

Purgatory: In Quest of an Image

*A large majority of Catholics
seem to believe in Purgatory.
Like our author, they may feel
we must deal with the
consequences of our lives.*

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF A DOCTRINE

Whatever has become of purgatory? The belief in an intermediate state after death in which those who were basically just were purified of remaining venial sin, and made expiation and reparation for the temporal punishment for forgiven sins, seems to have slipped out of Catholic consciousness in the past two decades. A central element in Catholic piety was once the regular celebration of Requiem masses, the enrollment of the beloved dead in purgatorial societies, and constant reminders to pray and earn indulgences for the dead. But all of that now seems largely gone. Sermons are rarely preached on the state of the "poor souls," references to purgatory are rare even in funeral services, and younger Catholics seem to have only a dim sense of what was once a major preoccupation in the day-to-day prayer life of their elders.

If one turns to catechetical resources to gain some foothold for approaching the subject, one will generally find rather vague and even abstract language replacing the more vivid and graphic imagery of a generation ago. Theologians devote very little attention to it; indeed most of what has been appearing on purgatory is of an historical nature. In a magisterial study of the development of the doctrine of purgatory in the Middle Ages, historian Jacques Le Goff wonders whether we will be able in our own time to find the appropriate imagery to

Robert J. Schreiter, C.P.P.S., is Dean and Professor of Theology at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. His books include *Exchatology as a Grammar of Transformation*, *Constructing Liturgical Theologies*, and *The Schillebeeckx Reader*.

sustain the belief (*The Birth of Purgatory*, Chicago, 1984, p. 359f.). And attempts to give the doctrine a contemporary face have been better at raising questions than giving answers.

Yet belief in purgatory has by no means been discarded by the Church. Pope Paul VI reaffirmed the traditional doctrine in his *Credo of the People of God* in 1968, as did also the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith in its Letter on questions in eschatology in 1979. In a 1984 survey among readers of *U.S. Catholic*, a monthly magazine, two-thirds of those responding stated that they still held a belief in purgatory. And the continued practice of giving Mass offerings for the dead shows a continued consciousness of this doctrine among significant segments of the Catholic population.

But one cannot escape the conclusion that, while the doctrine of purgatory is still alive among many Catholics, it enjoys a greatly diminished importance from a mere two decades ago. What has happened in those twenty years to cause so dramatic a shift?

CAUSES AND SYMPTOMS

Different reasons can be given for the seeming disappearance of concern about purgatory. In bringing forth those reasons, it is difficult to sort through what might be causes of the drop in interest, and what are simply symptoms that interest has already declined. As is often the case, causes and symptoms come to feed upon one another. Yet an attempt at such sorting out is necessary if we hope to come to some position on how to talk about purgatory today. At the same time, we must remember that the complexities we find surrounding our attempts to talk about purgatory are not entirely the product of the contemporary scene; rather, this has been a hallmark of the entire history of the development of the doctrine. Belief in purgatory did not come about for purely theological reasons, nor can the belief be deduced directly from the Scriptures. Purgatory's history is one of an interweaving of belief and practice, of theology and devotion, of hope and of comfort. It has been part of Christianity in one way or another for some seventeen hundred years, and has been considered doctrine for the Western Church for seven centuries. Its roots reach beyond Christian confession into the depths of our collective psyche. Thus, discerning reasons for its current eclipse and finding ways to reappropriate its meaning will be more than a theological task. It is a pas-

toral task as well. For to simply dismiss it as an outmoded belief is a too cavalier treatment of the sensibilities of generations of believing Christians, and may even be a somewhat foolhardy act of self-delusion.

