



Defining Purgatory and the Communion of Saints

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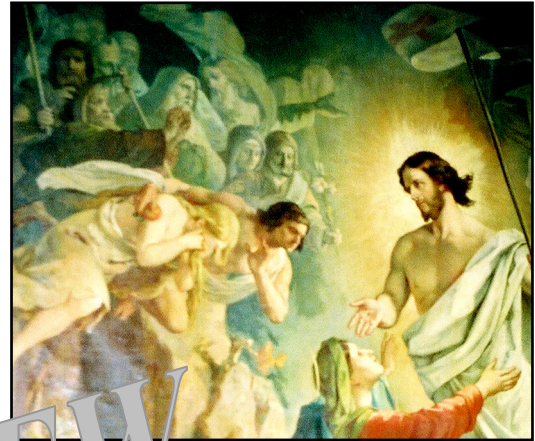
Read 1 Corinthians 3:13-15

The Afterlife: What does the Catholic Church teach?

- We are all sinners; even after we've been freed from Original Sin in our baptisms, we cannot become holy by our own efforts.
- We would die separated from Holy God, except:
- Jesus died in our place, taking our sins to the cross. Then he rose from the dead, to give us a resurrected life in Heaven.
- Those who accept this and seek forgiveness will have their sins removed and will live united with Jesus in Heaven.
- Those who understand this yet reject it will die in their sins, unable to enter Heaven, thereby choosing Hell.
- The souls who die loving Jesus but have failed to love others fully (what we do unto others we do unto Jesus; see Matt. 25) must be purified – purged ("Purgatory") – before they can experience the fullness of Heaven.

What is Purgatory?

From earliest times, the Church has rejected the idea that every Christian, upon death, immediately enters the full glory of Heaven.



1 Cor 15:51-57 points out that "that which is corruptible (our flesh-nature) must clothe itself with incorruptibility." Purgatory is a process of purging ourselves from what was worldly so that we can fully enter into what is eternal.

Purgatory comes from the Latin word for *cleansing fire*. The Church teaches that when we die believing in Jesus, we come into full contact with the infinite love of God (the "Beatific Vision"). Because of persistent sinful habits and an insufficient desire to do penance, and now gaining an awareness of how unlike Christ we had been on Earth, we long to be purified. Purgatory is a gift from God to fulfill that longing.

Probably the most accurate way to describe the source of pain (or fires) in Purgatory is this: Upon death, when we are delivered from the limitations of our human brains, we suddenly realize how infinitely and powerfully loving God is and, in contrast, how poorly we have loved. Our regret pains us to the core, like a fire that burns up our impurities.

Fueled by our yearning to be united with the fullness of God's holy love, this pain is intensified by the realization that we could have expiated our sins while on Earth, through the Sacraments, prayer, and good works.

Saint Catherine of Genoa wrote that the desire for God is an ardent fire more consuming and painful than any earthly fire. Saints Thomas and Bonaventure held that the slightest fire of Purgatory is more painful than the greatest sufferings of this world. The reason is because, during our journey on Earth, we don't really understand how great is God's love and how much we're missing by not loving others as he does.

Does God's mercy help those in Purgatory?

God longs to reach all of us with his love, and so he expresses his love to those who are in Purgatory by consoling them. His compassion is infinite, and he offers it freely. This relieves their suffering, but only to the extent that they are open to it. The less they accepted his love before they died, the less they are ready to do so now. Likewise, the more purified they become, the more they open themselves to his mercy.

Is there any joy in Purgatory?

Yes! We must never focus only on the suffering of Purgatory and forget the joy. Pope John Paul II pointed out that Purgatory *is* a place of joy. Your loved ones who are there are rejoicing in the Beatific Vision to the extent that they are united to it. They are experiencing deep happiness because they have escaped Hell and are entering Heaven.

They prefer Purgatory over Earth because they are free from Satan's attacks and the old temptations, and they are surrounded by other souls who are likewise free. They have no more enemies! As Wisdom 3:1 says, "The souls of the just are in the hand of God, and no torment shall touch them."

As we see in Wisdom 3:1-9, we are chastised, but we will be greatly blessed. God purifies us the way gold is purified in the furnace. (This analogy of purification creates the notion of fire in Purgatory, though it's not a literal flaming fire like we have here on Earth). We become "sacrificial offerings" that God takes to himself.

The terrifying descriptions of Purgatory that popular in some "revelations" today are exaggerations and are not founded in the teachings of the Church. Such punishment runs counter to the incomparable dignity of those who have been redeemed by Christ.

How long does it take?

To understand the answer to this, we must suspend our concept of time. The after-life exists in eternity. Eternity dwells outside of our linear time. The past and the future are both now and yet not now. The suffering experienced by the souls in Purgatory cannot be measured by days or years, but by intensity. If we could watch a loved one journey through purification, it might seem to take years, but to our loved one, it might last but a moment and yet be extremely difficult to bear. Or it might last for a long time without the soul being aware of time's passage.

The process is one of peeling away the layers of spiritual scars, many of which, while on Earth, remained below the level of our consciousness. Everything in us is exposed.

