

## **PURGATORY AND LIMBO**

The reality or the existence of a separate place of purification is something not clearly stated in the bible. However, references have been made to the book of Maccabees where it is believed that there is a state where souls are been cleansed before going to heaven. In this month's edition of the "Partner" Newspaper, we shall be considering this special state called PURGATORY, its teaching in the bible, the early church and how it has been understood historically and the present teaching of the Magisterium on this issue. We shall also clarify the term LIMBO.

### **WHAT IS PURGATORY?**

Purgatory is a place or condition of temporary punishment for those who, departing this life in God's grace, are not entirely free from venial sins, or have not fully paid the satisfaction due to their transgressions (Francis Ripley, *This is the Faith*, p. 396). With this definition, one may wonder, what is the need of satisfaction after death? In the Old Testament, we have different instances of God forgiving sins, yet demanding that reparation be made by those who have offended him. There is the instance of David in 2Kings 12:13-14, and there is the example of Aaron and Moses, who having doubted the word of God, asked for forgiveness but were still shut out of the promised land as punishment (cf. Num. 20:12). This does not mean, God does not forgive us our sins. He forgives, but there is debt that needs to be paid for the wrong we have done. In our Catechism, we were taught that there are three conditions for forgiveness necessary on the part of the penitent and that includes: contrition, confession and satisfaction. Satisfaction here is doing the penance given to us by the priest. Thus, if one is unable to make atonement for one's sins during his or her life time, such person will atone for it in the life after. Not all sins merit eternal damnation (Hell Fire). This explains why the church differentiate between mortal sins and venial sins. Although both are sins, but they are not of the same degree. So, for venial sins unrepented at the moment of death, must be expiated in some way. They do not merit Hell, but the soul is stained by sin and as such it's in need of purification. Purgatory is the place where such a purification is been carried out.

### **SCRIPTURAL FOUNDATION FOR PURGATORY**

There is no biblical basis for the doctrine of purgatory. This does not mean there is no basis at all for the doctrine, but only that there is no clear biblical basis for it. The classic text that made reference to such a place is 2 Maccabees 12: 38-46: "Then Judas assembled his army and went to the city of Adullam.... For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore, he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin." With this very scriptural background, it becomes expedient that there is a place for purification. Those damned or in Hell have no need of our prayers, neither do those already in heaven have any need of it also. But for those still in purgatory, they have a great need for our prayers and this was the very reason why Judas and his companions had

to pray for the souls of those who had died that God might free them from their sins and grant them eternal happiness in heaven. In the New Testament, there was the insistence that the kingdom of God had already come in Jesus Christ. In Matthew 12:32, Jesus said that sins against the son of man shall be forgiven him, but he that speaks against the Holy Spirit, such sin shall not be forgiven in this world and in the world to come. This passage as it has been interpreted down through the ages means that even if one is unable to receive forgiveness for the sins against the son of man, the person will still be capable of receiving forgiveness in the world after because that sin can still be forgiven. Furthermore, Saint Paul in 1 Cor. 3:12-15 made an allusion to a purification that will be made through fire. Fire here does not mean a destructive fire, but the one that purifies.

### **THE CHURCH FATHERS AND THE TRADITION OF THE CHURCH ON PURGATORY**

In the early church, most especially in the teachings of Tertullian, Origen, St. Cyprian and St. Clement of Alexandria, there was the custom of praying for the dead. It was expressed that the departed faithful were in a condition in which they could be helped by their brethren still on earth. The practice of praying for the dead passed into the official liturgy as early as the fourth century and the practice is still upheld till date. It was in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, however, that the existence of purgatory as a place came into prominence.

The connection between purgatory, penance, confession and indulgences is highly developed in the late medieval theology. Over the centuries, the doctrine of purgatory has been a point of controversy between Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodoxy as well as between Roman Catholics and Protestants. The difference between Roman Catholics and the Eastern orthodoxy emanates from a theological understanding, while for the protestant reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, they do not see the need of praying for the dead, thus rejecting totally what both the Catholics and the East held in common.

### **TEACHING OF THE MAGISTERIUM**

The doctrine of purgatory is affirmed by the Second Council of Lyons (1274) and the Council of Florence (1439). The Council of Trent affirms that Purgatory exists, and that those detained there may be aided by the prayers and good works of the faithful, particularly by the sacrifice of the altar. The Second Vatican Council, affirms the existence of purgatory in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 51: "this sacred council accepts loyally the venerable 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...." The Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms this position of the council too (CCC, n. 1030-1032).

Purgatory is best understood as a process by which we are purged of our residual selfishness so that we can really become one with God who is totally oriented to others. The kind of suffering associated to purgatory, is not suffering inflicted upon us from outside as a punishment for sin, but the intrinsic pain that we all feel when we are asked to surrender our ego-centered self so that the God-centered loving self may take its place (*R., McBrien,*

*Catholicism, 1169*). Benedict XVI says that the true measure of purgatory is to be taken in terms of the depth of the resistance in the human person that must be broken down or “burned” away in the encounter with the divine.

### **LIMBO: THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH**

Limbo designates the place or condition of those who have died without the conditions necessary for entrance into heaven but also without the personal, mortal guilt necessary for condemnation to hell (*Z. Hayes, Limbo in New Dictionary of Theology, 585*). Traditional theology distinguishes between Limbo of the fathers and limbo of the children. Limbo of the fathers refer to the presumed state of those who died before Christ. While limbo of the children refer to the state of the children who died without baptism but also without having committed any personal or mortal sin. While the souls of those in the limbo of the fathers have been freed by the death, descent into hell of Jesus and his Ascension back to heaven, questions remain as regards the souls of those in the limbo of infants. Limbo of infants is an attempt to deal with the soul of departed infants who die before baptism. There is no official teaching about the existence of a place called limbo in the recent teachings of the church. Two Councils (II Lyons in 1274 and Florence in 1439) in the past made reference to it, that those who die with only Original sin goes to hell but their condition will be different from those who die with mortal sin. However, contemporary theologians have made known the point that the souls of those who die without original sin are being committed to the mercy of God. God knows how he is going to judge them on the judgment day. The church has no official teaching regarding a place or a state called limbo of infants. It is believed that they shall see and receive the mercy of God.

The concept of Limbo and Purgatory are not the same and it is not the case that purgatory has come to replace limbo in the new teaching. Purgatory remains a place of purification for those who have known Christ but due to some venial sins which they are stained with are unable to enter into Heaven yet, but after the satisfaction due to their sins have been made in this place of purification, they will be accepted into the Kingdom of God. Limbo, however pertains to the state (which is not confirmed by any recent church teachings) where the souls of children who die with original sin will be. Our target as Christians is not to aim at entering into purgatory, but we should remain focused on entering heaven. We should also not relent in our prayers for the dead. They really do need our prayers. Let us offer masses for them and continually pray for the salvation of their souls because many of them may still be in this state of purification.