

THE PERPETUAL LIGHT OF PEACE

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THE TITLE of this article indicates what purgatory has been for Christians over the centuries — a source of peace. Since the period just before the Reformation until very recently, purgatory has almost always been associated with indulgences. One seemed to imply the other. Not only was there a state between heaven and hell, but we could actually help the dead as well as store up treasures for ourselves. After Vatican II, however, indulgences were less emphasized; the *Dies Irae* of the requiem mass was replaced by optional prayers expressing hope in the resurrection; priests became less and less concerned about offering three masses on All Souls Day, and ‘purgatory’ almost dropped out of our vocabulary. Yet purgatory remains an official Church teaching — a teaching many modern Christians would like locked up somewhere as a strange relative or a friend who embarrasses us.

Like other Church teachings, the doctrine of purgatory is the product of development, shaped and formed by Christians confronting the daily problems of human existence over the centuries. Just as in the past it grew, changed and was adapted to the evolving times, so too today we have no reason to believe that its growth has stopped or that it is an unusable relic. In fact, so far from relegating this doctrine to the dead past, we should welcome it as part of our rich heritage where it still performs vital functions.

A glance at the origins of the traditional teaching could suggest possible lines of new developments. Obviously scripture is the place to begin any such investigation; but the daily living of the faith, especially praying for the dead, shows not only how such teaching affected people’s lives, but also how people’s stance towards life after death moulded doctrines of this type.

Basic to teaching on purgatory is the belief that sin bears its own punishment. This is one of the very first lessons of the bible: Adam was punished for his sin (Gen 3,17-19). For disobedience, Adam and

his wife were banished from the garden of Eden. Many centuries later God saw that all people on earth had sinned, and that sin was worsening, so he sent a flood covering the entire world to destroy humanity, sparing only Noah and his family who had found favour in God's sight (Gen 6-9).

After the 'pre-history' of Genesis 1-11, we continue to discover human beings suffering punishment for their sins. For instance, Miriam was made leprous for challenging the relationship between Moses and God (Num 12,2-10). Because Moses sinned he was not allowed to guide the people into the promised land (Num 20,12). David's child, born as a result of his adultery with Bathsheba, died a week after its birth (2 Sam 12). These are examples of individual sin (except for Noah above) and individual punishment. The Babylonian Exile (587-538 B.C.) was a corporate punishment of a people for their sins, especially those of idolatry.

Though, in the cases just mentioned, the culprits were directly punished, this was not always true. We read in Leviticus (14,12-13) that a male lamb could be substituted and sacrificed as a sin-offering for sinners. Aaron was commanded to confess the sins of the people over the head of a (representative) goat; then the (scape-)goat was led out into the desert (Lev 16). A new concept was introduced in the book of Isaiah when the prophet spoke of a human being suffering for the sins of others (Isai 53,4-6). The early Church, of course, applied this passage to Jesus, but it was also to be used in later teaching on purgatory.

We can thus summarize the Old Testament teaching: there is punishment due for every sin that a person commits; this expiation can be of many kinds, whether one personally suffers for the sin or whether it is transferred to another (usually an animal). A just person can suffer in favour of sinners.

The traditional New Testament texts usually cited to 'prove' the existence of purgatory are Mt 12,32 (sins against the son of man will be forgiven, but those against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven in this age or the age to come) and 1 Cor 3,11-15 (the metaphor about the minister of the gospel who builds on the foundation of Christ with wood, hay, straw, or gold, silver, or expensive stones). Yet no recognized biblical scholar today would hold that these passages in particular or the New Testament as a whole teach the existence of purgatory as such. The New Testament is concerned with the 'kingdom of heaven' and 'salvation' rather than purgatory. Jesus affirmed that life is changed by death, but that it is not taken away.

He offered people hope in God's saving power, and therefore joy and consolation. This was the 'new' doctrine which he taught.

We should keep in mind that developments in the eschatological expectations of the early Christians played a large role in shaping the teachings of the incipient Church. Along with the first generation of Christians, St Paul himself at first expected the world to end during his lifetime. Later, when he realized that he would probably die before this had happened, he spoke of an intermediate phase between his own death and the time when he would appear before the 'judgment seat of Christ' (2 Cor 5,10). After several centuries, this 'interval' would develop into an understanding and explanation of purgatory in a temporal and material sense.

Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-165) was probably the first christian writer to open the way to some type of *post-mortem* purification/expiation by holding that no soul perishes after death because that would be a reward for the impious. Those judged worthy do not die; those who are to be punished will suffer as long as they exist and God wills it. By admitting the body/soul dichotomy Justin was one of the earliest recognized christian authorities to demonstrate how we survive death while our bodies are buried in the ground; he gave credibility to the possibility of purgatory. Just a few years later Tertullian (A.D. 160-225) mentioned the existing practice of praying for the dead, and reflected on the destiny of the souls of those who die after Adam but before the end of the world.

Within three centuries after the death of Christ we discover that not only Justin and Tertullian but also the leading intellectuals and pastors of the Church had enlarged upon Scripture to teach that those who still await the resurrection (though they be physically dead) were capable of further perfection. This theory was practically carried out by the Church officially sponsoring masses for the dead. In fact masses for the dead were celebrated before any doctrines on the matter. One who was completely dead to sin could rise again.

