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PURGATORY

By

Very Rev. G. P. DWYER D.D.

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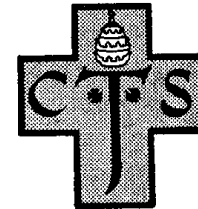
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TO be present at Mass in the Roman catacombs is a moving experience. We go down the steps out of the sunlight and we seem, indeed, to be passing into the company of the apostles and martyrs. As we offer the Christian sacrifice with the priest we realize vividly our kinship in the Faith with those who offered the same sacrifice there so very long ago.

This is especially true when we pray for the dead.

Be mindful, O Lord, of Thy servants and handmaids who are gone before us with the sign of faith and sleep the sleep of peace.

To these, O Lord, and to all that rest in Christ grant, we beseech Thee, a place of refreshment, light and peace. Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

Look up as the priest says those words in the Canon of the Mass and you may see dimly illuminated by the steady flame of the candles the inscription on the tombs set into the walls. They echo the priest's words as though a passing sigh had been caught and kept in stone throughout the centuries.

May the martyrs Januarius, Agathopus, Felicissimus obtain refreshment for me !

Pray for me a sinner !

*Brethren, I beseech you when you meet here for prayer
And send up ardent supplication to the Father and the Son
Do then likewise recall to mind the beloved Agape
That God Almighty may guard Agape forever.*

So our own day is linked with the days of the first Christians in one of the tenderest devotions of the Faith—prayer for the souls in Purgatory.

Let it be said at once that we know very little indeed about Purgatory. We could not even know that it existed unless God had made it known to us. He has revealed little more than the fact of its existence to us. The words of the Catechism sum up what we know :

PURGATORY

Purgatory is a place where souls suffer for a time after death on account of their sins.

But the Catechism also gives us the doctrine of the Communion of Saints. All the members of the Church in Heaven, on earth and in Purgatory are in communion with one another. We can help the souls in Purgatory by our prayers and good works.

First of all let us see how we know of the existence of Purgatory.

Most of us learn of Purgatory for the first time when we are taught to say our prayers—as indeed we learn most of the essentials of our Faith. We first learn, for example, that our Lord is God when we are taught to pray to Him as God. So we first learn of Purgatory when we are taught to pray for the Holy Souls. We fall in naturally with the custom of the Church. We do what has been done from the beginning. We do what the Christians in the catacombs did when they carved those inscriptions on the tombs. That is one of the ways in which the Faith is passed on to us by “tradition”—which simply means “handing down”.

The Holy Mass is, of course, the great school of Faith and from earliest times we find the Mass offered for the dead as well as the living.

The Church taught with the Scriptures that “the souls of the just are in the hand of God”—yet they could not pass to their “place of refreshment, light and peace” till their sins were atoned for. Where were they in the meantime? In some “secret dwellings,” said St Augustine, using a vague phrase, for the word Purgatory was not yet in use. At Mass the names of the living and the dead who were to be prayed for were inscribed on lists called *Diptychs* and read out, much as we hear them in the “weekly notices” to-day. At first the prayers

PURGATORY

were for the dead in general. But already early in the third century St Cyprian and Tertullian mention the practice of offering Mass for the dead at the tomb on the day of the burial and on their anniversary. When St Monica lay dying in A.D. 387 her last request to her son St Augustine was for a remembrance in his Mass.

Seeing my brother and me standing by her and looking closely upon us as we stood wordless in our grief, she said: “Here you will bury your mother”. I stayed silent and checked my weeping. My brother said he would be happier if she were to die in her own land and not in a strange country. . . . She looked at me and said: “See the way he talks”. And then she said to us both: “Lay this body wherever it may be. Let no care of it disturb you. This only I ask of you that you should remember me at the Altar of the Lord wherever you may be.”¹

And so, says St Augustine, when she died “the sacrifice of our redemption was offered for her, while the body, as the custom is, lay by the grave before it was actually buried.”