LITURGICAL SHIFTS

If we were to suggest one cause above all others which has led to the decline of interest in purgatory, a prime candidate would be the shifts in the liturgical practice brought about by the introduction of the reformed funeral rites in 1970. Not only were the prayer formularies thoroughly revised, but basic conceptual shifts in the intent of the rites also took place. The paschal character of Christian death was firmly placed at the center of the liturgical activity, with special emphasis on the resurrection dimension of the paschal mystery. This replaced what had been a dominant theme: a supplication before God that the departed be spared the just desserts of their sins. The previous rite made repeated reference to the deliverance of the soul from the gates of hell and from the bond of sin; the new rite speaks rather of a share in Christ's resurrection and the forgiveness of sins, with very little reference to the punishments due to sin. While black and violet remain appropriate liturgical colors for funeral rites, they have been almost entirely replaced by the use of the color white.

How has this changed belief in purgatory? It is always somewhat hazardous to speculate on such matters, but there seems to be some threads running through these changes that might lead us to some conclusions. The shift from an emphasis on death and possible perdition to resurrection and forgiveness, from release from justly deserved punishment to a share in resurrection, does two important things to a belief in purgatory. First of all, it shifts its perceived location from being closer to hell toward being closer to heaven. Although in the best of the tradition in the West (and even more consistently in the East) purgatory was seen as a kind of antechamber to heaven where the joy of future beatitude was tempered by a temporary eclipse of the vision of God (see for example the *Purgatorio* in Dante's *Divine Comedy*), late medieval and baroque preaching and iconography made it more of a scaled-down experience of the pains of hell. This latter view was the dominant image in the older liturgy, best characterized by the *Dies Irae* sequence and the *Libera Me* of the absolution. In the new rite, the emphasis on baptism as participation in Christ's death and resurrec-

tion shifts the focus of any remaining sinfulness away from hell to some purgation in the antechambers of heaven.

The shift from black to white vestments also has more than a merely visual effect. Black captured the feelings of grief of the mourners, but it also emphasized the ambiguous state of the departed: no longer among the living, but not yet secure with God. White, for better or worse, relieves that ambiguity. While it is meant to emphasize Christian hope for the resurrection, it also implies that the departed is already with the risen Christ. Black could help locate the departed soul in the ambiguous purgatorial place; white can do that (at least for Western cultures) only with the utmost difficulty.

In view of these facts—the new prayer formularies, the white vestments, the suggested joyful tone of the funeral service—it is not surprising that most homilists find it difficult to insert themes of purgation and forgiveness of sin into their sermons in funeral settings. The ritual itself militates against it. While the homily can still speak of the pain of loss and the grief of saying good-bye, a shift to resurrection is made almost inevitable. In that shift, there is very little room for an intermediate state such as purgatory.

The Roman Missal's discouragement of frequent votive Masses for the dead—its instructions speak really only of anniversary and funeral Masses—has further eroded the basis upon which belief in purgatory more easily rested. The black vestments, the similar formularies to the funeral service, the possibilities of even repeating the absolution over the catafalque—all of these had reminded those attending that the departed soul was probably still in the intermediate state of purgatory. Mass offerings continue to be accepted for the dead, but their commemoration within the context of a liturgical celebration whose focus is elsewhere obscures any thought of purgatorial sojourn on the part of the dead.

Likewise, the reformed ritual for the anointing of the sick, by emphasizing the support and prayer of the community for those who are ill, has withdrawn another prop for the doctrine of purgatory. When that anointing was seen as a sign of imminent death, the sacrament inevitably gave rise to thoughts about the state immediately following that death. In the new ritual, the sacrament has become much more a support for the living than a grace for the soon to die. The shift in focus has led to less attention to the after-death state. By stressing support, solace, and healing, the question of sin and punishment is necessarily played down. The reform of this sacrament has affected belief in purgatory only indirectly, but nonetheless significantly.

