

Meditation 6: Purgatory; or the mysterious testing of the Church suffering

My dear pilgrims, Sunday afternoon on the road to Chartres is never easy. There is of course the physical aspect: already around fifty kilometers covered, your legs getting heavier, your feet painful... But above all there is the mental aspect. The departure from Saint-Sulpice yesterday morning is nothing more than a memory; arrival at Notre-Dame de Chartres tomorrow is not yet a reality. If we did not have a watch, we would be unable to tell how long we have been walking and how much longer we have to walk. We are in the middle. It is the right time, therefore, to talk about Purgatory which is the place *par excellence* of waiting.

Major ideas

- Purgatory is not a recent “invention” of the Church
- Why is there Purgatory?
- State of souls in Purgatory
- The notion of duration in Purgatory
- The pain of meaning: the fire of Purgatory is a material reality
- There is no increase in charity in Purgatory
- The obligation to the temporal punishment due for all sin
- We can intercede for the deceased

The reality of Purgatory

The word “Purgatory” appears in the Middle Ages (11th century), but the reality of a state of purification before entering Heaven for certain souls was already mentioned by certain Fathers of the Church, including Saint Augustine († 430) and Saint Gregory the Great († 604), who speak of a “purifying fire.”

Moreover, the very primitive and universal practice of prayer for the deceased in the Church is a proof of the Church's faith in the existence of a state of purification after death.

But above all, the doctrine of Purgatory is already present in Holy Scripture. The most important text is found in the Old Testament, in the second Book of Maccabees. Judas Maccabeus won a resounding victory at the head of his troops. When burying their dead, however, the Jewish soldiers realized that some of them were wearing pagan amulets under their tunics. Judas Maccabeus then decided to collect a large sum of money – around 2000 drachmas – and send it to Jerusalem so that a sacrifice for sin could be offered at the temple: “He had this atoning sacrifice made for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin.”

Many theologians have seen in this gesture, which Holy Scripture reports and approves, proof of the existence of Purgatory, because it is a question of purification, of deliverance from sin after death.



The Catechism of the Catholic Church gives us a precise summary of the doctrine of the Church on the subject of Purgatory: “Those who die in the grace and friendship of God, but imperfectly purified, although assured of their eternal Salvation, undergo purification after their death, in order to obtain the holiness necessary to enter into the joy of Heaven. The Church calls Purgatory this final purification of the elect which is entirely distinct from the punishment of the damned.”

The reasons for Purgatory

The reality of Purgatory having thus been firmly established, let us now try to understand why this state of purification is appropriate and even, in a sense, necessary.

Let us first remember who is affected by Purgatory.

It is not a question of those who die in a state of mortal sin: we saw this morning that those who have the misfortune of dying in a state of mortal sin are immediately taken to Hell where they remain eternally deprived of the beatific vision.

Nor is it a question of all those who die in a state of grace, but only of those who, although they die in divine friendship, are "imperfectly purified," and have not yet "repaired their faults by fruits worthy of their repentance." They are not yet ready to enter Heaven. This would neither befit the holiness nor the justice of God.

Indeed, God is holy and nothing impure can appear before him. In this sense, Our Lord declares: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” Now, it can happen that the charity of a soul, although true, remains mixed with other attachments. In this case, she is not pure enough to see God.

Therefore, for certain souls in a state of grace, there remain obstacles that Purgatory must remove. There are three of them:

1. unregretted venial sins;
2. the remains of sin;
3. the obligation to the temporal penalty due for all sin.

Venial sins not regretted

Unlike mortal sin, venial sin does not turn us away from God. Nevertheless, it remains a sin, an offense against God, because it is despite everything a disordered and voluntary attachment to creatures.

The residue of sin

Sin, whether mortal or venial, once regretted and forgiven, leaves traces in our soul, like bad folds, or fragilities of the soul in relation to sin. These are the residue of sin, a sort of disordered inclination towards creatures, certainly diminished and not voluntary, but which remains present in the soul of the former sinner, disappears only gradually through spiritual combat, and is not compatible with the holiness of God.

The obligation to the temporal penalty due for every sin

Finally, even if he is forgiven as to the fault, he who has committed a sin, mortal or venial, must still undergo in justice a reparative punishment, which is called temporal punishment, to

repair the disorder caused by his sin. Here is an image to clearly understand this important distinction between fault and punishment: a child, not respecting the ban on playing in the living room, through clumsiness breaks the beautiful porcelain vase which sat on the fireplace. When his mother returns, he already regrets his action, he especially regrets not having obeyed his mother who had formally forbidden him to play in the living room. He bursts into tears and asks for forgiveness. Forgiveness is quickly granted, but the vase remains broken. Thus, the fault is remitted but, however, the disorder caused by the sin remains, at least partially. Reparation must be made in justice, through a penalty. If he were an adult, it would be fair for him to buy an identical vase, or at least offer an equivalent sum of money. Since he is just a child, his mother will ask him to at least clean up his mess, or give him a fair punishment.

