

Queen of Purgatory

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For the Year of Faith starting on October 11, 2012, and ending on Nov. 24, 2013, Benedict XVI asked all Catholics to study their faith and to share it with others. For those who know much about Our Lady, perhaps Mary's title as "Queen of Purgatory" could provide a novel aspect of Mary's Queenship. This unusual title is presented as a quote in the section about praying for deceased members in *The Official Handbook of the Legion of Mary*:

"Purgatory forms part of the realm of Mary. There, too, are her children, who in a passing spell of pain await their birth to the glory which will never pass. St. Vincent Ferrer, St. Bernardine of Sienna, Louis de Blois, as well as others, explicitly proclaim Mary to be Queen of Purgatory; and St. Louis-Marie de Montfort urges us to think and act in accordance with that belief. He wishes us to place in Mary's hands the value of our prayers and satisfactions. He promises us that, in return for this offering, those souls which are dear to us will be more abundantly relieved than if we were to apply our prayers to them directly."

(Lhoumeau: *La Vie Spirituelle a l'Ecole de St. Louis-Marie de Montfort*)¹

At a time when some Catholics as well as Protestants might question the reality of purgatory, this Marian title reminds all that purgatory is indeed still part of a Biblical and post-Vatican II faith, and that Mary's loving care extends there as well. This paper will review the Catholic belief in purgatory as found in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* and in the Bible. The related teachings on indulgences and the communion of saints will then be presented to give a context for Mary's role. The paper will conclude with the sayings of some saints about Mary's help for the Poor Souls in purgatory.

What is purgatory?

Whenever one wonders what Catholics believe about a topic, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides an official response. The second edition includes a most useful glossary where there is a helpful definition of purgatory as "A state of final purification after death and before entrance into heaven for those who died in God's friendship, but were only imperfectly purified; a final cleansing of human imperfection before one is able to enter the joy of heaven (1031; cf. 1472)."² CCC 1030 elaborates that the souls in purgatory "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." Thus, those who die in the state of grace, i.e. free from mortal or serious sins, but perhaps with unforgiven venial sins and/or reparation still due

¹ *The Official Handbook of the Legion of Mary* (Dublin: Concilium Legionis Mariae, 2005), pp. 104-105. Antoine Lhoumeau, *La Vie Spirituelle a l'Ecole de St. Louis-Marie de Montfort* (Bruges: C. Beyaert, 1954), p.

² *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd edition (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), p. 896. Henceforth, this book will be referred to as CCC and the numbers refer to sections, not pages.

for their forgiven sins go to purgatory. Although they are indeed suffering greatly as they are being purified with a burning love for God, the Poor Souls have a certain joy and peace because they know that they are definitely going to heaven and that they can no longer offend God by sinning.

CCC 1031 distinguishes purgatory from hell that “is entirely different from the punishment of the damned.” Some people today think of hell like a fiery jail with a release program after a certain amount of suffering and everyone going to heaven eventually, but that more closely describes purgatory. Since purgatory completes whatever purification is still needed to enter heaven, exactly what it consists of and its duration or intensity would be different for each soul. Purgatory is more like a courtyard, vestibule, or washroom for heaven, while the fires of hell last forever and by their own choice, no damned soul ever leaves it, just as no saved soul leaves heaven. Like heaven and hell, purgatory is a state of being, not a place, but different from heaven and hell, purgatory is a temporary state that will end on the Last Day.

Is purgatory in the Bible?

Today many Christians question the existence of purgatory because they think that it is not in the Bible. While it is true that the term “purgatory” is not in the Bible, the concept of purgatory is! CCC 1031 teaches that: “The tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire.” The footnote then refers to two New Testament texts:

I Cor. 3:15 -- "But if someone's work is burned up, that one will suffer loss; the person will be saved, but only as through fire."

I Peter 1:7 -- "That the trial of your faith (much more precious than gold which is tried by the fire) may be found unto praise and glory and honor at the appearing of Jesus Christ:"

The CCC then provides St. Gregory the Great's comments on Mt. 12:31 as well:

As for certain lesser faults, we must believe that, before the Final Judgment, there is a purifying fire. He who is truth says that whoever utters blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will be pardoned neither in this age nor in the age to come. From this sentence we understand that certain offenses can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come.³

Note that the CCC states that “we must believe” in purgatory; this insistence points to the Church's teaching being a dogma, i.e. a divinely-revealed truth of the Catholic faith.

CCC 1032 then explains that this Christian belief in purgatory is rooted in two Old Testament passages as well. First, the “practice of prayer for the dead” is found in 2 Maccabees 12:46: “Therefore [Judas Maccabeus] made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin.” This Jewish custom has been continued ever since the beginning of the Church that has offered Masses, “almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance” for the repose of the dead.⁴ To justify how another person's sacrifices can help someone else's soul, CCC 1032 quotes St. John Chrysostom's homily that refers to Job 1:5: “If Job's sons were purified by their

³ CCC footnote 608, St. Gregory the Great, Dial. 4,39:PL 77,396; cf. Mt 12:31.