INDULGENCES

The Catholic practice of granting and gaining indulgences for the recitation of prayers and the performance of good works has not disappeared. But its place in popular piety is not what was once the case. Paul VI, in his Apostolic Constitution on indulgences in 1967, rightly corrected the emphasis on indulgences, stating our responsibilities as members of the larger communion of saints. In reshaping the theological statement, the practice of computing indulgences in terms of days or years of remission of purgatorial punishment was replaced with a simple distinction between plenary and partial remission. By abolishing the more exact computation, however, the link between indulgences and purgatorial punishment was substantially weakened. For what the reform of funeral rites had done for changing the spatial imaging of purgatory, the reform of indulgences has done for its temporal imaging. This dual undermining of both the sense of location and of duration of purgatory has been the principal contributor to purgatory now having a more abstract and vague, and therefore less engaging, character.

THE MERCY OF GOD AND THE AWARENESS OF SIN

In one kind of way, the renewed emphasis on preaching the love and mercy of God has probably contributed to the decline of purgatory to some extent. It is difficult in preaching to hold together the tension between God's great redemptive love on the one hand, and God's righteous judgment on the other. In attempts to correct the effects of a residual Jansenism in Western Christian piety, there has been a particular stress in recent years on the unbounded love of God. This by itself could lead to less attention being directed to purgatory, since purgatory bespeaks punishment and the offense against God caused by our sins. The focus on the more optimistic dimensions of the Christian experience have thus contributed in some way to the decline of purgatory in Catholic belief.

There has also been a shift in the awareness of sin, a shift which is operating on a number of different levels. The very change of the designation of the Sacrament of Penance to the Sacrament of Reconciliation already indicates the Church's intent to bring about one level of change. The difference in name implies the introduction of a different image both of sin and of the remission of sin. The older image was drawn from the same legal metaphors which largely shaped Western soteriology since Anselm—that of laws being broken, offense being given, restitution being demanded. Reconciliation evokes rather

images of relationships between persons being broken and restored, harmony being reinstated, and healing or restoration taking place. In the newer rite, confession of sin continues to allow for recounting of individual acts of sin, but emphasizes at the same time more holistic concerns about general directions of life.

"Temporal punishment" is a concept fitting more easily into the legal imagery than the personalistic imagery now being favored. Notions of expiation and reparation, likewise, are more at home in the former system than in the latter. Thus on one important level, liturgical renewal has again had profound repercussions on the doctrine of purgatory. So much of what has been associated with purgatory in the Western Church—remission of temporal punishment due to sin, expiation and reparation—seems to have been swept away.

At the 1983 Synod of Bishops, much discussion was given to whether the awareness of sin was being changed on another level; namely, whether a society based on individualism, pluralism, and self-fulfillment might be eroding any concept of sin at all. Some of the Synod participants pointed to the decline in frequency of use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation as evidence of this. It is harder to discern whether there is some cause and effect relationship between frequency of confession and sense of sin, but some case could be made for such a relation. At any rate, if there is indeed a greater insensibility to sin among Catholics, that would inevitably have an effect on their understanding of purgatory as well.

All of these different factors—changes in funerary ritual, confessional ritual and practice, use of indulgences, subject matter for preaching, awareness of sin—are related somehow to the decline of interest in purgatory. One can see how the shifts in ritual focus could have a direct effect in bringing about this decline, yet it is also difficult to assign causes so unilaterally. What can be said, however, is that the factors just described have certainly undermined both the spatial and temporal aspects of the imagery by means of which purgatory has been maintained since the twelfth century in the West. And by so undercutting the imagery of a reality none of us has yet experienced, they have made the doctrine more vague and abstract than it has been in the West for centuries.