The Greek Fathers, too, as well as the Latin, urged the importance of prayers and Mass for the dead. Listen to St John Chrysostom (A.D. 344-407):

Help the dead as far as possible not by tears but by prayers and supplications and alms and offerings. Not unmeaningly have these things been devised; not in vain do we make mention of the departed in the course of the Divine mysteries and approach God on their behalf, beseeching the Lamb who is before us, who taketh away the sin of the world; not in vain—but that some refreshment may thereby ensue to them. Nor in vain doth he that standeth by the altar cry out, when the tremendous mysteries are being celebrated, “for all that have fallen asleep in Christ.”

So the Church continued the practice which she must have learnt from the apostles. St Chrysostom asserts that the

Confessions, translated by F. J. Sheed.

apostles themselves had commanded prayer for the dead. It is true that we have no writings of the apostles which contain this admonition. But the unbroken practice of the Church is sufficient evidence that prayer for the dead derives from their teaching.

The Church, too, found inspiration for its custom in the Scriptures. Our Lord Himself spoke of sins which might be forgiven in the next life.

Every sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven men, but the blasphemy of the spirit shall not be forgiven. And whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of Man it shall be forgiven him. But he that shall speak against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him neither in this world nor in the world to come.¹

“ Nothing defiled can enter Heaven ” and so the cleansing of sins which remain at death must be accomplished in some state midway between this world and Heaven.²

Again the Fathers quote our Lord's words about the servant who was ordered to be cast into prison because he would not forgive his fellow-servant.

Amen, I say to you, he shall not go out from there until he has paid the last farthing.³

All sin must be atoned for, if not here then in the next life. What is the “ last farthing ”? It is a sin, said Tertullian, “ which is readily forgiven ” but must still be paid for. We should now call it a venial sin.

Especially from the time of St Augustine the Fathers quoted

¹ Matt. xii. 31.

² The sin against the Holy Ghost is the deliberate and persisting refusal of the light of grace. This sin deliberately closes the door against the entrance of grace. The will of the sinner is stubbornly set against the will of God. It is a terrible truth that there are sinners who are beyond praying for. But God alone knows who is thus past praying for.

³ Matt. v. 26.

St Paul's text from the 1st Epistle to the Corinthians. The only foundation of a good Christian life is Jesus Christ.

But on this foundation different men will build in gold, silver, precious stones, wood, grass or straw, and each man's workmanship will be plainly seen. It is the day of the Lord that will disclose it, since that day is to reveal itself in fire, and fire will test the quality of each man's workmanship. He will receive a reward, if the building he has added on stands firm; if it is burnt up, he will be the loser; and yet he himself will be saved, though only as men are saved by passing through fire.¹

Now this passage of St Paul refers to the “ fire ” of judgment at the last day and cannot refer directly to Purgatory which will then cease to exist. But it has been used in the Church as an apt illustration of the doctrine of Purgatory.

We are to recognize [says Monsignor Knox] that many whose actions in this world have had little value will themselves escape condemnation though only by passing through the fires of Purgatory.

The fact that the Fathers and theologians use this text is important rather as evidence that they held the traditional belief of the Church in the existence of Purgatory.

Finally, there is the example of Judas Maccabeus who caused sacrifice to be offered in Jerusalem for the sins of those who had fallen in battle.

It is therefore a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins.²

The ancient Jews had not indeed any full knowledge of Purgatory. But the Fathers rightly saw in this text a foreshadowing of the truth that was to be clearly made known by Christ and used the words as an apt way of expressing it.

In all this matter then we learn of Purgatory primarily from

¹ 1 Cor. iii, 12-15 (Knox translation).

² 2 Mach. xii. 46.

the tradition of the Church. The teaching developed as the years went by and the Church saw deeper into its meaning. By the seventh century we hear of confraternities being formed to pray for the dead, to fast and to offer Mass for them. The Benedictine monasteries were centres of this pious work and the English Saints Boniface and Alcuin spread the custom of "leagues of prayer" for the dead in Germany and in the Empire of Charlemagne.

A deeper understanding was reached, too, about the nature of Purgatory. The early writers went no further than to speak in general terms of some cleansing of the dead in some mysterious place. That we can help them they knew because of the doctrine of the Communion of Saints. All the members of the Church in Heaven, on earth and in Purgatory are one body in Jesus Christ. Each part of the body contributes to the good of the whole. And the prayers and sacrifices offered by one member are of benefit to all the members of the Church. What then do we do when we pray for the Holy Souls, make sacrifices, offer alms or perform other good works on their behalf? We help them to pay the debt of punishment which still remains after the guilt of sin has been forgiven.