In his *Confessions* Augustine (A.D. 354-430) touchingly described the death of his mother, Monica. Little by little she 'gave up her soul'. When she realized that the end was near she requested Augustine and his brother to remember her at the altar of God after her death. After she had actually died Augustine and his family did not think it would be proper to celebrate her funeral with a great show of tears and wailing. These were things done by people who believed that the dead person was completely extinct. Monica did not die miserably nor, as faith taught, was she altogether dead.

When her body was removed and placed in the grave, but before burial prayers were offered for her, Augustine did not cry, but later he wept briefly for the woman who had wept so many years for him. He then prayed for her and asked God to forgive her sins. She was always a person who forgave others. She ceaselessly served at the altar of God, and when she realized that the end was coming she asked for prayers, because she knew that at the altar the holy victim is offered which brings an end to our condemnation.

Augustine recommended prayers for the dead because they were an act of thanksgiving for those who were very good, propitiations for those who were not exceedingly evil, and consolation for the living even if no help for those who had led a thoroughly bad life. This opinion was to be quoted verbatim by theologians for the next thousand years or more.

Naturally questions arose about the length and intensity of purification/expiation in the period/place which had come to be known as purgatory. Was it the same for all? Did greater merits and evils cause more pleasure and pain? The conclusion that a soul could reach heaven after somehow atoning for earthly misdeeds also implied that a person could make reparation for his or her sins during this life through good deeds, and/or after this life through suffering pain. The living could relieve part or all of the *post-mortem* suffering of the dead person by doing good works such as almsgiving and fasting. Since the living do not know what souls are in purgatory (or heaven or hell for that matter) they were urged by early church theologians to pray for all the departed to diminish the time and intensity of their pain. These prayers would never be wasted — so Augustine reasoned.

It was only *after* the age of the great Fathers of the Church that official church teaching on purgatory took its fixed shape. It has become commonplace to note the obsession with death which grew up in the later middle ages. Where the west door of romanesque cathedrals had displayed Christ in glory, gothic cathedrals introduced the Christ of judgment. By developing the doctrine of purgatory the Church was able to help people cope with the obsessive thought of death and the guilty burden of their sins. Death and judgment need not offer only a frightening and immediate choice between heaven and hell.

A number of reasons can be advanced to explain why people became so concerned with expiation and purification beyond the grave. Firstly, because the future is largely unknown, people are

always able to conjure up horrible phantasms of what might be. Scripture adds to these fears by using vivid language like that of fire and worms devouring the person. Naturally this is a metaphorical manner of attempting to present the 'other' world in terms of this world, but such images can be frightening. Their repeated use over the centuries led some to take them literally — expiation after death takes a temporal-material form. Apocalyptic writings, with their cosmic cataclysms, increased people's trepidations.

On the positive side, human and christian love played a large role. Like Augustine, the faithful knew that their union with their dear ones, so far from being broken by death, demanded a closer union through prayer. What Augustine held about praying for the dead eventually entered into the Church's official presentation of purgatory.

So powerful was Augustine's influence that people who followed him (even those like Caesarius of Arles and John Cassian) merely added footnotes to his teaching in this matter. For instance, Gregory the Great urged people to pray for the dead and to offer masses for them. Several hundred years later Innocent II (in 1143) commended a priest who had died to Christians' prayers. Innocent III in 1208 told people that sacrifices, alms and similar works help the dead. It was Innocent IV, in 1254, who first used the noun 'purgatory' in an official document. The Second Council of Lyons (1274) set forth the official Church teaching on this issue. This teaching is likely to be the one most familiar to people today: the souls of those who die and have not completed the expiation and purification due for their sins can be helped by vigils, sacrifices, prayers and almsgiving.

Since the Second Council of Lyons there have been only two major innovations or modifications of the official Church teaching with regard to purgatory. These are: the place of indulgences as a means of helping the dead (Leo X in 1520; later confirmed by the Council of Trent), and Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* which affirmed and accepted the 'faith of our ancestors in the living communion which exists between us and our brothers who are in the glory of heaven or who are yet being purified after their death' (*Lumen Gentium*, 51). Strikingly, *Lumen Gentium* made no reference to 'soul', 'fire', or 'purgatory'. At the same time the Church's teaching links up with the Old Testament notions of how expiation due for sin could be carried out — someone else is able to assume the burden.

We see that with the notable exception of *Lumen Gentium* the Church's official approach to purgatory has presupposed several

things: the body/soul dichotomy; purgatory as a place with temporal aspects; purification of the soul taking place after death in a 'material' way. The emphasis has been on purgatory as a place and time of punishment; it is a place of hope because of its temporary nature.

Vatican II, among its other accomplishments, reminded people that there is a difference between Tradition and traditions. Under the broad umbrella of Tradition many traditions have existed for centuries. Unfortunately some people, not acquainted with this fact, have identified their own particular traditions as the only manifestations of the Church's Tradition. Though official Church documents might have employed a given philosophical or theological model to express a teaching, other opinions and modes of expression are not excluded. Church history provides a treasury illustrating the variety of methods and models of teaching.

