

[Readings: Isaiah 25:6, 7-9; Psalm 23; Romans 6:3-9; John 6:37-40]

Some fear it. Others hope for it. Some see it as proof of God's mercy; others as testimony to God's wrath. Many don't know anything about it, while many more have forgotten what they once knew.

The "it" is Purgatory, and when it comes to Catholic beliefs about the afterlife, the Church's teachings on Purgatory have long been among its most contested and misunderstood.

Yet, despite all the confusion, the teachings themselves aren't that complicated. At their most basic, they can be boiled down to nine essential truths -- truths that not only illuminate the Church's doctrine, but also reveal the eternal significance of those teachings for us and those we've lost.

So, what are those essentials?

1. Purgatory exists.

That may seem like stating the obvious, but for some Catholics, Purgatory has become what pastor, author and blogger Father Dwight Longenecker called "the forgotten doctrine." He says. "Many modern Catholics don't know what purgatory is anymore. They have bought into the idea that sin has no consequences, that everyone goes to Heaven because God is too nice to send anyone anywhere else." The Church's doctrine on Purgatory, however, proclaims the opposite. It reminds us that sin does have consequences -- eternal ones -- and that while God is Love, God still honors the free choices made by men and women. "That's the terrifying compliment God pays the creature," said Dr. Regis Martin, professor of theology at Franciscan University. "He takes seriously the freedom we exercise, even if it carries us straight into Hell."

That being said, he continued, "While hopefully few of us are so wicked that we would choose to be wretched forever without God, not many of us are so pure that we can be catapulted straight into the arms of God. Most of us are somewhere in between."

Hence the need for Purgatory — the final purification of those who die in friendship with God but who haven't fully broken their attachment to sin or atoned for wrongs done in this life.

"When we stand before Christ the Judge, all the compromises we've made, all the gray areas into which our choices led us, have to be accounted for," said Martin. "We've got to square accounts with the Judge."

2. Purgatory isn't merely a punishment.

It's a merciful gift and a testimony to God's love. The role of suffering is to undo the damage we've done. It's God the Healer applying the remedy to make us perfect images of Christ."

3. The suffering endured by souls in Purgatory isn't physical pain.

Through the centuries, artists striving to convey the sufferings of Purgatory have depicted men and women tormented by a burning fire. But those illustrations aren't a literal representation of the goings-on in the purgative state. They can't be. In Purgatory, the soul remains separated from its body, so it can only suffer spiritually, not physically. That's not to say, however, that the flames of Purgatory aren't real. They are.

"The fire by which we're purified is an interior burning for the love of God," explained Susan Tassone, author of seven books on Purgatory, "Immediately after their death, the souls in Purgatory saw God in all his glory. They saw His love, His goodness, and the plans He had for us. And they yearn for that. They burn for it, with a yearning that surpasses the heat of any earthly fire."

4. The souls in Purgatory experience joy, as well as pain.

Every soul in Purgatory is bound for glory. Their fate has been sealed, and ultimately it's a blessed fate. Therefore, the time they spend in Purgatory, whether short or long, is a time marked not only by suffering, but also by joy. Mother Angelica was noted for saying, "I'll be happy even if I am in the last seat of the last car of the train to Purgatory, because I know its final destination!

5. Our prayers for the dead matter eternally.

The souls in Purgatory may be bound for glory, but the process of purgation still can be long and painful. That's where we come in.

That's why they need our prayers, especially the Mass. The Masses we have offered for the souls in Purgatory are the best thing we can do for our beloved dead. Because the Mass is the highest form of worship and prayer.

It's also not bound by time. The Church teaches that Purgatory operates outside of space and time as we on earth experience it. Which means we should never stop praying for those we've lost. Even before people used the word 'Purgatory,' they recognized the need to offer up prayers and have Masses said for those who've left this life."

6. The holy souls intercede for us.

The souls in Purgatory can't do anything for themselves, but the Church has long believed that they can do something for us: They can pray for us, helping obtain for us the graces we need to follow Christ more perfectly. I didn't know this when I was researching this homily.

The same is doubly true of the souls now in Heaven, whom our prayers helped. Those souls become like our second guardian angels, taking us under their wing. "That's because the gift we helped give them was the Beatific Vision, which is the greatest gift of all."

7. The Church's teachings on Purgatory are rooted in Scripture.

If you're looking for scriptural evidence for Purgatory, start in the Second Book of Maccabees (12:45), where Judas Maccabee orders prayers and sacrifices for fallen soldiers who committed idolatry shortly before their death. Their beseeching implies there is hope even beyond the grave for those who defiled themselves.

In the New Testament, St. Paul likewise hints at the cleansing fires of Purgatory when he writes, "If any man's work is burned up he will suffer loss though he himself will be saved" (1 Cor 3:12-15). He also seemingly prays for the soul of Onesiphorus in 2 Timothy 1:18.

8. Purgatory wasn't an invention of the medieval Church.

Even before people used the word 'Purgatory,' during the Middle Ages, they recognized the need to offer up prayers and have Masses said for those who've left this life.

That uninterrupted witness includes the writings of Church Fathers and Doctors from the first century onward. It also includes records of Catholics commemorating the anniversaries of departed loved ones with Masses and prayers, the inclusion of burying the dead among the spiritual works of mercy, and centuries of Christians who left money in their wills for Masses to be said for their souls. Since the damned cannot benefit by our prayers and the blessed in Heaven have no need for our prayers, that enduring witness implies another place or state where souls exist who can benefit from them."

9. Purgatory is like spiritual summer school.

How's that? To start with, just as sitting in a classroom during January is easier than sitting in a classroom during July, doing the suffering and sacrificing it takes to grow in holiness is easier on earth than it is in Purgatory.

In part, that's because on earth we still have our physical bodies.

“Our task is to become conformed to Christ,” Father Longenecker says. “That’s a task we’re supposed to do here. It has a physical dimension to it.”

Which is to say, with our bodies we can do good works that break us of attachments to sin and self. Without a body, all those corporal works of mercy -- all those ways of loving and serving others, as well as atoning for sin -- are impossible. Even more fundamentally, purgatory is like summer school because, just like summer school, no one has to go there. Purgatory is not supposed to be the norm. We can do all the work necessary to become holy here. We just need to make use of the graces he gives us now.”

Taken from an article by *Emily Stimpson*, an *Our Sunday Visitor* contributing editor.