

Purgatory as a Gift That Gets Us in Shape for Heaven
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“Purgatory” is a word that is not frequently used today. In the last year, I have mentioned it both in the introduction to my series, *Our Saints and Intercessors*, (<http://www.renewaloffaith.org/video---our-saints-and-intercessors-part-i.html>) and in the introduction to my series, *Sacraments: Channels of God’s Grace*, (www.renewaloffaith.org/sacramentsintro).

When I use the term Purgatory, people are surprised. For some people, it has been so long since they have heard the word that they wonder if the Church has discarded this belief. It has not! You can find information about it in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in paragraphs 1030-1032 (<http://ccc.usccb.org/flipbooks/catechism/270/index.html>). The good news is when these people hear Purgatory mentioned, they desire to know more about it.

This article is written with the hope of providing answers and responding to their desire to know more about Purgatory.

In this article, I will focus solely on Purgatory. However, to fully understand it, one needs to look at Purgatory in the context of what our faith teaches us about death, judgment, Heaven, and Hell. For that, you can view my video presentation, *The Four Last Things* online at <http://www.renewaloffaith.org/video---last-things.html>.

So, what is Purgatory? Let me begin my answer by saying that Purgatory is a ***gift***. Purgatory exists to get us into Heaven. We read in 1 John 3:1-2

See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now; ***what we shall be has not yet been revealed***. We do know that when it is revealed ***we shall be like him***, for we shall see him as he is.

God bestows this gift on us because He loves us. He wants us to be with him in Heaven. In order to be in Heaven, we must be like him, without sin, or even the stain of sin. Our sins are forgiven when we confess them in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, (<http://www.renewaloffaith.org/reconciliation.html>) but they have still left their mark on us. Purgatory is “where we go” to be purified, to have the effects of sin removed from our soul.

In speaking of the Communion of Saints, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states

The three states of the Church. "When the Lord comes in glory, and all his angels with him, death will be no more and all things will be subject to him. But at the present time some of his disciples are ***pilgrims on earth***. Others ***have died and are being purified***, while still ***others are in glory***, contemplating 'in full light, God himself triune and one, exactly as he is" (954, <http://ccc.usccb.org/flipbooks/catechism/250/index.html>).

Purgatory is the second state, for those who “have died and are being purified.” As we continue to explore the question, “what is Purgatory?,” let me honestly say that we do not know much about it in the sense of it as a “place” or what actually happens to us in Purgatory. You will not find the word “Purgatory” in the Bible. This should not surprise us as there are other words that are central to our faith like “trinity” (see my video presentation, *Praying With the Saints*, www.renewaloffaith.org/trinity), and “consubstantial” that are not explicitly found. These words and concepts; however do have a solid foundation in the Bible.

So, what does the Bible have to say about Purgatory? In the Old Testament, we turn to 2 Maccabees 12:32-46 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+maccabees+12%3A32-46&version=NABRE>). The Jews were in battle and some died. In verses 42 and 43, we hear how the survivors prayed for the dead and took up a collection to offer a sacrifice on their behalf. From this, we have our custom of praying for the dead. If a person goes immediately to Heaven or Hell at their death, there would be no point in praying for them. In fact, one is judged individually at death. Once they have died, nothing can change whether one goes to Heaven or Hell.

So, what is the point of offering sacrifice for them (as we do when we have Masses said for the dead)? Such sacrifice is offered to purify them of sins so they can enter Heaven. I stress “purified” because we cannot change their sins with our prayers. They must have repented and sought forgiveness themselves before dying. Today, we seek forgiveness of our sins when we confess them in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. While our sins are forgiven, they still have an effect on us. (see my blog article, “Is Purgatory Gone” <http://blog.renewaloffaith.org/blog/?p=359>) We need to be purified of that effect. How is this done?

The most common image for Purgatory is one of fire. In 1 Corinthians 3:15 we read, "But if someone's work is burned up, that one will suffer loss; ***the person will be saved, but only as through fire.***" In 1 Peter 1:7, we read, "so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold that is perishable ***even though tested by fire***, may prove to be for praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

When one hears of fire, one might think of destruction and pain. Certainly, the fires of Hell are painful. The “fire” of Purgatory is a different sort of fire. It is a ***cleansing*** fire. One might think of an uncontrolled forest fire that destroys everything in its path. Conversely, one can have a ***controlled*** burn in the forest to clean out the undergrowth so that the good growth can thrive. The latter controlled burn is like that of the image of “fire” in Purgatory.