Let us ask ourselves: what is the essence of purgatory? It is the removal or release of everything that is opposed to God. No matter what might have been the historical reasons for the idea of purgatory evolving and coming into the christian consciousness, it is so defined. The body/soul dichotomy, temporal references, *post-mortem* expiation are not essential parts of its definition. Purgatory is a maturing of the fundamental option for Jesus Christ which a person has made. It therefore implies a process, though not necessarily a temporal one.

Scripture studies in the last forty years have illuminated and filled out Church teachings. This is strikingly evident in the area of christology, but also we find advances in eschatology. Usually eschatological statements and sayings have been interpreted as referring only to the future. This is not illogical, but we still must ask ourselves: do such statements refer only to future events or can they point to ultimate values in the here and now, or both? Scripture scholars today stress the values rather than the events.

The Old Testament repeats time after time that God is faithful to his word. The God of the Exodus, though sometimes angry and irritated with his people, never abandoned them. The people's faith was often tested, especially during the forty-nine years of the Babylonian Exile. God was true to his promises. Complete fulfilment of God's promises did not necessarily take place in history; it could be accomplished beyond history.

The New Testament focused on God as one who wants the world to be saved. God spoke to us in human terms through Jesus. Not

only did Jesus associate with 'sinners' but he pointed out that he was the good shepherd who would leave ninety-nine sheep in order to find and bring back one who had strayed. He told his audiences about God's merciful love for them and the love that they should have for one another, while he downplayed strict justice and punishment. So great was his love that he died for all men and women.

St Paul in his Epistle to the Romans recalled to his readers that while all men and women are sinners in solidarity with the first Adam, they have been acquitted and made righteous by the new Adam, Jesus Christ, with whom they are also united by the bond of solidarity. Paul further encouraged the Romans by stating that if they confessed that Jesus is Lord and believed that God had raised him from the dead, they would be saved. He told the Galatians that they were children and heirs of promise. These statements do not necessarily refer only to the future but to the audience addressed there and then, and to us today; they tell us who we are right now, and of our present condition.

While Christians over the centuries have taken comfort in the biblical parables about God's love and mercy, they still faced the problem of those who were basically just but who had died without fully paying back their 'debts' conceived of in human terms. *Post-mortem* expiation in the form of purgatory through which one was passively purified was an explanation that held sway for centuries.

We can always conjecture as to how something that is opposed to God is removed, or what is involved in the maturation of a person in his or her fundamental option. We cannot *a priori* say that it is the same for everyone. For instance in the seventh century Gregory the Great proposed a rudimentary form of 'realized purgatory'. Human history is a story of suffering (and purification). Perhaps we are paying our 'debts' by and through the tribulations of daily life. A teaching like this does not exclude vicarious expiation nor does it deny expiation after death. Gregory's opinion, however, offered another possible explanation of purgatory: a conversion experience or daily living which has given an individual sufficient love, and brought purification from his or her iniquities, so that the person is received into heaven immediately after death.

Throughout the centuries there have been people who viewed purgatory with the joy of hope instead of sorrow at the threat of punishment. For instance, Catherine of Genoa (A.D. 1447-1510) believed that no happiness could be found worthy to be compared to

that of a soul in purgatory with the exception of the saints in paradise. The basis of that joy, she believed, was rooted in a person's relationship to God, and the realization that a person attains perfection not through his or her resources alone.

In the last century Eugénie Smet founded the Society of the Helpers of the Holy Souls. Her programme was to help vicariously the souls in purgatory by praying, by suffering and by labouring. These ideas and programme of the Church Militant helping the Church Suffering anticipated *Lumen Gentium* by a century.

Where does all this leave us today? The Church's official teaching has defined that purgatory exists but has not defined its nature. Belief in purgatory arose and developed through the centuries mainly because of the practice of praying for the dead. This belief also explained the state of souls awaiting the resurrection and reasonably met the requirements of divine justice. People conceptualized purgatory according to their current needs and philosophical/theological presuppositions. Those who insisted on the body/soul dichotomy presented purgatory as the *post-mortem* punishment of the soul as it waited for heaven. The punishment (or expiation) consisted in the delay in obtaining the beatific vision; some argued that a type of sense pain was also involved. Others took whatever image they had of sin and applied it to the individual: purgatory was the removal of the stain, the rust, or the barrier of sin.

Just as we humans think and reason in a space-time continuum so we tend to describe purgatory. We often forget that since purgatory belongs to the realm of eschatology, our conceptualizations of it will necessarily involve metaphorical language. Purgatory takes place outside of time.

We have already objectively been saved by Jesus Christ (Rom. 8,24). By definition, and again we must use spatial-temporal metaphorical terms, the people in the state of purgatory are those who have been subjectively saved but who await their individual consummation as well as that of the world. Good works done for the dead, therefore, are a prayer for the Lord to come again in glory.

Since purgatory is the integration of the fundamental option made in Jesus Christ, a maturing process, it is joyful. Peace itself implies order and integration, and is a fundamental hope in most men and women — especially those who are neither saints nor the most grievous sinners.