THE BASIC DOCTRINE

As was noted above, a sense of purgatory has been present in Christianity, both East and West, since the third century. It has been de-

defined as doctrine, however, only in the West, at the Second Council of Lyons (1274), the Council of Florence (1439), and the Council of Trent (1563). The first two instances of definition were occasioned by discussions with the Eastern Church; the last occasion arose in response to the Reformers. What has been defined about purgatory is quite minimal, something which must be kept in mind as we try to come to more contemporary language for it: (1) that purgatory exists as a state (2) where such temporal punishment from forgiven sin as still remains at the time of death is cleansed before admission of the dead person to the direct vision of God, and (3) these dead may be helped by the prayers and good works of those still alive. The nature and duration of the purification which takes place is left undefined, as is whether purgatory is a place. Whether lesser, venial sins are forgiven in purgatorial purification (graver, mortal sins are clearly not forgiven) is also left undefined. Hence, that purgatory is punishment by fire, as is most often presented in popular iconography, is not part of the necessary belief. Nor giving it particular location or duration is required to be in any given form. In view of this, the reforms that have eclipsed purgatory in recent years are well within the realm of Catholic belief; they have, for the most part, simply removed the legitimacy of some of the spatial and temporal imagery.

But what then of a more contemporary expression of purgatory? By looking at some of the problems which the doctrine has faced in the past two decades, we have already uncovered some of the historical forms which had shaped Catholic awareness during the past several centuries. By looking now more closely at significant moments in its historical development, we might be able to uncover significant aspects of why the doctrine came to take shape in the first place. If we can get hold of what problems those developments were responding to, we can also gather for ourselves the issues which any contemporary expression of the doctrine will have to address. In doing so, we will be in a better position to formulate a way of speaking about purgatory that does justice to the range of human concerns about death and our relation to God.

BIBLICAL EVIDENCE

Contemporary exegetes agree that there is no clear and unequivocal biblical warrant for the doctrine of purgatory. At the same time, the Scriptures do not rule out the possibility. There are three passages es-

pecially which have traditionally been called upon to contribute some indirect support to purgatory, although even together they could not be said to provide a biblical foundation. Yet the issues each passage raises reveal something of importance for formulating a contemporary expression of purgatory.

2 Maccabees 12, 43-46 is a passage often associated with the doctrine of purgatory. Here Judas Maccabeus makes an atonement offering for soldiers who have been slain, an offering intended to expiate the sin of wearing pagan amulets at the time of their death. The author of the text clearly believes that such an atonement offering could free the dead from their sin.

While this passage may not be the biblical warrant for the existence of purgatory it was once thought to be, it does substantiate a belief that the living are in a position to help the dead, and that the dead may be released from their sins, even though they are no longer alive and so able to make normal repentance. These are two aspects of any integral doctrine of purgatory, it would seem: a relation of the living to the dead which allows the living to be of assistance to those who have died, and that sin can be remitted by God, even after the normal opportunities for conversion have passed.

A second passage often adduced for the existence of purgatory is Matthew 12, 32: "Whoever says anything against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever says anything against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or the age to come." Important here are the final words of the passage. They imply that certain sins can be forgiven in the age to come, while others cannot. This has been brought forward to show the distinction between those who have excluded themselves from salvation, and those who, though essentially embracing God's offer of salvation, are not entirely just and are still in need of forgiveness.

In light of this, a doctrine of purgatory in whatever form has to take human action in this life seriously. Human freedom means nothing if the possibility of rejecting God is not possible. Not every and any sin is automatically forgiven. Again, evidence here is at best indirect, but it brings up the point that purgatory as a doctrine is related directly to an understanding of human action. Purgatory recognizes the gravity of sin, but also the possibility of forgiveness. It recognizes, too, that it is not a kind of second chance to rectify what had happened during life. One's status in purgatory is directly consequent upon how one has lived and can only deal with the aftermath of that life—it cannot create a new possibility.

A third passage is 1 Corinthians 3, 10-15, in which Paul talks of how each individual's building (i.e., life) will be tested according to its quality, on the judgment day. Because of the reference to fire in the passage, this was seen as warrant for understanding punishment as fire. More central to the concerns here is that each will be tested, and if found wanting, there is a purifying agent by which one can be saved.

