

By
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The Forgotten Church

When people are asked who the head of the Catholic Church is, inevitably they're going to say the pope is the head of the Catholic Church. But that's only partially correct. The pope is the *visible* head of the Catholic Church on *earth*. The correct answer to give is that Jesus Christ is the head of the *whole* Catholic Church. The pope is only the head of part of the Church.

The Catholic Church exists on three planes: the Church Victorious (members in heaven), the Church Militant (members on earth), and the Church Suffering (members in purgatory). We all think about the Church Victorious, perhaps because that's our eventual goal. We can't help but think of the Church Militant, because that's the Catholic Church we're all members of. But hardly anyone thinks about the Church Suffering, and that's the Catholic Church I want to talk about in this installment—what I call the Forgotten Church.

Based on my experience in dealing with Catholics in their ongoing catechetical education, I've identified three primary reasons why most Catholics don't spend a lot of time thinking about purgatory. The first reason is, purgatory isn't a pleasant place, and none of us enjoy contemplating unpleasant things. It's our natural tendency to avoid all unpleasantness. I get that. We tend to think that if we don't think about purgatory, then we can actually avoid it altogether. The problem with that is, by neglecting thinking about purgatory could become eternally hazardous, as we'll observe in a moment.

The second reason why Catholics don't think much about purgatory is, they either don't know exactly what it is, or they don't believe in it. In either case, the reason for this is catechetical ignorance. That usually isn't the fault of the Catholic. After Vatican II, traitors who had infiltrated our chancery offices really dumbed down catechesis, which is the very biggest reason the Church is losing members. (No, it's not the homosexual scandal in the priesthood, because well-catechized Catholics would never leave the Church over that; they'd know better.) At least 90% of Catholics are wholly ignorant of the teachings of the Church, no matter how much they make proclamations to the contrary. So their problem with purgatory (and virtually everything else) can be easily remedied with good catechesis. Of course, they actually have to care first.

The third reason for not thinking about purgatory is the one that scares me. It seems that the majority of Catholics have bought into a Protestant heresy called "security to the believer". Essentially, this theological error is the belief that a Christian soul automatically goes to heaven when death occurs, simply because that person was a professed Christian. Unless a person is perfect at death, an automatic journey to heaven on the Celestial Express simply isn't going to happen. Unfortunately for Catholics who adhere to this error, they have, for all intents and pur-

poses, become Lutheran, because it was Martin Luther who first proclaimed there is no purgatory in 1517. That's a bit more difficult to deal with, as most people are a little obstinate about giving up their subjectively held-to heresies.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "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" (1030-1031).

Purgatory is a testimony to God's mercy and justice. Because He is infinitely merciful, as well as an infinitely just, purgatory is a necessity. If God were more merciful than just, He would be imperfect. He is perfectly merciful, but that mercy can be perfect only if it is balanced by His perfect justice.

Although purgatory is not explicitly mentioned by that name in the Bible, the concept of a place of purification is certainly implied. Jesus said, "I tell you, you will not get out till you have paid the very last penny" (Luke 12:59). Christ mentions the sin for which "there is no forgiveness, either in this world or in the world to come" (Matthew 12:32). This implies that venial sins can be forgiven in the next world. Where? Hell is eternal punishment. "Nothing unclean shall enter heaven" (Revelation 21:27), and even venial sin causes the soul to be unclean. The implication is clearly purgatory.

Paul tells us that at the day of judgment each man's work will be tried. This trial happens after death. What happens if a man's work fails the test? "He will be the loser; and yet he himself will be saved, though only as men are saved by passing through fire" (I Corinthians 3:15). Now this loss, this penalty, can't refer to consignment to hell, since no one is saved there; and heaven can't be meant, since there is no suffering ("fire") there. Purgatory alone explains this passage.

The Church has always believed in purgatory. The Bible mentions the need to pray for the dead: "It is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they might be loosed from their sins" (II Maccabees 12:46). There are also inscriptions of prayers for the dead in the catacombs, where Christians stayed largely hidden during the great Roman persecutions of the first three centuries. Finally, we have the writings of the early Christians such as Tertullian (160-240), Cyprian (200-258), Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386), Ambrose (340-397), John Chrysostom (344-407), and Augustine (354-430) to tell us about purgatory and the need to pray for the dead.

This is the reason ignoring purgatory may be eternally hazardous. If we don't get into the habit of praying for the repose of the souls who have died, how can we expect any prayers from the living for our own repose when we pass on into eternity?

Early into my conversion, I read an excellent book about purgatory that I think every Catholic should read. It's called, oddly enough, *Purgatory*. It was written by Fr. F. X. Schouppe, and it's available from TAN Books and on Amazon. The first half of this book uses anecdotes to show God's justice in purgatory, while the second half uses anecdotes to show His mercy. You can't read this book and come away without developing a devotion to the poor souls in purgatory. I know that's what happened to me! You really should consider getting this book so you can better know What We Believe... Why We Believe It.