I am getting ahead of myself. I said above that the word “Purgatory” is not found in the Bible. I provided the scriptural references for our understanding of Purgatory but, if it is not named in the Bible, how did our understanding of it develop?

Here I turn to Pope Paul VI’s, apostolic constitution in 1967, "Indulgentiarum Doctrina"(ID) where he writes

The doctrine and practice of indulgences which have been in force for many centuries in the Catholic Church have a solid foundation in divine revelation which comes from the Apostles and "develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit" (1

http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-vi_apc_01011967_indulgentiarum-doctrina.html).

I described Purgatory as a gift. Why is it a gift and why do we need the gift? Here Paul VI writes

It is a divinely revealed truth that *sins bring punishments* inflicted by God's sanctity and justice. *These must be expiated* either on this earth through the sorrows, miseries and calamities of this life and above all through death, *or else in the life beyond through fire and torments or "purifying" punishments* (ID, 2).

In purgatory, in fact, the souls of the those "who died in the charity of God and truly repentant, but before satisfying with worthy fruits of penance for sins committed and for omissions are cleaned after death with purgatorial punishments (ID, 3).

In looking at this, we must realize that we cannot earn our salvation. It is a gift. We cannot earn forgiveness. Forgiveness is made possible through Jesus' death on the Cross. It is a gift. Forgiveness and Salvation are gifts. While we cannot earn them, if we appreciate them as gifts, we will respond by doing good works. As such, our works serve as visible signs of our faith and our desire to repent with a contrite heart (cf. James 2:14-26 <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=James+2%3A14-26&version=NABRE>).

I said above that Purgatory is "where we go" to get ready for Heaven. We tend to describe Purgatory (as well as Heaven and Hell) in terms of a physical place. We do this because we are human, we are tactical beings relating to our world through our senses such as seeing and touching. As Ratzinger wrote, we need to think of Purgatory not so much as a physical place but rather in terms of what it offers us spiritually. Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) describes it as a means to deal with our unresolved guilt (*Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 189). We cannot enter into Heaven itself until we let go of our guilt.

Another way to look at Purgatory involves shedding our excesses. For an image to reflect this "shedding", Papandrea refers to an image of Purgatory provided by Macrina, sister of St. Gregory of Nyssa. Think of a rope being pulled through a hole small enough that only the rope itself can fit through. The rope is covered with clay. We are that rope. To enter through the needle of Heaven, we need to shed our excesses. Purgatory is part of doing that (*What Really Happens After We Die*, 78).

St. Catherina of Genoa says we need complete purgation before being in the presence of God. Sin must be removed first (83). Likewise, St. Catherine of Genoa sees Purgatory not as a place but a condition. Yet it is real, a spiritually reality that we begin to experience in the sufferings of this world. For her it brings spiritual maturation. It is about immersing ourselves in God's love. Thus, she believes there is joy in Purgatory. Catherine speaks of joy in Purgatory (82):

- "As the soul grows in its perfection, so does it suffer more because of what impedes the final consummation, the end for which God made it."
- "In purgatory great joy and great suffering do not exclude one another"

We also tend to think of Purgatory in terms of "time", how long are we there? We do not know if time has the same meaning in Purgatory except that it might seem like eternity as we wait for Heaven. Thus, we do not know how long we will be there.

Another image used to help explain purgatory is the caterpillar. The caterpillar enters the cocoon and reemerges as a butterfly. I see this image explaining the Resurrection as much as Purgatory. In this analogy, the caterpillar symbolizes our life here on Earth as we are living now. When we die, we enter into a cocoon, which symbolizes Purgatory. In Purgatory, what had been made ugly by sin, is re-formed into the beautiful butterfly. Looking at the Resurrection, the butterfly symbolizes how our bodies are transformed from their earthly form to the glorious form we will have in Heaven. It is the *same* body, transformed, in part through Purgatory.

