Bulletin Article **Purgatory** **November 8, 2026**

Since the Church celebrated All Souls Day just last week, it might be a good time to talk a little about Purgatory. The existence of Purgatory is a dogma of the Church, meaning that it is something revealed by God and is absolutely certain. To deny the reality of purgatory is to reject both the God-given teaching authority of the Church and Sacred Scripture. Scripture makes a number of references to purification after death in both the Old and New Testaments, a few of which will be presented here.

The Second Book of Maccabees (Old Testament) recounts a great battle that Judas Maccabeus (an Israelite) and his army underwent to overthrow the Gentiles (pagan Greeks) who had taken over Israel. After the battle, they went to bury those who were killed. In the pockets of each Israelite who was killed they found some sort of pagan amulet; in other words, they had put confidence in idols, false gods. So Judas Maccabeus and those with him prayed for them and took up a collection of 12,000 drachmas for sacrifices to be offered in Jerusalem. This is a Scriptural case of praying and offering sacrifices for those who have died. Heaven and hell are both permanent so if that's all there was, there would be no point in praying or offering sacrifice for them. There's no point in it unless there is the possibility of purification from sin after death.

Second Maccabees also shows, then, that the Jews, before the coming of our Lord, understood that Purgatory – a place or state of purification after death – existed. This is helpful because our Lord brings out Purgatory in a number of places and He seems to take it for granted that those listening (Jews) are already aware that further purification from sin can/does occur after death.

The parable of the faithful steward in the Gospel of Luke (Lk 12:35-48) is one instance where our Lord refers to purification after death. In fact, Jesus is speaking *directly* about punishment after death that is not permanent, a punishment that will end and thus cannot be hell. In this parable, there are 4 servants; one immediately receives his reward, that's Heaven; one is cut to pieces and put among the unbelievers, that's hell. Now if Heaven and hell are all there is after death, then our Lord should have stopped there, but He didn't. There were 2 more servants, each of whom received punishment after death, but their punishment had an end.

In the parable of the wicked servant (Mt 18:23-35) Jesus says that that wicked servant will be thrown into prison until his full debt is paid, implying release after the debt is paid. The Master "summoned" the wicked servant…for judgement. This "summoning" corresponds to the moment of death. So our Lord is once again speaking of a purification or reparation after death.

There are other passages in Scripture that speak of purification after death. In the Sermon on the Mount, (Mt 5: 21-26) Jesus speaks of judgement (which occurs at death) and says: you will be thrown into prison and will not get out until you have paid the last penny – again, purification after death that does end. In 1 Cor 3:13-15, St Paul also speaks of a "purifying fire" that occurs on the "the Day" when all will be revealed – which is not in this life. Equally important, however, is Sacred Tradition. The Church Fathers, including St Augustine, clearly hold to the reality of a purgation, a cleansing, that can occur (if a person is not condemned) after death; i.e., the reality of Purgatory was held from the beginning; it is part of Revelation.

Some people try to claim there is no such thing as Purgatory because the word purgatory is not in the Bible. This objection is so childish that it is hardly worth addressing. The use of a word to communicate some reality is not only a common use of language but the very purpose of language. How could you speak of something being blue, for example, without pointing at something blue, unless you had the word blue? Yes, words are used to describe realities. Do we always have to say the full phrase: painful purification from sin or repair of the damage caused by sin after death, as described in Scripture? Can we not just have one word for all of that? Of course we can, that's what words are for, that's how language is used! The word Purgatory is also a fitting or aptly descriptive word as well, since purgation means: clearing or cleansing from impurities by separation from them. That's exactly what the purification after death, spoken of by Scripture and the Fathers, means.