It might seem strange that God could forgive a sin and yet there should remain punishment to be endured. And yet this is a common experience of our own everyday life. Suppose I rob my friend and afterwards repent and beg his pardon. He forgives me but I will not be content until I have made up to him what I had taken. In the same way God in His mercy forgives the repentant sinner. But by every sin we have taken something to which we had no right—some pleasure, some satisfaction of our own will against the law of God. The more fervently we repent the more we shall be determined to make up for what we have done against His will. St Thomas held that in one who dies in a state of grace the guilt of all venial sins is

remitted immediately after the Particular Judgment. The soul at that moment turns to God in an act of supreme love. But there still remains the justice of God to be satisfied. That debt the soul willingly and lovingly pays in Purgatory.

All this teaching was summed up in the Council of Trent (1545-1563). The Church solemnly defined the doctrine that after the guilt of sin has been forgiven there still remains some temporal punishment which must be undergone either in this world or in Purgatory. In a later session the same Council speaks thus :

The Catholic Church taught by the Holy Spirit in the Sacred Scriptures, in the ancient tradition of the Fathers, in the holy Councils and most recently in this holy Council, teaches that Purgatory exists and that the souls there detained are helped by the prayers of the faithful and especially by the Sacrifice of the Mass. . . .

What is the nature of the pains of Purgatory? Very little is known about this. What is certain is that the greatest pain is the delay in passing to the Blessed Vision of God. The Holy Souls in Purgatory see clearly that their only good is God. They no longer desire anything but God. And yet they cannot reach Him till their debt of punishment is paid. The sufferings of the Holy Souls spring from this double source—longing for God—realization of sin. On earth we can turn to a hundred and one things to distract the mind, to muffle the cry of the heart. These escapes are denied to the Holy Souls; they have no body to clog the eager longing of the soul. All the time their mind is set on God—their whole being is consumed with desire and longing for God. And at the same time they see themselves as they really are. They see clearly how their sins were an offence against God. They see how unfit they are to go to God until the debt of punishment is paid. They realize at last the malice of sin.

Here is a burning desire and longing for God which far surpasses the heat of any earthly fire. And so we rightly speak of the fire of Purgatory and of the cleansing flames. But they are the flames of love. St Thomas and others have held that the flames of Purgatory are a real fire, but on this point nothing certain has been laid down by the Church.

The cleansing of the Holy Souls, then, consists in paying the debt of punishment that they owe. Does it mean also that in some way their characters are refined, the traces left by habits of sin are burnt out in the fire of love? Some writers have thought so, notably St Catherine of Genoa. It is hard to see how this could be so for the will of the Holy Souls is already turned entirely towards God. There is no possibility of their ever falling again into sin. How can there be any trace left of a "habit of sin"?

Yet we should not too easily reject the idea that suffering in Purgatory may be a refining influence. We understand very little about the mystery of suffering and the mystery of free will. What we do know is that suffering on earth can be a most powerful agent in forming character. A person who has never suffered deeply always seems in some way immature. But a man who has suffered and yet not allowed suffering to embitter him seems to have acquired hidden reserves of strength allied to gentleness. The whole secret, as the saints very well know, is to accept suffering as the will of God with complete trust.

The Holy Souls above all have this complete trust in God. His will is theirs. It may be that their sufferings are preparing them in some mysterious way to see Him face to face. It may be that suffering in Purgatory, as on earth, does something to the character besides simply paying off the debt of sin. We do not know.

Again we do not know what amount of punishment is due to sin nor by what standard God measures it. What is certain is that the Church has always warned us urgently of the need of penance for sin and many saints have spoken of the intensity of the pains of Purgatory. It is true that the saints cannot give us any public revelation beyond what God has given us already. But we should be very foolish to ignore the warnings of the saints whose spiritual insight is so much deeper than our own. It is only the saint who can realize to the full the evil of sin. And we may take it therefore that the saints may well have a deeper realization of the punishment which sin deserves. When the stern St Augustine and the gentle St Francis de Sales both tell us that the pain caused by the fire of Purgatory is more severe than anything a man suffers in this life we shall be wise to lay their warning to heart.