Another question that people ask, does everyone go to Purgatory? In other words, are there people holy enough to go directly to Heaven, without needing Purgatory?

Let me begin to answer this question by offering what we read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

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 (1030 <http://ccc.usccb.org/flipbooks/catechism/270/index.html>).

Here, I think it is important to remember how I described Purgatory as a gift. It is not punishment. In our humanity, we struggle against sin. Saying someone must spend time in Purgatory is not saying they were a bad person. It simply acknowledges that we are in need of redemption.

As I said, our human nature causes us to struggle with sin. There are only two people who are without sin. The first is Jesus, like us in all things but sin (cf. Hebrews 4:15). The second person is Mary who was conceived without sin. Here, I also consider the likelihood that babies who die would not need Purgatory because, at a young age, one is not capable of sin in that sin requires our full knowledge and consent to the sin. A baby cannot consent to any sin. Here, I leave the question of Purgatory for Mary and babies in God's hands. God knows what is necessary for one to be welcomed into Heaven. Certainly, he welcomes the babies and Mary. If they need to have their bodies transformed to be welcomed into Heaven, God will take care of that. After all, He is God. (The early church also thought that the martyrs may not need Purgatory as their martyrdom was their Purgatory.)

So, if our loved ones go to Purgatory, is there something we can do for them? Above, I offered what the Catechism says about the three states, the saints in Heaven, those in Purgatory, and us still here on Earth and the "exchange of spiritual goods." We do this by offering Mass intentions for the deceased. In doing so, Mass intentions for the deceased are not simply a recognition of a birthday or anniversary. In offering a Mass intention, we are offering the sacrifice of Jesus for the person.

We can pray for those in Purgatory just as we ask the saints to pray (intercede) for us. We can do this for them any time of the year but we especially do so in the month of November, including All Souls' Day on November (see my 2019 homily for more on November as a special time to pray for the dead - "**Remembering Our Dead – Homily for Mass of Remembrance**" <http://blog.renewaloffaith.org/blog/?p=3021>).

In paragraph 1032, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states

This teaching is also based on the practice of prayer for the dead, already mentioned in Sacred Scripture: "Therefore [Judas Maccabeus] made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin." From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God. The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead:

Let us help and commemorate them. If Job's sons were purified by their father's sacrifice, why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them (<http://ccc.usccb.org/flipbooks/catechism/270/index.html>).

This paragraph affirms the custom of praying for the dead and leads us to our final topic, *indulgences*.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* addresses the question of what an indulgence is

"An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven, which the faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains under certain prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints." "An indulgence is partial or plenary according as it removes either part or all of the temporal punishment due to sin." Indulgences may be applied to the living or the dead (1471, cf 1471-1479 <http://ccc.usccb.org/flipbooks/catechism/372/index.html>).

Pope Paul VI offers

"An indulgence is the remission before God of the temporal punishment due sins already forgive as far as their guilt is concerned" (ID, norms, n.1, http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-vi_apc_01011967_indulgentiarum-doctrina.html).

Thus, an indulgence mitigates or eliminates our need for "time" in Purgatory. It can be offered for ourselves or for those in Purgatory. As Pope Paul VI writes

Following in the footsteps of Christ, the Christian faithful have always endeavored to help one another on the path leading to the heavenly Father "through prayer, the exchange of spiritual good and penitential expiation. The more they have been immersed in the fervor

of charity, the more they have imitated Christ in his sufferings, carrying their crosses in expiation for their own sins and those of others, certain that they could help their brothers to obtain salvation from God the Father of mercies (ID, 5 http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-vi_apc_01011967_indulgentiarum-doctrina.html).