This might happen in an instant, but now our whole person must be penetrated with the light of Christ. As the purification progresses, our full personality emerges for the first time. We become the child of God that the Father had intended when he created us, with all of our talents, gifts and abilities to glorify the Holy Trinity.

Can we help souls in Purgatory?

Purgatory will exist until the second coming of Christ and his final judgment. Until that time, the souls there definitely need our help. No longer on Earth, they cannot rectify the damage that resulted from their sins. Their opportunities to make amends have passed. During their lives, they set the speed at which they now grow into the full experience of the Beatific Vision, but we can quicken their purification.

Helping them is one of our responsibilities as part of the communion of saints, i.e., the community of all who are joined in Christ on Earth, in Purgatory and in Heaven. Since the action of any member affects all others, we can help the souls finish their purification.

Pope Leo XIII wrote in his encyclical on the Eucharist, *Mirae caritatis*, on May 28, 1902:

"The communion of saints is nothing else but a mutual sharing in help, satisfaction, prayer and other good works, a mutual communication among all the faithful, whether those who have reached Heaven, or who are in the cleansing fire, or who are still pilgrims on the way in this world. For all these are come together to form one living city whose head is Christ and whose law is love."

Because we are joined in the communion of saints, the Catholic liturgy always includes prayers for the souls in Purgatory. And the Church provides this prayer during the blessing of a cemetery: "We beseech You, Lord, grant to the souls of your faithful whose bodies rest here the forgiveness of all their sins."

Through Jesus and our love, we can perform on their behalf prayers, alms, fasting, sacrifices, deeds of penance, good works and other acts of piety. We can also offer up Masses, publicly and privately, in which we give them our love and commit them to Jesus' love. Our love will animate these souls. The celebration of All Souls Day and the whole month of November is given over to this important ministry of the Church.

Traditionally, the Church has placed more emphasis on helping those in Purgatory than we do today. We need to give importance to this ministry of intercession, and include praying for those we've never met. We need to make All Saints Day a bigger celebration than Halloween, and we need to attend Mass on All Souls Day for the sake of our loved ones who have died.

Can we shorten our own time in Purgatory?

Our daily goal should be to purify our lives and grow more deeply into the fullness of God's love while we still have the Sacraments available to boost us. God should be no stranger to us. Neither should his Word, which is our guide to living a holy life. We dare not remain lazy about getting rid of unholy desires, worldly attitudes, unloving deeds, and ignorance about what God wants from us. The more we unite ourselves to his love now (through prayer, reconciliation, penance and purification), the less suffering we will endure in Purgatory.

What does Scripture say?



The lives of all are to be revealed before the tribunal of Christ so that each one may receive his recompense, good or bad, according to his life in the body (2 Cor. 5:10).



The work of each will be made clear. The Day will disclose it. That day will make its appearance with fire, and fire will test the quality of each man's work.... If a man's building burns he will suffer loss. He himself will be saved, but only as one fleeing through fire (1 Cor. 3:13-15).



"You worthless wretch! I canceled your entire debt when you pleaded with me. Should you not have dealt mercifully with your fellow servant?" Then in anger the master handed him over to the torturers until he paid back all that he owed (Matt. 18:32-34).



Settle with your opponent while on your way to court with him. Otherwise your opponent may hand you over to the judge, who will hand you over to the guard, who will throw you into prison. I warn you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny (Matt. 5:25-26).



The reason why Christ died for sins... was that he might lead you to God . . . It was in the spirit that he went to preach to the spirits in prison (1 Peter 3:18-19).

What do Saints say?

“The Divine Essence is so pure – purer than the imagination can conceive – that the soul, finding in itself the slightest imperfection, would rather cast itself into a thousand hells than appear, so stained, in the presence of the Divine Majesty. Knowing, then, that Purgatory was intended for her cleansing, she throws herself therein, and finds there that great mercy, the removal of her stains.” (St. Catherine of Genoa, 15th century mystic)

“I was talking with some souls who, while on their way from Purgatory to Heaven, stopped here to thank me because I remembered them in my Mass this morning.” (St. Padre Pio)

“More souls of the dead from Purgatory than of the living climb this mountain to attend my Masses and seek my prayers.” (St. Padre Pio)

“There is no peace to be compared with that of the souls in Purgatory, save that of the saints in Paradise, and this peace is ever augmented by the in-flowing of God into these souls, which increases in proportion as the impediments to it are removed.” (St. Catherine of Genoa)

“The soul keeps rising ever higher and higher ... as the Apostle tells us [in Philippians 3:13] and, thus, it will always continue to soar ever higher. For, because of what it has already attained, the soul does not wish to abandon the heights that lie beyond it. And, thus, the soul moves ceaselessly upwards, always reviving its tension for its onward flight by means of the progress it has already realized.” (St. Gregory of Nyssa)

“The 'fire' of purgatory is God's love 'burning' the soul so that, at last, the soul is wholly aflame. It is the pain of wanting to be made totally worthy of One who is seen as infinitely lovable, the pain of desire for union that is now absolutely assured, but not yet fully tasted.” (St. Catherine of Genoa)