

PURGATORY – THE REALISM OF HOPE

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The doctrine of Purgatory figures as a realistic dimension of hope. Hope does not need to pretend. No human one of us is without imperfections, blind spots and ambiguities. All of us have been affected by the violence of history. If such distortions are not evident to oneself, there are plenty of others to remind us that we have not reached a state of pure perfection. There is room, then, for a final stage or state of growth.

The Christian doctrine of Purgatory has a family resemblance to the immemorial spiritual traditions of South East Asia regarding reincarnation (metempsychosis, or “transmigration of souls”). As long as a state of true purity of being is not reached, terrestrial life will go on in some other form. By a strange mutation, this typically Eastern doctrine of purification has entered into the popular religiosity of the West as a kind of hope. Indeed, it is estimated that some twenty-five percent of Europeans believe in some form of reincarnation.

Church teaching in quite minimal:

- i) There is a state of purification after death;
- ii) In this state, any guilt is expiated and punishment is remitted as a prelude to admission to the beatific vision;
- iii) Those in Purgatory can be helped by the prayers and good works of the faithful in this life.

Vatican II relates Purgatory to the pilgrim nature of the Church. The communion of believers spreads over time and reaches beyond the barrier of death so that “we all in various ways... share in the same love of God and neighbour, and we all sing the same hymn to the glory of God”.¹

The prayerful origin of Church teaching is classically expressed in the great intercession found in the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom:

Let us pray also for the repose of the souls of the departed servants of God, and for the forgiveness of their every transgression, deliberate and indeliberate... give rest, O Lord, to the souls of your departed servants in a place of light, in a place of refreshment, in a place of repose from which pain sorrow and sighing have fled. Because you are so good and love mankind, forgive their every offence, whether in word or deed or thought; for there is no one living and never will be, who does not sin: but you alone are without sin ...²

“For there is no one living and never will be who does not sin”. Here we are close to the fundamental meaning which the doctrine of Purgatory conveys. It suggests a sober estimate of the human condition coupled with surrender to the transforming power of grace. There is no optimistic repression of our flawed humanity, nor any pretending to a perfection

that would take us out of our pilgrim state. St Catherine of Genoa's pre-Reformation Treatise on Purgatory (1510) is of special value. Unfortunately it did not appear until 1551, forty years after her death, at a time when Protestant reactions to the Catholic tradition in this matter were most intense. What is remarkable in this saint's writings is the way she removed the purificatory suffering from any implication of divine punishment inflicted on the sinner from the outside, as it were. For her, the process of purification is freely and even joyously embraced for the sake of union with God:

I believe no happiness can be found worthy to be compared to the soul in Purgatory except that of the saints in paradise. And, day by day, this happiness grows as God flows into these souls more and more, as the hindrance to his entrance is consumed. Sin's rust is the hindrance, and the fire burns the rust away, so that more and more the soul opens itself up to the divine inflowing. As the rust lessens and the soul is opened up to the divine ray, happiness grows, until the time be accomplished, the one wanes and the other waxes ... As for the will, never can the soul say these pains are pains, so contented are they with what God ordains with which, in pure charity, their will is united.³

We think of Purgatory at the point where the mysteries of our unity in Christ and our communion in the Holy Spirit intersect, and find expression in the practice of praying for the dead in the corporate imagination of hope. Our actual individuation in the worlds of both nature and grace is a far more corporate matter than the individualistic bias of modern culture suggests. To exist as a person is to be in relation to others. Born into a family, each person lives from others. Living in a society, each one lives with others. Sharing and breathing a common culture, each one lives through others and the multiple ways in which they have made the world intelligible and hospitable to life. In our responsible relationships with others, we not only co-exist, but "pro-exist", i.e., exist "for the other" in our freedom and generativity.

Every human person carries the grace and burden of the whole human community. But Christian hope sees all this subsumed in an even higher level of shared life, namely, our corporate unity in Christ and the Spirit. The more the collective and social dimensions of human existence are acknowledged, the more the value of praying for others can be appreciated.