Like Purgatory, our theology of indulgences did not form overnight. Pope Paul VI presents some of the historical development of indulgences in “Indulgentiarum Doctrina” http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-vi_apc_01011967_indulgentiarum-doctrina.html. Here are some of the highlights:

- "The Apostles themselves, in fact, exhorted their disciples to pray for the salvation of sinners." (ID, 6. cf. James 5:16, 1 John 5:15)
- "The bishops, therefore, prudently assessing these matters, established the manner and the measure of the satisfaction to be made and indeed permitted canonical penances to be replaced by other possibly easier works, which would be useful to the common good and suitable for fostering piety, to be performed by the penitents themselves and sometimes by others among the faithful" (ID, 6).
- "The conviction existing in the Church that the pastors of the flock of the Lord could set the individual free from the vestiges of sins by applying the merits of Christ and of the saints led gradually, in the course of the centuries and under the influence of the Holy Spirit's continuous inspiration of the people of God, to the usage of indulgences which represented a progression in the doctrine and discipline of the Church rather than a change" (ID, 7).
- "Unfortunately, the practice of indulgences has at times been improperly used either through "untimely and superfluous indulgences" by which the power of the keys was humiliated and penitential satisfaction weakened, or through the collection of "illicit profits" by which indulgences were blasphemously defamed" (ID, 8).

As Pope VI says, indulgences offered for others can be an act of charity (love)

Therefore the use of indulgences effectively influences charity in us and demonstrates that charity in an outstanding manner when we offer indulgences as assistance to our brothers who rest in Christ (ID, 9).

Pope Paul VI goes on to offer the following about the requirements for an indulgence

Although indulgences are in fact *free gifts*, nevertheless they are granted for the living as well as the dead only on *determined conditions*. To acquire them, it is indeed required on the one hand that *prescribed works be performed*, and on the other hand that the faithful *have the necessary dispositions*, that is to say, *that they love God, detest sin, place their trusts in the merits of Christ and believe firmly* in the great assistance they derive from the Communion of Saints" (ID, 10).

Under “determined conditions” and “prescribed works to be performed,” all indulgences require us to do at least three things. We need to make a good confession, we need to receive Communion, and then complete an action that depends on the nature of the indulgence. Often, this is making a

pilgrimage or offering a specific prayer. This is not about the *quantity* of our prayers and actions. The prayers and actions do not “buy” us the indulgence. Rather, they are signs that we have the “necessary disposition” to be open to the gift of the indulgence.

This disposition is something that was lost by the time Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses (that listed what he felt was in need of reform) to a church door in Germany in 1517 (seen as the start of the Protestant Reformation). Indulgences were almost literally being sold. For example, if you donated to the building of a church, you received an indulgence. This does not reflect the necessary disposition.

From this, Pope Paul VI affirms the practice and teaching of indulgences

Therefore Holy Mother Church, supported by these truths, while again recommending to the faithful the practice of indulgences as something very dear to the Christian people during the course of many centuries and in our days as well-this is proven by experience-does not in any way intend to diminish the value of other means of sanctification and purification, first and foremost among which are the Sacrifice of the Mass and the Sacraments, particularly the Sacrament of Penance (ID, 11).

Indulgences serve a pious purpose when offered in charity for the suffering of those in Purgatory. Charity is essential here. If we are to have the “necessary disposition”, we should seek an indulgence not just to get ourselves or another out of punishment. We should always desire to receive the Eucharist, go to confession when needed, and to perform pious acts because it is the right thing to do.

Indulgences are not a “get out of jail free card.” Just as we cannot confess a sin before we commit it because it shows we do not have a firm resolve to sin no more, seeing an indulgence as a “get out of jail free card” takes the gift that God offers in the indulgence for granted.

Purgatory is a gift that God gives us so we can be with him in Heaven. We show we value this gift by doing our best to avoid sin. Praying for the dead and offering indulgences shows our Christian love. These actions do not change their sins but are an act of love just as Jesus offering his life on the Cross so that our sins may be forgiven is the supreme act of love.

For Further Reading on www.renewaloffaith.org

- “Funerals, Mass Intentions, and Purgatory,” <http://www.renewaloffaith.org/funerals--mass-intentions--and-purgatory.html> – this page contains a video clip from the introduction to my series, *Sacraments: Channels of God’s Grace* (www.renewaloffaith.org/sacramentsvideo) discussing what’s in the title as well as some links to previous blog articles I have written on these topics.
- *The Four Last Things* (<http://www.renewaloffaith.org/video---last-things.html>) – in this video presentation Fr. Jeff explores what our faith teaches us about the way we look at death as it relates to Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory.

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