⁴ CCC footnote 610 refers to the Council of Lyons II (1274):DS 856.

father's sacrifice, why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation?"⁵ CCC 1498 adds that "Through indulgences the faithful can obtain the remission of temporal punishment resulting from sin for themselves and also for the souls in Purgatory."⁶ Thus, it is necessary to explain indulgences at this point.

What is an indulgence?

Even some very practicing Catholics think that indulgences had been eliminated by the Church after Martin Luther protested them as abuses, or if not then, at least by Vatican II's renewal of the Church! While in the time of Martin Luther, there were some improper uses of indulgences with bishops collecting money by granting them to people who donated, and some priests gave the impression that people were able to buy a spiritual benefit; there was also confusion to think that almsgiving itself forgave sins. However, these confusions were the result of poor preaching, not official teaching of the Church.

What does the Church teach about indulgences? The CCC glossary and 1471, in the section about the effects of the sacrament of Penance, provides the general definition: "An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven, which the faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains under certain prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints."⁷ There are two kinds of indulgences—"partial or plenary according as it removes either part or all of the temporal punishment due to sin."⁸

Vatican II then did change how partial indulgences are described. Before this council, partial indulgences were often given in terms of days, e.g. "a 33 days indulgence," meaning it was the equivalent of doing penance for 33 days on earth. However, purgatory is outside of time and therefore this description of time is not clearly applicable. Now, an indulgence is simply called either "plenary" meaning all of the temporal punishment is removed, or partial, without designating an amount. Note that both types of indulgences refer only to temporal punishment, not eternal punishment.

What is temporal punishment?

Indulgences can not be applied to a soul in hell. As CCC 1472 explains,

...sin has a double consequence. Grave sin deprives us of communion with God and therefore makes us incapable of eternal life, the privation of which is called the "eternal punishment" of sin.

⁵ CCC footnote 611 cites St. John Chrysostom, Hom. in 1 Cor. 41,5:PG 61,361.

⁶ CCC footnote 83 cites CIC, can. 994. 84 Cf. Council of Trent (1551): DS 1712-1713; (1563): 1820.

⁷ CCC footnote 81 cites Paul VI, apostolic constitution *Indulgentiarum doctrina*, Norm 1.

⁸ CCC footnote cites *Indulgentiarum doctrina*, Norm 2; Cf. Norm 3

On the other hand every sin, even venial, entails an unhealthy attachment to creatures, which must be purified either here on earth, or after death in the state called Purgatory. This purification frees one from what is called the "temporal punishment" of sin. These two punishments must not be conceived of as a kind of vengeance inflicted by God from without, but as following from the very nature of sin. A conversion which proceeds from a fervent charity can attain the complete purification of the sinner in such a way that no punishment would remain.

Thus, a rightly-ordered love for God and for others is what is needed to enter heaven. If one has at least some love, then the goal of purgatory is to purify that love to be able to enter heaven.

A common confusion of many Catholics is to think that if a sin has been forgiven, then one is ready to enter heaven, but this is not necessarily true. Just as one can be forgiven for damaging property, but still has to pay for its repair, the spiritual damage done by sin or "temporal punishment" has to be repaired or healed. This restoration can be achieved by "patiently bearing sufferings and trials of all kinds and, when the day comes, serenely facing death," as well as "by works of mercy and charity, as well as by prayer and the various practices of penance, . . ." (CCC 1473). If someone does not complete this temporal purification on earth, then it remains to be completed after death by one's own suffering in purgatory and helped by others in the communion of saints.

What is the Communion of Saints?

How does an indulgence offered by someone on earth get applied to a soul in purgatory? The holy people or "saints" on earth, in purgatory, and in heaven are all united to one another through their union in Christ to form the Mystical Body of Christ (Eph. 4:22, 24, CCC 1474) . This unity of Christian love, called "agape" or "charity," allows for "an abundant exchange of all good things," including the superabundant spiritual satisfactions and merits of Jesus Christ, Mary, and the other saints (CCC 1475-1477). By the power Christ gave to Peter to bind and to loose things on earth as well as heaven, the Church has access to this spiritual "treasury of the merits of Christ and the saints to obtain from the Father of mercies the remission of the temporal punishments due for their sins" (CCC 1478). Thus, just as someone on earth can donate money to pay someone else's debt, or physically donate blood or a kidney to heal someone else's illness, on the spiritual level, Catholics on earth can offer indulgences for the Poor Souls in purgatory (CCC 1479).

How can one gain a plenary or partial indulgence?