It would be quite wrong to think of Purgatory only as a place of pain. Purgatory is a place of joy. The Holy Souls long to know God fully in union with Him in Heaven. But they already know Him far more fully and deeply than they did on earth. Faith is a new means of knowing God superior to any natural means. In Purgatory the faith of the Holy Souls is far deeper and more illuminating than ever it was on earth.

Purgatory, too, is a place of hope, the virtue which on earth makes all burdens light. In Purgatory the hope, confidence and trust of the Holy Souls is without any shadow of hesitation or doubt. They know they are saved. They accept willingly and lovingly whatever pain God sends them with complete confidence that God knows best what they need in order to be fit to come to Him. They are like those sufferers in hospitals who are most patient and happy for they know that the pain they suffer is the pain of a wound that is healing.

Above all, Purgatory is a place of love, of charity. The Holy Souls are consumed with the love of God. The whole of

their being is transfigured by this love. From it there flow patience, peace and joy. Pain can do nothing to dim this love. In fact, we know from our own experience that pain borne for one we love does not diminish but enhances our love.

It is true [says St Francis of Sales] that the greatest sufferings on earth cannot challenge comparison with the torments of Purgatory: but it is equally true that the interior peace of the souls is far above anything earth can give of prosperity and contentment.

Purgatory is indeed a place of stillness, of tranquillity, of rest. All dread, fear, uncertainty is gone. The ills of the flesh are no more. The fretful fever of life on earth is done. In Purgatory our resignation to our lot is not merely complete, it is loving, it is affectionate.

Another consolation for the Holy Souls is their companionship with one another. There seems no reason even why they may not be blessed with visits paid to them by the saints and especially by our Blessed Lady the Mediatrix of all graces.¹

We have said that only God knows how much or how long the souls must suffer. But it is the certain teaching of the Church that their sufferings can be diminished and shortened by the help of their companions in the Church in Heaven and on earth—by us and by the saints.

Because of the communion of saints the blessed in Heaven can help the souls in Purgatory by their prayers. The prayers of the saints and especially of our Blessed Lady are most powerful with God. Yet we on earth can help the souls in Purgatory in ways which are outside the power of the Blessed

¹ We have, of course, no revelation on this subject. We do not even know exactly what is meant when we say that Purgatory is a "place" except that even a disembodied spirit acts in one place to the exclusion of another and so may be said to be in a place. It may even be that, as St Gregory surmised, some suffer in the places where they have sinned, unseen and unheard by those who perhaps were partners in their sin. It is not impossible that God has sometimes allowed a Holy Soul to appear in some form to the living as a warning or to beg prayers.

in Heaven. The saints cannot suffer; but we can, and by our sufferings we can in a true sense make satisfaction on behalf of the Holy Souls. By bearing the daily crosses which come to us, by voluntary penance of all kinds, we can atone for sin and offer that atonement for the sins of the souls in Purgatory instead of for our own.

This thought can be a most powerful help to us to overcome our daily temptations. How many times a day are we tempted to fall into our predominant fault, the sin which has become a habit with us? Every time we face that temptation we can say to ourselves, "If I fall it is a sin, if I resist it is a cross—something I can offer for the souls in Purgatory." We might make life a real crusade for the souls in Purgatory and at the same time root out the vices which disfigure our lives.

Because we can help the Holy Souls by our prayers and good works, Purgatory is a most consoling doctrine for the living. It is an assurance that we can make up for any unkindness or neglect towards them whilst they were on earth. So we should use especially the means which the Church has always recommended—prayer, penance, alms and, most of all, the Holy Mass.

No Mass is said without benefit to all the souls in Purgatory. But Mass may be offered for an individual soul and we can trust that special benefits will be granted to that soul because of the Mass. We should bear in mind, however, that we have no means of knowing in what measure God applies the benefits of the Mass to the souls in Purgatory. It would be very foolish to think that the rich man who leaves a great sum of money for Masses is certain to benefit more than the poor man who has only the general prayers of the Church. It is not for us to put limits to God's power. All our prayers, works and Masses for the Holy Souls are in the nature of a request to God. They are not a bargain struck with Him.