But prayer is a gift. Whether we pray for ourselves or others, we pray through the grace of the Holy Spirit. Our asking and seeking and knocking on the door (Lk 11:9-13) is not a matter of changing the will of God. On the contrary, it signifies that the gracious will of God is being actualised within us. For the desire expressed in prayer is from God. It is a grace. God works to make us receptive to that fullness of life that God wills for each and all. In this perspective, intercessory prayer, as a hope-filled desire for the good of the other, is the gift of God. It inspires a more intense unity in the Spirit and a more compassionate solidarity in Christ, in an expanding field of love, compassion and communion.

Thus, intercession is a sharing in the self-giving love of God. The Spirit of love inspires the members of Christ to be agents of grace for one another, and "for everyone" (1 Tim 2:1). The life of the whole Body is involved in each of its members, just as the progress

of each individual member affects the life of the whole. Praying for the dead is a specific form of intercession, an act of the fundamental solidarity of all in Christ. Paul assures us that neither “death... nor heights nor depths, nor things present nor things to come, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:38f). Neither do such cosmic realities separate us from one another in the communion of life and love that the Spirit gives.

It is immaterial, therefore, whether our prayers are strictly contemporaneous with the death of the departed. What matters is not the space-time extension of our present existence, but the eternal dimension of God’s love in which we are members of one body, and commune in the one Spirit. All the intercessions that have been made, or will be made, for anyone are of the Spirit’s inspiration. All our prayers for others share in the prayer of Christ “since he always lives to make intercession” for us (Cf. Heb 7:25). In the universe of grace, such prayers are all part of God’s gift to each one in life and in death. In the eternity of love, therefore, it is not as though prayer works to make God’s love more merciful. The opposite is the case. An indicator of God’s predestining grace for each one is the Spirit’s continuing inspiration of intercessions on their behalf. In the eternity of love, each one comes to salvation through the prayer of all. In the communion of saints, all participate in the salvation of each one.

Theology offers no guided tour of the afterlife. The only way anything about “the other side” can be expressed is by way of analogies drawn from human experience, and by cultivating a certain holographic sense of how all the mysteries of faith interconnect. When the sufferings of the Holy Souls are imagined as penalties imposed by God on the sinner, hope must protest. The divine realm of grace and mercy is being subverted by petty, penal calculations arising out of thoroughly unredeemed systems of justice. The Father of mercies does not “go by the book” in the administration of an economy of scarce grace. Little wonder Protestant theologians of the past and the present protest against any such implication. If the doctrine of Purgatory should ever compromise the all-sufficiency of the grace of Christ, it can hardly figure in Christian orthodoxy.

Yet hope must be realistic. It does not paper over the human situation, nor ignore the desirability of further purification for the unfinished beings we are and know, in order that all arrive at the full integrity of their being in Christ. Still, purification does involve some kind of suffering. But it is a suffering born out of love. As this love grows to its fullest realisation in unreserved surrender, it works to purge the soul of all attachments to anything less than the infinite mystery of God.

The first and last thing, in this context is God’s saving grace. Consequently, Purgatory must be interpreted in terms of the divine compassion for the human condition. God’s love reaches the limited human beings that we are. Far from pretending that evil is good, that imperfection is fulfilment, or that our fragmented being is already our best selves, redemptive love works for our complete transformation.

But transformation looks to conversion. Human freedom throughout life is distracted and stratified. It prays to be integrated into the pure love of God, with whole heart and soul, mind and strength. We are commanded to love our neighbour as ourselves,

not as selves destined to be left unfinished and ambiguous, but as selves fully conformed to Christ (Mk 12:30-31).

Purgatory refers, then, to our unfinished existence exposed to the living flame of the Holy Spirit. Our existence becomes fully attentive to the living and active Word of God at the deepest level of our being. At that point, there can be no evasion: all are “naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account” (Heb 4:12-13). The suffering involved is not so much imposed or inflicted by God. It is rather suffering from God, or more simply, suffering God.

For the divine mystery is encountered in the utter otherness of its reality. It is also the love for whom we were made, and in whom alone we find our real identity or “glory”. The Holy Spirit is the fire that burns away wood, hay and straw of all egoism to expose the foundations of what we truly are and most desire to be (1 Cor 3:12-15). The demons that have driven us are finally exorcised. The idols we have cultivated are exposed for what they are, projections of a self fearful of the infinite otherness of God, even if that Other is believed to be love. But love purifies as “the fire that burns away our dross and reforms us to be vessels eternal joy”.