What this passage adds by way of elements to an understanding of purgatory builds upon the previous concerns: human action is taken seriously, and what needs to be set aright is done so by a purifying force. Thus there is not only a need for forgiveness, but also a kind of purification attendant upon that act of forgiveness. Human action is such that its effects cannot be restricted to the individual who has initiated the action; the effects fan out and linger long after the action is completed. These, too, must be dealt with. In the legal imagery of a Pauline and an Anselmian soteriology, these are the punishments resulting from sin. The sin may be forgiven, but its consequences continue.

To draw out these elements from these three biblical texts does not do justice to the integrity of those texts; it was done because these are the three traditional sources for the doctrine of purgatory. Modern critical exegesis may not support such a use of these texts, but they do echo concerns about death, salvation, and purgation which are still very much with us: the seriousness of human action, the possibility of forgiveness and purification even after death, and the ability of the living to intercede on behalf of the dead.

ELEMENTS FROM THE TRADITION

Some elements from the post-biblical tradition of Christianity can also be lined up which help complete the picture. Again, this is not intended as a complete history of the development of the doctrine; we are only concerned with locating key elements.

An important part of the development of the doctrine was the recurrent visions of purgatory, either in sleep or in prayer. Apart from whatever veracity one might wish to accord to those visions, their impact played a crucial role in purgatory's history.

An early and influential vision was that recorded in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, in which Perpetua saw her dead brother Dinocrates in torment. Upon awaking, she prayed daily for him. A few

days later, she had another vision in which Dinocratus was now freed of the frustration. In the account, Perpetua knew that her prayer could be of help to her brother, and that proved to be the case. What this points to is an apparently established practice of prayer for the dead in the early third century.

Other visions could also be brought forward here. Those recorded in the writings of Gregory the Great (accounts of visions Gregory had heard from others) tend to be didactic in tone, admonitions to repentance among the living. Those found in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of England* begin to show purgatorial purification as happening in a special location in the afterlife (whereas some of Gregory's accounts have individuals returning to earth for purification), with differentiated areas for certain people and certain punishments. These differentiations reach their height, of course, in Dante's great poem. What these kinds of visions add to our issues about purgatory is how much the images of location and differentiation will probably mirror our understandings of ourselves in the here and now: the visionary configurations of purgatory are not without their analogue in waking life. This does not make purgatory merely a projection of human fears and yearnings, but it does help us trace back the dominant imagery that will shape the picture of purgatory.

A final element may be added here. This is from Augustine, a major figure in the shaping of the doctrine of purgatory. What is of interest to us here is a passage from the *Confessions* (9, 13, 34-37) where, in his grief, he reflects on the life of his mother Monica. Though an upright and just woman, she too was subject to human frailty and could profit from prayers for the dead. The passage weaves together Augustine's grief at the loss of his mother, with all the ambivalence which comes to us in the moment of grief, and the need to be able to help her in some way now even though she is beyond his reach. The deep human need to aid those whom we have loved and cannot now touch comes through strongly in this passage of the *Confessions*, and represents another issue about purgatory: the need of the living to deal with their grief and even ambivalence toward the dead. The long tradition of suffrages for the dead, and even the excesses in those suffrages, bespeak the intensity of this human emotion.

These issues, then, need to be added to the foregoing ones echoed in the search for biblical warrant: language about purgatory as admonitory to the living; purgatory as a mirror of earth; and the need to aid the dead and so communicate with them, however indirectly.

PURGATORY: SOME CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES

In the long and complex history of purgatory, of discussions between East and West, between Catholics and Reformers, the impact of governing imagery and metaphors stands out. We are, after all, talking about a reality not yet experienced, and so imagery often fills out more of the picture than might be warranted. Yet as Yves Congar has pointed out in his own reflections on purgatory, we cannot get along with no imagery at all, even though we may have to curb some of our more unruly ones from time to time (*Vaste monde, ma paroisse*, Paris, 1966, p. 76). When one looks at the differences between East and West on purgatory, it has been the controlling images or metaphors which have been the sources of the differences as much as anything. As McBrien has aptly summarized it, the medieval West emphasized the penal and expiatory nature of purgatory which grows out of understanding salvation with legal metaphors. The East preferred to see purgatory as a place of purification in the sense of maturation and spiritual growth in the contemplation of God (*Catholicism*, Minneapolis, 1981, p. 1143f.). The West found the East's imagery too vague; the East found the West's penchant for physicalist imagery too crude.

