



99 1/2 Won't Do – Catholic Teaching On Purgatory

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Today is the Feast of All Souls. Today we pray for the souls of all the faithful departed in Purgatory. It makes sense for us to reflect on the Doctrine of Purgatory and its roots.

The Catholic teaching on Purgatory is one of the teachings of the Church that many struggle to understand today. Non-Catholics have generally rejected this teaching, calling it unbiblical. **Actually, it is quite biblical and the biblical roots of the teaching will be shown in this reflection.** Many Catholics, too, influenced and embarrassed by the protests of non-Catholics, have been led to downplay, question, or even reject this teaching. **The task of this reflection is to set forth the Catholic teaching on Purgatory as both biblical and reasonable.** It is perhaps best to begin with a description of the teaching on Purgatory and then show its biblical roots. Finally, I will attempt to show why the teaching makes sense based on what God has said to us about holiness and Heaven.

I. Reality of the Teaching – What is Purgatory? The Catechism says the following on purgation and Purgatory:

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 attain the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. The Church gives the name "Purgatory" to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned(Catechism 1030-1031).

Exactly how this purgation (or purification) is carried out is not revealed explicitly. But Tradition has used the image of fire based on certain Scripture texts:

- *Now if any one builds on the foundation [of Jesus Christ] with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— each man's work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of*

work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire (1 Cor 3:13-15).

- *And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal which he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth, and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven" (Is 6:5-7).*
- *But who can endure the day of [the Lord's] coming, and who can stand when he appears? "For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the Lord. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord (Mal 3:2-4).*

So the purification is represented by fire. However, as can be seen in the quote already supplied, the Catechism is careful to point out that the purification of Purgatory is entirely different from the experiences of Hell. Thus to summarize, Purgatory is a place and a process of final purification which the elect undergo after death (if necessary) before entering Heaven

II. Roots of the Teaching in Scripture: Some have dismissed the Catholic teaching on Purgatory, calling it unbiblical. It is true that the word "Purgatory" does not appear in the Bible, but neither does the word "Trinity." Despite the fact that the word "Trinity" does not appear in the Bible, every Christian still accepts the teaching, since the Scriptures contain the truth of the teaching that the word conveys.

It is the same with Purgatory. Though the word does not appear in the Bible, the teaching does. We do well then to examine some Bible texts, in addition to the ones above, and thereby learn that Purgatory is in fact a biblical teaching..

A: We begin first with the Promise of Jesus that serves as a premise for purgation. Jesus declared that we must *be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect* (Matt 5:48, Rev 3:2).

Other Scriptures also teach that we are called to ultimate perfection

- *Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God.* (2 Cor 7:1)
- *And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.* (James 1:4)

B: Based on this promise there is a prerequisite of perfection to enter heaven.

- *But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect* (Heb 12:22-23)
- *But nothing unclean shall enter heaven, nor any one who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.*(Rev 21:27).

The Church takes these promises of ultimate perfection, and of Heaven as the place of that perfection, very seriously. The Church understands from the Word of God that if that perfection is not attained by the time of death then, before entering Heaven, we must undergo a final purification that brings to completion the good work that God has begun in us (*cf* Phil 1:6). The need for purgation thus flows from the promises of God that we shall one day be perfect.

C: Jesus also uses an image for purification as “paying the last penny.” Consider the following passage from the Gospel of Luke:

You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky; but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? “And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? Settle with your opponent on the way to court, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison. I tell you, you will not get out till you have paid the very last penny.” (Luke 12:56-59)

The context of this passage seems clearly to be one of judgment, and in particular, the judgment we will one day face. We may ask, “Who is the judge?” It is Jesus. For Scripture says, *The Father judges no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son* (John 5:22). We may also ask, “What is the ‘prison’ referred to in this passage?” We may instinctively think of Hell. But that could not be correct in this instance, for the text clearly indicates that one will emerge from the prison after the last penny is paid. Hell is a place from which no one emerges (cf Mk 9:48, Lk 16:26).

Thus the “prison” cannot be Hell, and surely it is not Heaven. There must then be some place, after judgment, where an individual may be detained for a time and then released after “paying the last penny.” Our Catholic Tradition calls this place Purgatory. Though the Lord in this passage clearly urges us to settle our accounts before facing the judge, there does seem to be a chance to settle accounts later if this is deemed necessary..

D: St. Paul in a passage already referenced writes:

Each man’s work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation [of Christ] survives, he will receive a reward. If any

man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.(1 Cor. 3:13-15).