There is therefore a temporal punishment due to sin. We are called, already on earth, to fulfill this through acts of love, prayer, sacrifices, which voluntarily repair the disorder caused by our sins. Let us also not forget the penance given by the priest in confession, the objective of which is precisely to begin this reparation. But he who has not loved and repaired sufficiently in this life will have to pay this penalty after death, through the fire of Purgatory.

The state of souls in Purgatory

We have seen who is affected by Purgatory and why. Let us now see how this purification is accomplished.

The main punishment of Purgatory

The soul that is in Purgatory is absolutely certain of its Salvation. It is therefore filled with great joy. But this coexists with intense suffering, which it would be wrong to want to minimize. Indeed, in Purgatory the soul is deprived by its own fault of the beatific vision that it could and should have. Thus, the main punishment of Purgatory is to endure the delay, the wait for Heaven through one's fault. Here below, we do not have the beatific vision and, let's face it, this is not generally a source of intense and continuous suffering. In Purgatory, however, the soul finds itself in a situation where all earthly goods are radically taken away from it, where God is the only good, and it finds itself, if not deprived, at least distanced from it, through its own fault. .

The pain of the senses

To this penalty of delaying the beatific vision, which is the main one, is added a penalty of sense, inflicted by the fire of Purgatory, which consumes the residue of sin. The nature of this fire remains mysterious, but according to the common and traditional position of theologians, it is not a simple metaphor, but a physical reality. The fire of Purgatory is a material reality which retains, as in a place and for a time, the souls found there.

Time in Purgatory

Since there is a delay, a period imposed before the beatific vision, proportionate to the degree of disordered attachment to creatures which the person had at the time of his death, there must be a certain time in Purgatory, a certain duration. It is certainly not a question of the continuous time that we experience here below, but rather of a discontinuous time formed by the succession of thoughts. Each moment of Purgatory can correspond to ten, twenty or thirty hours of our earthly duration. To imagine this, let us think of these stories of saints who on earth could already remain for several hours in ecstasy, absorbed by one and the same thought, without seeing earthly time pass, and who when emerging from ecstasy thought they

had not prayed for more than a moment.

The effect of the punishment of Purgatory

Most theologians believe that venial sins not regretted at the time of death are regretted – and, therefore, forgiven – at the particular judgment, that is to say at the moment of entry into Purgatory.

The residue of sin, for its part, only disappears gradually and, likewise, the penalty due to sin is gradually discharged. However, it would be misleading to conceive of Purgatory as a path of progression or improvement in the literal sense. There is indeed an important difference between the atonement that we can accomplish on earth and that which is accomplished in Purgatory.

On earth, in fact, we can satisfy for our sins, that is to say, offer by our own will, freely, a satisfaction, a compensation, that is to say an act of love which compensates for our actions, the refusal of love: penances, fasting, works of mercy and charity... Thus on earth, not only does satisfaction allow us to pay the temporal penalty due to sin, but it merits an increase in charity, an increase in our holiness. In Purgatory, on the other hand, the punishment is not chosen – the soul would probably not have had the courage to impose it on itself. But the punishment is at least accepted and even offered. We no longer speak of satisfaction, but of “satispassion”, to emphasize the passive aspect of this expiation. Thus, there is no increase in charity in Purgatory.

What we can do for the souls in Purgatory

The final work of spiritual mercy is: “Pray to God for the living and for the dead.” We who are on earth can not only make satisfaction for ourselves, but we can also intercede for the departed. This is called suffrage for the souls in Purgatory. There is an essential act of charity here, which is recalled by the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “From the earliest times, the Church has honoured the memory of the deceased and offered suffrages in their favour, in particular the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, purified, they can reach the beatific vision of God. The Church also recommends alms, indulgences and works of penance in favour of the deceased.”

Through their suffrage and because of the bond of charity, the living can thus assume part of the pain of the souls in Purgatory.

This is already what happens with every good work. By virtue of the communion of saints, each good work of one of us benefits all. But we can also accomplish a good work with the intention of specially benefiting this or that person, this or that deceased.

Among the works useful to the souls in Purgatory, we must mention in a special way Mass offerings. The Eucharistic sacrifice is in fact the very source of the application of the merits and satisfactions of Our Lord in His Passion, and the best means of relieving and helping the souls in Purgatory.

Conclusion

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy.” By our good works here below, we satisfy for our sins, we make in a way “our Purgatory on earth”, but we can also relieve the sorrows of the souls of the faithful who are in Purgatory, especially those to whom we are

attached by ties of blood or affection. We thus participate in the Redemption, which is inseparably a work of God's justice and mercy.