Seen in this way, the current crisis of purgatory can be seen as one of a reality in search of an image. What has happened in Western societies is that the traditional images used to express salvation have broken down. The legal imagery, rooted in Paul's theology of salvation as redemption and refined in Anselm's soteriology, is simply no longer persuasive. That these images do not figure largely in the liturgical reform of the sacraments is perhaps merely reflective of this, acknowledging rather than causing the current situation. Models used in the liturgical reform tended to be high patristic ones, or new ones more reflective of a scriptural base. No consistent and persuasive soteriological imagery is emerging in Western societies. Liberation theology has captured one set of images for the soteriology of those societies where social oppression is the overwhelming fact of the majority of the population's existence.

Thus, without an effective set of images to express our saving relationship with God, the purification of that relationship becomes hard to express. This would explain the current eclipse of purgatory as much as anything.

Where, then, ought we to look? Drawing upon the imagery of intimacy and covenant, as expressed in the Sacrament of Reconciliation,

some authors are mining the metaphors of personalism and existentialism for new possibilities. This would be consistent with the individualism of Western societies (and with the culture of those who had the main hand in the reform of the sacramental rites). In his reflections on purgatory, Robert Ombres suggests that, instead of talking about doing penance, we might speak of healing and restoration (*Theology of Purgatory*, Dublin, 1978, p. 68). Others, such as the Austrian Gisbert Greshake, see the encounter with God as the moment of purification (*Stärker als der Tod*, Mainz, 1976, p. 92). Karl Rahner uses similar language.

All of these suggestions at imagery work in one way or another from a fulfillment model of the human person. If we were to trace that model out in regard to purgatory, it might look something like this:

The call to salvation is a call to growth, to become who we really are, to grow fully into the life we have received. In the ordering of our growth, we encounter sin—the disorder in our own life, the failure to respond authentically, the refusal to enter into communion. Even when we are able to order what has been unordered, or to undo what has been done, our actions are not mere concepts. Since we live as communal beings, our actions have implications, repercussions, “vapor trails” in the trajectory of our existence. These too must be dealt with.

That dealing with the consequences of our actions is part of coming into the perfect communion with God after death. And just as we were interdependent beings in life, so the common stream of life we participate in allows interdependence even in death. Intercession on behalf of the dead is effective because of our mutual interconnectedness in that God of life. By praying for the dead, we can help the dead who cannot now help themselves as they did while alive. By praying for the dead, the living also help themselves, not only in being reminded of the consequences of their own actions, but also in strengthening the bonds of life by participating more intensely in them. For it is ultimately God, the source of life, who purifies the dead of the consequences they have created. That purification is done through an intensification of communion. To think of that intensification as temporal, as enduring over time, is legitimate since it expresses best our own sense and experience both of human growth and human repair.

This way of talking about purgatory tries to respect the great lines of the tradition within the controlling imagery of a stream of life flowing from God which is purified and strengthened within us through

communion and authenticity. It is culture-bound, but also knows the limits of its applicability. It borrows from Western existentialism, but also from more communal concepts of life. It tries to find a place for the residual consequences of human sin, and through its image of connectedness, show the interaction of the living, the dead and God.

This is not presented as in any way definitive. But by combining the elements for talking about purgatory effectively as evidenced in the tradition, with a search for imagery for salvation within a culture, one can construct a new and effective way of talking about an old, and still quite necessary, dimension of Catholic belief.