

The Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults

by Fr. Antony

Purgatory

The concept of purification after death dates back to the Jews of pre-Christian times. Evidence of this can be seen in the Second Book of Maccabees. (The Protestants do not accept 2 Maccabees as scriptural). In 2 Maccabees, following a battle, the faithful Jews found out that their fallen comrades each carried with them sacred tokens of idols, which the law forbade the Jews to wear: They turned to prayer, beseeching that the sin which had been committed might be wholly blotted out (**2 Mac. 12:42-43**).

The sacred text notes that this was an honorable deed, and the passage closes with the statement, “Therefore he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin” (2 Mac. 12:46). The Church Fathers also clearly teach about the purifying fire, and it is completely rooted in the apostolic tradition.

THE OFFICIAL TEACHING

The Catechism clearly affirms the Church’s belief in Purgatory and the purification of the soul after death: “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.” (**Cf. No. 1030-32**). From this basic teaching, we must always remember that (1) a person’s stay in Purgatory is temporary, (2) purgatory is different from Hell, and (3) a person in Purgatory undergoes purification for venial sin and the hurts caused by sins.

Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church also asserted that, “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; and it proposes again the decrees of the Second Council of Nicea, of the Council of Florence, and of the Council of Trent” (no. 51).

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

One of the allegations against the Catholics on this point is that there are no biblical references to purgatory. Yes, it is true that we may not find the exact word “purgatory”, in scripture, but we have clear references, by Jesus, which points to the possibility that there might be some debt of justice that would be paid after our earthly life.

As Christ teaches about the importance of forgiveness, He gives the example of a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. He brought in a man who owed a great deal of money and forgave him the debt. The forgiven man in turn went out and met one of his fellow servants, who owed him but a fraction of the amount, and demanded repayment and tortured him. The just king summoned his servant back, and in anger delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt (**Mt. 18:32-34**).

Again in St. Luke's Gospel, Jesus invites His followers to make peace with one another, so that they will not be handed over to the magistrate who would throw them into prison: "I tell you, you will never get out till you have paid the very last copper" (**Lk. 12:59**; cf. **Mt. 5:26**).

The reference of a "prison" from which we would not be released until we had 'paid the last cent' is a reference to purgatory. And in Matthew (**12:31-32**) Jesus mentions that there are some sins (e.g. sin against the Holy Spirit) that would not be forgiven either in this age or in the age to come. This is a clear indication that some sins are forgiven in the age to come. The church teaches that this "age that to come" is the life after death.

There is another clear example from the scripture; St. Paul in his letter to **1 Cor. 3:11-15** clearly speaks about purgatory. "If someone's work is burned up, that one will suffer loss; the person will be saved but only as through fire" (**1 Cor.3:15**). This purification is necessary because, as Scripture teaches of heaven — the New Jerusalem — and the temple within it, "Nothing unclean shall enter it" (**Rev. 21:27**).

So, this third and temporary state of purification is biblical, apostolic, historical and, most of all, true and completely reconcilable with the teachings of Jesus Christ in the Gospels.