All of this so far has just been describing the Church's clear foundation for her teaching on Purgatory. There are so many attacks on any number of the things revealed by God and taught definitively in His Church,

Purgatory being one of them, that maybe what was laid out here initially will be helpful for some. Or, it might be helpful in bringing others to the faith. At the same time, for a Catholic it is enough to know that the existence of Purgatory is a dogma, a definitive teaching, of the Church and that's it; there's no argument about it, it's true because God said and I know God said so because He teaches it definitively in His One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. As soon as a true Catholic hears that, they know it's true and they're ready to move on and learn more about it. So enough on that, what more can be said about Purgatory?

Although what Purgatory is has already been largely covered (at least implicitly), a good starting point is always a definition or description. This is the one given by Fr John Hardon in his Modern Catholic Dictionary:

> "The place or condition in which the souls of the just are purified after death and before they can enter heaven…The souls are certainly purified by atoning for the temporal punishments due to sin by their willing acceptance of suffering imposed by God."

Notice that Fr Hardon says: of the just, those already reconciled with God. Purgatory is not a "second chance." If a person dies in a state of mortal sin, separated from God, they go to hell forever. Notice also that Purgatory is a transitory, temporary state – not a permanent one, it is not a final end. The only 2 final ends are Heaven and hell. Furthermore, if a person "goes" to Purgatory, there is no chance of them going to hell. Those in Purgatory will go to Heaven, immediately after their purification is finished. Furthermore, in Purgatory a soul can no longer go backwards in their relation with God, like we can in this life. In Purgatory one can only go forward.

Why Purgatory? Heaven, hell, and Purgatory all hinge on just one thing – a person's relation with the Lord. The analogy used for relation with God in Scripture is marriage so to understand a little more about Purgatory, we will once again start by considering what a marital relation might be like. The relation might be completely broken, the two have even come to despise one another. For those whose relation with God is like this when they die, they go to hell. But let us suppose that overall a couple has a good marriage. They generally look out for one another, sacrifice themselves for each other, think often of each other, and so on. But, once in a while the wife gets irritated with the husband – he leaves his socks on the living room floor or some such thing; and once in a while the husband gets irritated with his wife – maybe she bangs the pots and pans around and wakes him up. And, even though they often think of the other person first, sometimes they don't; sometimes they forget the other and think of themselves first. So overall you'd have to say that they have a good marriage, and there's certainly (say) real friendship between the two. *But*, it's not perfect.

Well for many of those who do eventually get to Heaven, their relation with God is probably like this when they die. But there can be no imperfection in Heaven. Heaven would not be Heaven – perfect, uninterrupted, ecstatic happiness – if there was any imperfection; an imperfection would mean that we could still (let's say) get irritated with God. So what should God do with such people? They can't go to Heaven because of their imperfections. Should they go to hell? Well, it was God's decision that they should not. He said instead that He would create a "place" for such people where they can go through a final purification. And this is what the Church calls Purgatory. Purgatory, then, is yet another extension of God's unfathomable mercy.

St Catherine of Genoa was given, by our Lord, to understand that a soul in Purgatory experiences joy but also intense pain. Aquinas argued that the pain in Purgatory is worse than any pain on earth. Why, and what is the nature of this pain? Both Catherine and Thomas say that those in Purgatory are given a burning desire for God, which is the source of both their joy and pain. It is painful because they cannot yet reach Him, in spite of that terrible longing. It is something like being in a bitterly hot desert with a terrible thirst, knowing that water lies ahead, but you cannot yet reach it. The thought of the water brings you joy, but its current absence causes pain. Aquinas says this is worse than any pain on earth because the desire for God is so intense. It is generally held that the souls in Purgatory cannot help themselves since the means for helping themselves – self-denial, the sacraments, and so on, are no longer available to them. However, we can help them with prayers, indulgences, Masses, sacrifices, and so on. It is a great work of charity to do so. Imagine seeing someone lying on the ground in great suffering. What will you do, just step over them? Not only is it a great work of charity to help the souls in Purgatory, it's very uncharitable not to. The month of November is for remembering our beloved dead and the Holy Souls in Purgatory. Make sure to do so. *God bless you, Fr Kuhn*