This is surely a complex passage, but again there seems to be a judgment scene described here. Each person's work will be judged; his or her works will be tested by fire. Some shall receive reward. Others will suffer loss. Ultimately they are saved, but "only as through fire" according to the text.

Thus there seems to be a sort of purification accomplished for some. On Judgment Day, what is imperfect or unbecoming will be burned away. Now this entry unto salvation "through fire" cannot take place in Heaven since there is no pain or loss suffered there. Nor can it be Hell since that is an eternal fire from which there is no escape (*cf* Matt 25:41). Hence there must be some place of purifying fire through which some pass in the life to come. Our Catholic Tradition calls this Purgatory.

E: In Matthew 12:32 our Lord says

Whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

This text implies that in the world to come, there is the forgiveness of some sins. But where could this place be? It cannot be Heaven since there is no sin to be forgiven there (*cf* Rev 21:27). It cannot be Hell since forgiveness is not granted there and there is no escape (Lk 16:26). **Hence there must be some third place in the "age to come" where the forgiveness of sin can be experienced.** Catholic Tradition and teaching calls this Purgatory. Here, individuals in a state of friendship with God and with faith in Him may receive forgiveness for certain sins committed in life and be purged of the injustices and effects of those sins.

F: There is also a teaching in Scripture from the Book of Maccabees:

It is therefore a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins.(2 Mac 12:43-46)

Although most non-Catholics do not accept Maccabees as a book of the Bible, it *does* give us historical evidence that praying for the dead was a Jewish practice. Nowhere does Christ condemn such prayers nor does any New Testament text dismiss such practices.

These scriptural texts have been reviewed to show that the Catholic teaching on Purgatory does have a biblical basis. The claim that Catholic teaching on this matter is “unbiblical” is thus unfounded. There is a biblical basis and foundation for the Church to teach that after death a purification is both available and in many cases necessary.

III. The Reasonableness of the Teaching. – Not only is there a Biblical basis for the teaching on Purgatory, there is an argument for the fittingness of this teaching based on Biblical teaching. In other words, the teaching makes sense based on the promises contained in scripture to those who have been called to be saints.

- 1. Premise:** Scripture teaches that Heaven is a place of perfect happiness where there is no more sorrow or pain, no more death, no more tears (cf Rev 21:23-24). The saints in Heaven are perfectly holy and thus we are exhorted here on earth to strive for peace with all men, and to strive for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb 12:14). Regarding Heaven, Scripture says, *But nothing unclean shall enter it, nor any one who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life* (Rev 21:27). Christ also teaches us very solemnly, *You, therefore, must be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect* (Mat 5:48).
- 2. Problem: Now this raises a question: What happens to those who die in a state of grace and friendship with God but are not yet perfect?** Most of us will admit that if we were to die at this very moment, we could not honestly say that we are perfect. Even assuming that we are in a state of grace and friendship with God, we can likely see there are still some

rough edges to our personality and that we still struggle with certain habitual sins and shortcomings. Likewise, most of us carry within us certain sorrows, regrets, or misunderstandings from the past. Despite effort, we may have not been able to fully let go of these things. It is clear that we cannot take any of this with us to Heaven. If we did, it would not be a place of perfect joy and total sinlessness.

- 3. Prescription:** Obviously we must be purged of any final imperfections, sins, and sorrows before entering Heaven. Every tear must be wiped from our eyes (Rev 21:4), every sorrow left behind, every wound healed. Only then will we be able to experience Heaven. Ideally this takes place here on earth, *And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing* (James 1:4). Yet many of us know that this process is seldom complete at death. Thus, presuming that we die in a state of grace and friendship with God, Christ will surely complete his work in us (for He is faithful to His promises) by purging us of whatever imperfections, venial sins, or sorrowful effects of sins that still remain. Further, all punishments due to sin are completed.

Thus, the teaching on Purgatory seems quite fitting based on Jesus' promise that we would one day be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect, lacking in nothing. If we die before this process is complete, then something must happen after death to transform us into the glory which we have been promised and to which we have been called. Catholic teaching and Tradition assigns the term "Purgatory" to this process of completion and transformation.

Perhaps, in this light, it is good to conclude with a prayer and blessing from St. Paul: *In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in*

you will carry it on to completion at the day of Christ Jesus (Phil 1:4-6).

There's an old hymn that says, "99 and a half won't do! ... Gotta make a hundred." But If I die in friendship, yet am still imperfect, God will complete the work He has done in me by purging away any of the dross of imperfection. Thank you, Lord!

[Charles Pope](#)

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