only of those sins which directly hurt someone (in our tradition we call these sins of commission, sins whereby I directly hurt someone through lying, cheating, physical or psychological harm, etc.) but also the sins of omission, whereby I am not the best possible person at your disposal. The love-intention of God is that we are responsible for each other as sisters and brothers. My lack of wholeness or holiness in some way robs you of the best that I can offer you at any given time. There is a kind of *lacuna*, a lack, a "hole" which is caused by my unloving act. What could have been there, what *should* have been there as a result of a loving act, is now no longer there. This lack or hole leaves a permanent mark upon the world. In the objective order, there is something missing which now needs to be filled.
3. There is a reinforcement of the fear-filled biases that lead me to further sin and prevent me from surrendering myself to the ocean of God's love. A popular acronym for fear is **False Evidence Appears Real**. The false evidence, the lies, the misperceptions of reality that ground my fears are many: *I am unlovable. There is a scarcity which prevents my needs from being met. I will never get the breaks in life.* Ironically, and indeed most tragically, our unloving sinful (re)actions to these false appearances do nothing more than reinforce the false evidence. In short, sin creates a cycle in my life: I fear I am unlovable, I do something unloving which only serves to reinforce the fear that in fact I am unlovable.

Now in light of all this, what exactly does God’s forgiveness accomplish? The act of forgiveness heals relationships and restores unity where there was alienation. Thus, when God forgives us, there are no longer any obstacles that stand in the way of my relationship with Him. However, there is still some kind of a “hole” in the objective order that has been created by my sin. By my refusal to be the best possible person I could be, by my inability to bring goodness into a particular situation at a particular time in the history of the world, I have created a void that needs to be filled. This void or hole has been spoken of in the past as the “debt” of sin; I “owe” it to you to make up to you what I withheld from you because of my act of unloving selfishness. Thus, sins can be forgiven and yet, in the objective order, there is still a debt that needs to be paid.

In the past, the Church may have looked at this debt in a very literal, fundamentalistic way -- something needed to be paid back in justice. The juridical and legalistic models of paying back debts led us to conjure up a system of temporal punishment – doing time, so to speak, to make up for the goodness which our unloving acts failed to bring about in the world. While the Protestant tradition may have rightfully called those legalistic models into question, we still need to address the issue of the *lacuna* that is created by unloving acts.

The first objective situation needing to be addressed is that my acts of unloving, over a period of time, reinforce the fears that drive me to sin. These acts of unloving place real limits upon my heart to be able to respond generously and joyfully to the offer of love in the present. While I may be forgiven, my heart still needs to be healed. Even if, after death, I were to be brought immediately to the throne of unconditional love, mercy and grace, my fear-laden heart wouldn’t be able to totally trust that reality. The scars are still there preventing me from enjoying the absolute offer of God himself to us, heart to heart.

The understanding of purgatory that comes to us from the Eastern Church might well be brought to bear upon our western juridical models which have envisioned purgatory as a place of punishment and chastisement. It may be more fruitful to think of purgatory as a time of enlightenment whereby I begin to perceive *reality* not through the distortion of my fear-laden eyes but through the higher perspective of God’s all-embracing eyes. The *reality* is that God has called me as his very own precious, beloved child. As we hear in the first letter of John “Perfect love drives out all fear” (1 John 4:18) I need to grow in that trust of a perfect love that embraces me unconditionally.

A number of years ago, I tried to explain purgatory to a group of seventh graders in this fashion. I enthusiastically announced to the class that I had tickets for them for a very special musical event in Manhattan. I told them that everyone was invited! They, in turn, started guessing what kind of an “event” they were going to experience. “We’re going to a rock concert!” they exclaimed hopefully. “No,” I said, “something much better than a

rock concert.” They asked, “A Broadway musical? You’re taking us to a Broadway musical?” Once again, I said, “No, this is even better than a Broadway musical.” Well, after they gave up guessing, I told them that we had orchestra seats to Giacomo Puccini’s *Tosca*.

“Tosca” they said. “What’s that?”

When I explained to them that *Tosca* was an opera, they started moaning saying, “I hate opera. Opera is boring. Opera is for rich old people.” We started to discuss what it might take for them to grow in their appreciation of opera. They finally admitted that maybe if they learned Italian, maybe if they understood the plot of the opera, maybe if they listened to a lot of classical music and maybe if that was the *only* kind of music that they knew, they would probably enjoy my gift of tickets to the opera.

And so it is with heaven. We are all invited to share the bliss, the joy, the unencumbered reality of enriching relationships with others. But first, we need to *understand the language and have an appreciative knowledge of the music* before my joy is truly heavenly. The process is one of enlightenment, not punishment!