Purgatory supposes a purification appropriate to the self that God intends us to be. The Spirit of holiness is acting in the moment of death or in “process” of dying. Under the action of the Spirit, the self moves out of the “concupiscence” of our complicity in the dynamics of violence and exclusion that are so inextricably bound up with the history of the world. The last vestiges of presumption now yield to the unconditional surrender of hope.

The inevitable self-centredness that has structured each life is now confronted with that infinite Otherness that was, at every moment, the eternal depth and source of our being. The restless fragmentation and compromise of our being-in-the-world now comes to a decisive moment of integration. It is a moment of yielding without reserve to the Reign of God. We do not back defensively into this other Kingdom. The self is now called to turn forward and to embrace, in full freedom, the mystery of love in all its dimensions.

As the Other draws near, “what we shall be” (1 John 3:2) begins to appear. We begin to breathe the pure air of another place, which we recognise as our true home. The self that was in the making, that stirred beneath the egotistic stratagems and projections of a lifetime, now awakens to its full proportions. Our true identity is found only in God. The self that we thought was our exclusive possession is revealed to be a self-in-God and a self-for-God. It is as though we arrive at our first pure act of adoration – of the infinitely Other who all along was our loving creator and our final goal.

This true self had always been there. But it was often enough concealed beneath the masks of an ego shaped by the pressures, distractions, defences, compromises and projections inherent in our divided existence (i.e., “concupiscence”) in the world. It was there, likewise incognito, in the intimations and anticipations of hope and prayer, in ego-less moments of love, joy, wonder, gratitude and forgiveness. In this purgatorial self-realisation, the fragmentation and meandering of life in time comes to its end. The true self comes into its own, in the utter simplicity of its God-ward-ness. Before this integrating moment, the

tumbling torrent of life had just swept us along. We had either been ahead of our true selves, impatient with the ambiguities of our life in time. Or we had been behind our selves, clinging to false versions of who we really were. But now an eternal love gathers all the scattered fragments of our selves in time into the form and features of our true being. We catch up with the person, the self that God has been creating all along. We begin to know who we are for the first time, and so to confront all that is false and unfinished in our being. If this can be called suffering, it is the pain of being born into the inexpressibly other world in which God is the light.

Purgatory is meeting Christ, He is met as the “truth” fundamental to each one’s unique identity. We become aware of ourselves as being made through him, for him, in him (Col1:15-18). In that piercing encounter, the distortions of our existence are made evident. With that meeting comes the realisation that we are not yet in every aspect of our being wholly in Christ and fully subject to him. To accommodate the graphic phrase of Paul, the “rubbish” of false alliances and justifications, must now be renounced and left behind. It is a matter of suffering “the loss of all things in order to gain Christ and be found in him” (Phil 3:9).

We are left with no other identity, no other power of action, save through what we in him. It is as though every believer comes in the end to what Paul describes about himself in his desire to know Christ and to be conformed to him in his cross and resurrection: “Not that I have attained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ” (Phil 3:12-14).

Purgatory suggests the expansion of our being to a truly compassionate existence. We awaken to the demands of ultimate Christ-like love and to all the relationships that this implies: “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). Each member of the Body of Christ begins to feel something of the totality of suffering of the whole Christ—to which each has undoubtedly contributed. Sinfulness has in fact held us back from a fully creative immersion in human history. Our lack of love has left others unloved, unforgiven, ignored, and rejected. In moving out of any self-regarding exclusion of others, the vitality of true life stirs within us: “those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25).

Our Purgatory is, then, the process of our becoming a truly compassionate presence in the heart of human history. Suffering of this kind is not the kind of pain that isolates us from the rest of the world. On the contrary, it causes us to belong more deeply to crises and struggles that had previously left us indifferent and unconcerned. It is a time of forgiving and asking forgiveness, in ways that were not possible within course of history. All have profited from the exploitation of others, as one race drives out the weaker, and empires are built on any number of oppressed peoples. Heaven can only be populated by those who have forgiven the sins of the past, and asked forgiveness for the harm they have caused. It is not fanciful to imagine that this process of reconciliation is the purification implied in any valid notion of Purgatory.