This, too, must be borne in mind when we are gaining indulgences for the souls in Purgatory. The Church assures us that when she grants an indulgence she is drawing on the merits of all the saints and especially of our Blessed Lord and His Mother. An indulgence granted to the living is an actual spiritual remission of the debt of punishment by the Church. But an indulgence applicable to the souls in Purgatory is like a prayer : it is a request to God rather than a grant by the Church. For the Church has no jurisdiction in Purgatory. The Pope could not empty Purgatory by granting an indulgence. We may be sure, however, that the fact that the Church is officially endorsing our prayers and good works by allowing us to offer an indulgence to God for the souls in Purgatory will be a very powerful plea to Almighty God to hear our prayer on their behalf.

Whilst we are praying for them we may be sure the Holy Souls are praying for us. The Church, it is true, has never spoken officially on this point. Nor does the Church pray to the Holy Souls in her official prayers.

But in their private prayers all Catholics pray *to* the Holy Souls as well as for them. This instinct is surely right—as right now as it was in the catacombs where you may read : “ May thy soul rest in peace. Pray for thy sister.”

St John Vianney, the Curé d’Ars, expressed the Catholic mind when he said :

If we only realized the power of the souls in Purgatory . . . and what they obtain for us by their intercession . . . We must pray much for them, that they may pray much for us.

The Holy Souls do not forget those who are dear to them on earth. They hear news of them from those who come later to Purgatory. God, we may trust, gives them knowledge of us in a way known only to Himself. In this way they know of our

prayers for them and to them. True they can no longer merit for us—the time for that is ended at death. But they can pray to God like a beggar holding out his hand. The merciful Saviour who heard the prayers of the blind man by the wayside will not be deaf to the plea of the Holy Souls. Indeed every Catholic who prays to the Holy Souls knows from experience how powerful their prayers are and how readily God grants the favours for which we ask them to pray.

What of ourselves? Must we take it for granted that we shall have to spend some time in Purgatory? Or is it possible so to live that we can hope to go straight to Heaven?

There are good grounds for believing that we may avoid Purgatory entirely if we make use of the means God gives us here. Frequent attendance at Holy Mass certainly is the most effective means of sharing in the merits of our Lord’s passion and death for us. The Blood of our Saviour is the one ransom for sin. Frequent confession and Holy Communion bring us, too, the prize our Lord won for us.

Again we should not waste the suffering and pain that is part of every life. The more willingly we bear it here as a punishment for sin the less we shall have to suffer hereafter.

The indulgences granted by the Church are another means we should seize upon.

Some persons generously give all that they win by these means to the Holy Souls. We may be sure God will not be outdone in generosity in their regard.

Finally a true understanding of Purgatory should make us eager to ensure that the dying receive the last Sacraments, and receive them in good time. One of the main purposes of Extreme Unction is to “ wipe out the remains of sin ”. What are these remains? Certainly among them is the temporal punishment which is still due to sin after the guilt has been

PURGATORY

forgiven. We cannot presume to speak with certainty in any individual case. Much depends on the dispositions of the sufferer, the intensity of his sorrow for sin, the sincerity of his purpose of amendment, the fervour of his love of God. We can nevertheless have a well grounded hope that a Catholic who dies after receiving Extreme Unction, the Holy Viaticum and the priest's last blessing, in good dispositions, may go straight to Heaven.

Extreme Unction [says St Thomas] achieves the spiritual healing of man, and by removing all that could impede his entry into Heaven perfects his preparation for eternal life.

That is why it is important to make sure that the last Sacraments are received in good time before the grave illness has clouded the mind and maybe hindered the fervour of the sick person's dispositions.

It is not surprising then that the Church in her prayers for the dying says with confidence and serene joy :

Go forth, Christian soul, out of this world, in the name of God the Father Almighty who created thee; in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God, who suffered for thee; in the name of the Holy Spirit who sanctified thee; in the name of the Angels, Archangels, Thrones and Dominations, Cherubim and Seraphim . . . may thy place this day be in peace and thy abode in holy Sion.

Compassion and generosity should be the keynotes of our devotion to the poor souls in Purgatory. The more we pray and suffer for them, the more sure we are of shortening both their Purgatory and our own.

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