Catholics who might wish to offer an indulgence for their beloved dead can do so only when they are in the state of grace. Then, for a plenary indulgence, there are five conditions:

1. Do an indulgenced act with the intention of gaining an indulgence.
2. Confession within 20 days before or after the act.

3. Mass and communion the day of the act.
4. No attachment to sin at the time of the act (a simple resolution is fine).
5. Prayers for the pope and his intentions – usually an Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be or Apostles' Creed

For a partial indulgence:

1. Do an partially indulgenced act with the intention of gaining it.
2. Try for a plenary indulgence but fail perhaps in one of the five conditions, e.g. Mass and communion that day.⁹

Thus, every effort to gain an indulgence benefits both the person who gains it and the Poor Soul for whom it is offered.

What did the saints say about Mary's role in purgatory?

Hopefully the discussion of how regular Catholics can offer prayers, sacrifices, and indulgences for the intentions of the poor souls in purgatory explains how much more Mary can help the poor souls in purgatory! Being the Immaculate Conception and then never sinning, Mary's merit and satisfaction would be added to the Church's treasury of merits for others. As part of the Mystical Body of Christ, Mary can most efficaciously offer her merits for the Poor Souls.

Various saints have commented on Mary's role in purgatory. St. Vincent Ferrer made a theological deduction from Mary's spiritual maternity: "Mary is the mother of good things existing in purgatory because by her they have the results of her intercession."¹⁰ St. Bernadine of Siena applied an Old Testament prefigurement to Mary: "The Virgin retains her rule in the realm of purgatory, according to Sirach: And I have walked in the waves of the sea." She delivers her fervent devotees from these torments by visiting and helping them in their needs."¹¹ As a visionary, St. Bridget of Sweden reported that Our Lady said "I am the Mother of all those who are in the place of expiation; my prayers mitigate the chastisements which are inflicted upon them for their faults."¹² Ven. Sr. Paula of St. Teresa said she saw in visions how Saturday and feastsdays of Mary are special days when Mary visits purgatory, similar to how we visit people in jail. Those who wore the Brown Scapular are brought to heaven each Saturday. St. Peter Damian told how Mary celebrates the feast of her Assumption by bringing thousands of souls to heaven that day.¹³ While they have different perspectives, these saints agree that Mary gives her motherly help to the Poor Souls in purgatory.

Conclusion

⁹ Colin Donovan, "Indulgences – General Conditions," EWTN.com, http://www.ewtn.com/expert/answers/indulgences_conditions.htm.

¹⁰ Lhoumeau, p. 188, footnote 2.

¹¹ Lhoumeau, p. 189, footnote; Sirach 24:8.

¹² F.X. Schouppe, S.J., *Purgatory: Explained by the Lives and Legends of the Saints* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1986), p. 178.

¹³ Schouppe, pp. 181-182.

Thus, Catholics can be confident in the validity of Mary's title as Queen of Purgatory. The Catholic belief in purgatory is well grounded in both the Old and New Testament. As one Body in Christ, the communion of saints shares the spiritual riches from Christ, Mary, and many other saints. While as Immaculate Queen and Mother, Mary's intercession is more powerful, any Catholic in the state of grace can assist the Poor Souls in purgatory. Each November the Church remembers the suffering souls most effectively by asking for Our Lady's help, as Father Faber did in his poem:

The Queen of Purgatory

O turn to Jesus, Mother! Turn,
And call Him by His tenderest names;
Pray for the Holy Souls that burn
This hour amid the cleansing flames.

Ah! They have fought a gallant fight:
In death's cold arms they persevered;
And, after life's uncheery night,
The harbour of their rest is neared.

In pains beyond all earthly pains,
Favourites of Jesus! There they lie
Letting the fire wear out their stains
And worshipping God's purity.

Spouses of Christ they are, for He
Was wedded to them by His Blood;
And angels o'er their destiny
In wondering adoration brood.

They are the children of thy tears;
Then hasten, Mother! To their aid;
In pity think each hour appears
An age while glory is delayed.

See, how they bound amid their fires,
While pain and love their spirits fill;
Then with self-crucified desires
Utter sweet rumors, and lie still.

Ah me! The love of Jesus yearns
O'er that abyss of sacred pain,
And, as He looks, His bosom burns
With Calvary's dear thirst again.

O Mary, let thy Son no more

His lingering Spouses thus expect;
God's children to their God restore,
And to the Spirit His elect.

Pray then, as thou hast ever prayed;
Angels and Souls, all look to thee;
God waits thy prayers, for He hath made
Those prayers His law of charity.¹⁴

¹⁴ Copied with permission. Robert, Cyril. *Mary Immaculate: God's Mother and Mine*. (Poughkeepsie, New York: Marist Press, 1946), as found under "November Poetry" on The Mary Page: <http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/resources/poetry/november.html#faber>