The world we have left behind has suffered from the distortion of our own particular history. Each human life has, at least to some degree, left a polluting vapour trail in the atmosphere of life. All have to admit that in so many ways we simply did not connect with reality of the actual people who made up our lives: parent, child or relative; friend and neighbour; stranger and enemy. These were all there in the drama of our life's history, but we never had enough love to give.

Purgatory, then, must be considered as a deeper immersion in the Spirit of unity and compassion, as each becomes more fully a member of the Body of Christ. We die out of the violently patterned individuality into the reality of true personhood. The hard core of the individuality we so carefully defended is now melted. True life beckons as a loving embrace of the other. It flows in a tide of relationality. Like the trinitarian persons themselves, each one of us is called to become a pure relationship to the other and to all.

We must suppose that this expansion of our being will be humbling and painful. Yet there must be joy, too: we are on the way to becoming pure grace for others. We begin to affirm and value of the other—hitherto ignored or denied. Love burns the resistant selfishness out of us and transforms us into agents of healing and redemption, especially for those who had been given into our care. This phase of purification brings about within us that “greatest love” of laying down life itself for others. We begin to share in the compassion of Christ himself (John 15:13; 1 John 3:16). It will mean knowing for the first time, completely and unambiguously, that “we have passed from the death to life because we love one another” (1 John 3:14).

Note: on The Time of Purgatory

When speaking of the duration of Purgatory, there are two possible types of language. Admittedly, we cannot escape from imagining such duration except from within the space-time structure of our present existence. In so far as Purgatory is an encounter with the risen Lord, in as much as it is a definitive entry into the death of Jesus, the language of a moment of purification and perfect contrition seems appropriate. From such a point of view, temporal duration makes little sense.

On the other hand, if we conceive of Purgatory as a new, compassionate relationship with the history of the world adversely affected by our failures in love, then we can speak of it in terms of historical duration. We cannot be completely in heaven as long as our sin-affected history continues.

Leaving the matter there confronts us with a number of paradoxes. Perhaps these can only be resolved by yielding to a larger mystery still—the manner in which Christ himself suffers the incompleteness and imperfection of his Body. The great third-century Alexandrian theologian, Origen, wrote as follows:

You will have joy when you depart from this life if you are a saint. But your joy will be complete only when no member of your body is lacking to you. For you too will wait, just as you are awaited. But if you who are a member do not have perfect joy as long as a member is missing, how much more must our Lord and saviour who is

the head and origin of this body consider it an incomplete joy if he is still lacking certain of his members?... Thus he does not want to receive his perfect glory without you: that is not without his people which is "his body" and "his members".⁴

This passage is not, of course, speaking about Purgatory, and certainly not about Christ's sufferings in any purgatorial sense. On the other hand, it might suggest an understanding of Purgatory both as a moment of purification and as an ongoing relationship with history. The way the head of the body awaits his "complete joy", the way the members of the Body who are in glory await their complete joy, must have some parallel in the way those "in Purgatory" await their complete joy. Suffering the incompleteness and distortions of our history occurs in different ways. But these are all aspects of how the eternal mystery of love has time for our full growth to humanity.

Purgatory as we have been presenting it is not an ominous imposition, but a deeply hopeful aspect of the gift of God. God has time, makes room, for our full purification, in a "time" and "space" proportioned to God's inexhaustible love. From this point of view, "time" is the divine gift. It is the time of purification, a time related to the course of history, yet also beyond it. Its true character can be sought only in the infinite dimensions of eternal love as these embrace all time and space and history. It can only be measured, not so much in Einsteinian relativity, but in a divinely ordered relativity appropriate to our full growth in Christ.

¹ See *Lumen Gentium*, par. 49-50.

² Quoted from George Maloney, *The Everlasting Now* (Notre Dame IN: Ave Maria Press, 1980), 64.

³ St Catherine of Genoa, *On Purgatory*, trans. Charlotte Balfour and Helen Irvine (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1946), 18-19.

⁴ In *Leviticumhomiliae VII*, 1-2. See J. Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 185, for full text.