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The Existence of Purgatory

11/1/1997

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A fundamental truth of the Christian faith is that we will not be sinning in heaven. Sin and final glorification are incompatible. Therefore between the sinfulness of this life and the glories of heaven we must be made pure. Between death and glory there is a purification.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: "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 achieve 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" (CCC 1030-1). The concept of a purification after death from sin and the consequences of sin is also stated in the New Testament in passages such as 1 Corinthians 3:11-15, Matthew 5:25-26, and 12:31-32.

The doctrine of purgatory, or the final purification, has been part of the true faith since before the time of Christ. The Jews already believed it before the coming of the Messiah, as revealed in the Old Testament (2 Macc. 12:41-46) as well as other pre-Christian Jewish works, such as one which records that Adam will be in mourning "until the day of dispensing punishment in the last years, when I will turn his sorrow into joy" (*The Life of Adam and Eve* 46-7). Orthodox Jews to this day believe in the final purification, and for eleven months after the death of a loved one they pray a prayer called the Mourner's Kaddish for their loved one's purification.

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Jews, Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox historically always proclaimed the reality of the final purification. It was not until the Protestant Reformers of the 1500s that anyone denied this doctrine. As the following quotations from the Church Fathers show, purgatory has been part of the Christian faith from the very beginning.

Some imagine that the Catholic Church has an elaborate doctrine of purgatory worked out, but basically there are only three things that are essential components of the doctrine: that a purification after death exists, that it involves some kind of pain, and that the purification can be assisted by the prayers and offerings of the living to God. Other ideas, such that purgatory is a particular "place" in the afterlife or that it takes "time" to accomplish, are speculations rather than doctrines.

The Acts of Paul and Thecla

"And after the exhibition, Tryphaena again received her [Thecla]. For her daughter Falconilla had died and said to her in a dream: 'Mother, you shall have this stranger Thecla in my place, in order that she may pray concerning me, and that I may be transferred to the place of the righteous'" (*Acts of Paul and Thecla* [A.D. 160]).

Abercius

"The citizen of a prominent city, I erected this while I lived, that I might have a resting place for my body.

ordered this to be inscribed; truly I was in my seventy-second year. May everyone who is in accord with this and who understands it pray for Abercius" (*Epitaph of Abercius* [A.D. 190]).

Perpetua

"[T]hat very night, this was shown to me in a vision: I saw Dinocrates going out from a gloomy place, where also there were several others, and he was parched and very thirsty, with a filthy countenance and pallid color, and the wound on his face which he had when he died. This Dinocrates had been my brother after the flesh, seven years of age, who died miserably with disease. . . . For him I had made my prayer, and between him and me there was a large interval, so that neither of us could approach to the other . . . and [I] knew that my brother was in suffering. But I trusted that my prayer would bring help to his suffering; and I prayed for him every day until we passed over into the prison of the camp, for we were to fight in the camp-show. Then . . . I made my prayer for my brother day and night, groaning and weeping that he might be granted to me. Then, on the day on which we remained in fetters, this was shown to me. I saw that that place which I had formerly observed to be in gloom was now bright; and Dinocrates, with a clean body well clad, was finding refreshment. . . . He went away from the water to play joyously, after the manner of children, and I awoke. Then I understood that he was translated from the place of punishment" (*The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity* 2:3-4 [A.D. 202]).

Tertullian

"[T]hat allegory of the Lord [Matt. 5:25-26] . . . is extremely clear and simple in its meaning . . . [beware lest as] a transgressor of your agreement, before God the Judge . . . and lest this Judge deliver you over to the angel who is to execute the sentence, and he commit you to the prison of hell, out of which there will be no dismissal until the smallest even of your delinquencies be paid off in the period before the resurrection. What can be a more fitting sense than this? What a truer interpretation?" (*The Soul* 35 [A.D. 210]).

Tertullian

"We offer sacrifices for the dead on their birthday anniversaries" (*The Crown* 3:3 [A.D. 211]).

Tertullian

"A woman, after the death of her husband . . . prays for his soul and asks that he may, while waiting, find rest and that he may share in the first resurrection. And each year, on the anniversary of his death, she offers the sacrifice" (*Monogamy* 10:1-2 [A.D. 216]).

Cyprian

"The strength of the truly believing remains unshaken, and with those who fear and love God with their whole heart, their integrity continues steady and strong. To adulterers even a time of repentance is granted by us, and peace [i.e., reconciliation] is given. Yet virginity is not therefore deficient in the Church, nor does the glorious design of continence languish through the sins of others. The Church, crowned with so many virgins, flourishes, and chastity and modesty preserve the tenor of their glory. Nor is the vigor of continence broken down because

suffering for sins, to be cleansed and long purged by fire; another to have purged all sins by suffering. It is one thing, in fine, to be in suspense till the sentence of God at the day of judgment; another to be at once crowned by the Lord." (*Letters* 51[55]:20 [A.D. 253]).

Lactantius

"But also, when God will judge the just, it is likewise in fire that he will try them. At that time, they whose sins are uppermost, either because of their gravity or their number, will be drawn together by the fire and will be burned. Those, however, who have been imbued with full justice and maturity of virtue, will not feel that fire; for they have something of God in them which will repel and turn back the strength of the flame" (*Divine Institutes* 7:21:6 [A.D. 307]).

Epiphanius

"Useful too is the prayer fashioned on their behalf, even if it does not force back the whole of guilty charges laid to them. And it is useful also, because in this world we often stumble either voluntarily or involuntarily, and thus it is a reminder to do better" (*Medicine Chest Against All Heresies* 75:8 [A.D. 375]).

Gregory of Nyssa

"If a man distinguish in himself what is peculiarly human from that which is irrational, and if he be on the watch for a life of greater urbanity for himself, in this present life he will purify himself of any evil contracted, overcoming the irrational by reason. If he have inclined to the irrational pressure of the passions, using for the passions the cooperating hide of things irrational, he may afterward in a quite different manner be very much interested in what is better, when, after his departure out of the body, he gains knowledge of the difference between virtue and vice and finds that he is not able to partake of divinity until he has been purged of the filthy contagion in his soul by the purifying fire" (*Sermon on the Dead* [A.D. 382]).

John Chrysostom

"Let us help and commemorate them. If Job's sons were purified by their father's sacrifice [Job 1:5], why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them" (*Homilies on 1 Corinthians* 41:5 [A.D. 392]).

Augustine

"But by the prayers of the Holy Church, and by the salvific sacrifice, and by the alms which are given for their spirits, there is no doubt that the dead are aided, that the Lord might deal more mercifully with them than their sins would deserve. The whole Church observes this practice which was handed down by the Fathers: that it prays for those who have died in the communion of the Body and Blood of Christ, when they are commemorated in their own place in the sacrifice itself and the sacrifice is offered also in memory of them, on their behalf. If, then, works of mercy are celebrated for the sake of those who are being remembered, who

would hesitate to recommend them, on whose behalf prayers to God are not offered in vain? It is not at all to be doubted that such prayers are of profit to the dead, but for such of them as lived before their death in a way that makes it possible for these things to be useful to them after death" (ibid., 172:2).

Augustine

"Temporal punishments are suffered by some in this life only, by some after death, by 'some both here and hereafter, but all of them before that last and strictest judgment. But not all who suffer temporal punishments after death will come to eternal punishments, which are to follow after that judgment" (*City of God* 21:13 [A.D. 419]).

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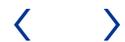
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