

From the Heart

A series of essays on basic Catholic doctrines and beliefs

Written by Bill Dunn - Published by Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish, Harwinton, Conn.

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Does the Catholic Church Still Believe in Purgatory?

Because the subject of Purgatory is rarely mentioned anymore, many faithful Catholics assume the Church no longer believes in or teaches this doctrine. The idea that otherwise faithful souls get sent to a place of fiery torment before being allowed into Heaven seems downright cruel. This surely is not what a loving God would do to those who worshipped Him during their earthly lives, is it?

Although it is discussed very rarely these days, the doctrine of Purgatory has always been, and still is, believed and taught by the Catholic Church.

The reality of Purgatory is actually very logical—and biblical. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes Purgatory this way: “Those who die in God’s grace and friendship imperfectly purified, although they are assured of their eternal salvation, undergo a purification after death, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of God” (section 1030).

The doctrine of Purgatory is based on some key principles: First, only people who are pure and holy will enter into Heaven. The Bible says, “Nothing impure will ever enter [Heaven]” (Revelation 21:27); and, “Without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14).

Next, Scripture indicates that it is possible for some sins to be forgiven after death. In Matthew 12:32 Jesus said, “Anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age **or the age to come**” (emphasis added).

Scripture also indicates that there is some kind of third possible destination after death, which is neither Heaven nor Hell. In his first epistle, St. Peter wrote, “[Jesus] was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago” (1 Peter 3:18-20). Speaking about Jesus, the Apostles’ Creed says, “He descended to the dead. On the third day He rose again.”

The souls Jesus visited and to whom He preached, during that time between His death and Resurrection, were not condemned (Hell), but they also were not yet in glory (Heaven). At that point in time, those souls were in a mysterious third destination.

Finally, in his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul describes the good works of believers, using the analogy of constructing a building. He says, “If any man builds...using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or

straw, his work will be shown for what it is....It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work” (1 Corinthians 3:12-13).

Paul continues in the next two verses: “If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; but **he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames**” (emphasis added).

The specific word Purgatory is not used here by Paul, but it sure sounds like Paul is describing it. He says if someone’s earthly Christian works do not meet the test, he or she will suffer loss, but ultimately will be saved.

A logical way to describe Purgatory is to use a parable. Imagine spending the day outside doing yard work. When you come into the house, your clothes are covered with dirt and sweat. Your spouse, dressed impeccably, grabs your arm and says, “We’re going to a fancy banquet. Come on, get in the car right now and let’s go.”

Knowing that you would be quite embarrassed to walk into a fancy banquet dressed in dirty work clothes, you instead say to your spouse, “Give me 45 minutes. I’ll take a shower, put on my best clothes, and *then* I’ll be ready for the banquet. I might be a little late, but at least I’ll be prepared.”

Purgatory is kind of like that. But instead of cleaning physical dirt and sweat, it is our spiritual attitudes and unrepentant sins that are cleansed. If people are honest with themselves, most will admit that despite their faith in God and regular church attendance, deep down inside there still lurks occasional bouts of selfishness, anger, envy, dishonesty, and pride.

A few final comments about Purgatory:

- The Church is silent on the exact nature of Purgatory, whether it’s a specific place or some spiritual state our souls are in. The Church also is silent on whether actual fire is involved, which might be a symbol for God’s all-consuming, purifying love.
- Everyone who goes to Purgatory ends up going to Heaven.
- You don’t *have* to go to Purgatory. It is possible to become holy and pure enough in this life, and go straight to Heaven at the moment of death. (Mother Teresa comes to mind.)

In conclusion, the Catholic Church still believes in and teaches the doctrine of Purgatory. It is not a place of cruel, arbitrary punishment. It is instead an opportunity for spiritual purification and cleansing. All sincere Christians should be thankful that it exists.