

PURGATORY

Introduction

The idea of purgatory postulates that, because we are unlikely to have reached a state of perfection by the end of our earthly lives, we are not fit to see God face to face without some form of purification. Because of the way this idea has sometimes been presented, occasionally the death of a loved partner or friend will reawaken in a Roman Catholic brought up in a traditional - even old-fashioned - way many fears and anxieties.

“For too many people the word ‘purgatory’ simply conjures up a watered-down version of hell in which the predominant element is suffering and punishment, the pain of which is only mitigated by the fact that it will eventually come to an end. This is a terrible perversion of the [Roman Catholic] Church’s doctrine and one which owes more to pagan mythology than to the teaching of the Gospel.” This is how Sr Mary Cecily Boulding, OP, introduces the subject of purgatory in her contribution to the Catholic Truth Society’s series ‘In the Light of the Catechism’ (*Purgatory*, CTS Do641, 1995 - a most valuable little booklet on which this page is based).

Definition

“The actual doctrine of purgatory, as defined by the Church, is so brief and succinct that our human minds ...have dressed it up and filled all the gaps in our real knowledge with imaginative fantasies...” (Boulding, p.3).

Though the first definition (Council of Florence, 1439) asserted the fact of a state of ‘purgatory’ after death, the Latin word *purgatorium* did not imply a place. “It subsumed the idea ... of cleansing or purifying sufferings. The council also stated baldly that suffrages (Latin: *suffragium* - help), that is the prayers and good works of the living, could help the dead who were ‘in’ purgatory” (p. 4).

Over time, the more fantastic excesses of mediaeval imagery led the churches of the Reformation to reject the doctrine of purgatory and the Council of Trent (1563) to reiterate it in plain and simple terms. Vatican II repeated the essential doctrine also in a restrained and positive manner (*Constitution on the Church*, 49-50) and this is probably the most helpful definition for us today.

“When the Lord comes in his majesty and all the angels with him (cf. Matt. 25.31) death will be destroyed and all things will be subject to him (cf. I Cor. 15.26-27). Meanwhile some of his disciples are exiles on earth. Some have finished with this life and are being purified. Others are in glory ‘beholding clearly God himself, triune and one, as he is’ (Council of Florence). But in various ways and degrees we all partake in the same love for God and neighbour, and all sing the same hymn of glory to our God; for all who belong to Christ, having his Spirit, form one church and cleave together in him (cf. Eph. 4.16).”

In modern times

Between 1983 and 1987 the question of purgatory was discussed at length by the members of ARCIC II, during the dialogue leading to the *Agreed Statement on Salvation and the Church*. At that time the outcome was inconclusive, but the 1991 *Consensus Statement on Justification* achieved by the English Roman Catholic-Methodist Committee concludes that:

“Methodists and Roman Catholics are united in confessing that perfect holiness is necessary before a person can see God face to face (cf. Heb. 12.14). When a person has reached in this life a measure of holiness which falls short of perfection, then it is believed that this perfection is conferred in the transition from this life to eternal life. Granted such basic agreement some variety of attitudes and practices may be tolerated in a united Church.”

Many have tried to imagine an interim state after death during which the soul attains that perfection which it may not have achieved in life, and the *Consensus Statement* notes that while Methodists usually envisage a more or less instantaneous transformation (at the point of death), [Roman] Catholic imagination veers towards a long-drawn-out process that is somewhat, or very, painful (Boulding, p. 16).

The statement of the eminent theologian Vladimir Lossky sums up the Orthodox position which has considerable attraction - that, at the second coming of Christ, the whole created universe will enter into perfect union with God; such perfection will be realised, or made manifest, differently in each human person who has received the grace of the Holy Spirit in the Church. However the limits of the Church beyond death, and the possibilities of salvation for those who have not known the light in this life, remain for us a mystery of the divine mercy - a mercy on which we dare not count, but one to which we cannot place any limits (Boulding, pp.17-18).