The second objective situation which needs to be addressed is the need for a healing in the relationships of those whom I have hurt. If we were to see that every act of unloving in some way creates a ripple effect that reaches out to a world community, then there is a lacuna in the world because of my unloving deeds. While forgiveness may heal the relationship with God, and individual acts of reconciliation may heal relationships with others (even acts of reconciliation with the whole community of the Church mediated to us through the sacrament of reconciliation), there are still objective hurts with far reaching consequences which I create through my acts of unloving. These relationships are healed through prayer.

Why pray for the dead?

This moves us to the final question which was raised before, namely the efficacy of prayer for the dead. The tradition has clearly spoken of the utility of prayer for the dead, that it is somehow helpful in clearing the way so that our loved ones may enter into that state of total happiness which we call heaven. However, the nature of this intercession must not be understood in some simplistic manner that my prayer is bargaining with God, somehow moving Him to have pity and mercy upon my dearly departed loved one. It is not the case that my prayer is my supremely merciful attempt to change God’s mind and lessen the punishment that this person will have to undergo. Such an understanding of prayer makes me more merciful than the Lord himself!

Prayer for someone is not asking God to show mercy on someone but is an expression of our innermost selves that seeks to share God’s merciful outlook. In fact, all

intercessory prayer is not to be seen as a means of changing God's mind but seen as a means of allowing my mind to be transformed so that I will share the very concerns of God Himself. In the case where I am praying for a deceased loved one, my prayer for them heals any aspects of woundedness created by that person's failure to love. In other words, the prayer does not have the effect of changing God's mind, but rather it has the effect of changing my mind, making my mind more open and loving towards that person who may have hurt me directly or, through their sins of omission, indirectly. If I am to share in the very community of saints with this person in some future "day," my prayer for the departed begins a process of healing so that we can both enjoy each other uninhibited by any past baggage, free from the past and able to love and be loved by God.

This explanation might help to explain the efficacy of my prayer for someone whom I knew in this life; however, we also speak of praying for "all the faithful departed," or "all the souls in purgatory" especially those who are most "lost and forgotten." How does prayer help the poorest of souls?

Prayer for the dead is an act of love which helps those who have died to understand that they are in fact loved. This is most especially the case when the prayer is being made for some unknown soul in purgatory. Men and women who have the special gift to be in contact with those who have passed on to the other side of life tell us that the dead are aware and thankful for our prayers for them. In effect they experience the healing love of the community on earth -- an experience which helps them to trust and surrender to the power of love.

In addition, prayer for the dead opens our heart to the mission of God to finish the unfinished work that has been left undone because of the death of someone. The *lacuna* or hole-in-the-world that has been created through the history of our unloving deeds needs to be attended to in some fashion. It is not a matter that, as a result of prayer, I am now motivated to complete the unfinished work of another -- that my prayer for the dead will enlighten and inspire me to find a cure for cancer or to discover some yet undiscovered secret of the universe. The real "hole" created by sin is the ever magnified presence of fear that persistently infects the world. My prayer for the dead creates a bond of love which begins to undo the atmosphere of fear and distrust that has been created by the cumulative sin of the world.

Finally, prayer for the deceased brings a union between my heart and the heart of Jesus. On the night before he died, Jesus revealed his deepest love intention for the world -- a love intention that is voiced in a final prayer of supplication to the Father: "I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. I wish that where I am they also may be with me,

that they may see my glory that you gave me, because you loved me before the foundation of the world.” (John 17:20-21, 24) It is the desire of Jesus that we will enjoy together that living communion with one another where there will be no obstacles that prevent us from truly loving each other for eternity. My prayer for those who have died is an opportunity to join my heart to the heart of Jesus in sharing a common vision, a dream, “that all may be one.”

Conclusion

And so, where do *we* go from here? The question is most appropriately answered by looking at where we have come from. Our origin is from the Triune God, the God who, by his very essence, is a community of three-in-one. We have been made in that image of God, an image of community. Fashioned and imaged by the divine community, we are made for community – forever! The bonds of love which we establish here on earth are the bonds, once purified of selfishness and fear, that can be brought into the sphere of God’s eternal communion of love which we call heaven. Destined for community, purgatory becomes that process whereby the obstacles that stand in the way of that communion can be removed. “On this mountain the Lord will destroy the veil that veils all peoples, the web that is woven over all nations; he will destroy death forever. The Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces; the reproach of his people he will remove from the whole earth; for the Lord has spoken.” (Isaiah 25:7-8) May we long for that day when all the veils that separate us one from another will be forever gone.