

**PURGATORY: A BURNING ISSUE?**

by

JEROME O'BRIEN

submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of

MASTER OF THEOLOGY

in the subject of

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

at the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

SUPERVISOR: PROF. E. VAN NIEKERK

NOVEMBER 2007

### **SUMMARY**

The thesis explores the subject of purgatory and its relative value for modern people. It summarises:

1. The manner in which biblical texts used to underpin the doctrine;
2. The history of the doctrine within the Roman Catholic Church and the reaction to it during the Reformation and beyond; and
3. Contemporary formulations of purgatory and purgatory-like ideas.

The thesis argues, from several perspectives, that a modern formulation of the doctrine is:

1. Reasonable;
2. Biblically consistent;
3. Meets the criteria of an established Tradition at practice within the Church; and
4. Is capable of assisting people in understanding and appreciating the existential questions of death and the after life.

The thesis is approached from the angle of a Legal Counsel presenting an argument for acceptance of the thesis.

### **KEY TERMS**

Eschatology; purgatory; intermediate state; after life; sanctification; amelioration of sin; role of tradition; progress of the soul; soul; justification by faith; grace; theodicy; human suffering; universalism; *parousia*.

**CONTENTS PAGE**

CHAPTER	DESCRIPTION	PAGE NO
ONE	<b>Introduction: The Dispute, or Problem, Before the 'Court'</b>	1
	A Peculiar Issue	1
	Why a 'Burning Issue'?	3
	Terminology	5
	Eschatology	11
	The Potential of Purgatory	13
TWO	<b>Perspective (My Interest in the Case)</b>	15
	Methodology and Operative Assumptions	15
	The Manner in which I Approach the Argument	20
THREE	<b>The Bible</b>	25
	2 Maccabees	26
	Genesis 3:24	29
	Matthew 12: 31	30
	Matthew 5: 23	32
	1 Corinthians 3: 11 - 15	34
	Summary	38
FOUR	<b>The History of the Church</b>	40
	Introduction	40
	Early Origins	41
	St Augustine	45
	Gregory the Great	49
	Mortal and Venial Sins	53
	St Thomas Aquinas	57
	Subsequent Councils and Further Development	61
	The Reformation and Beyond	66
	The Counter Reformation	70
	Contemporary Roman Catholic Teaching	74
FIVE	<b>The Opinions of Expert Witnesses</b>	77
	Introduction	77
	Bernhard Bartmann	78
	Joseph Ratzinger	87
	Arthur James Mason	93
	Brian Hebblethwaite	101
	John Macquarrie	108
	Gerhard Sauter	111
	Jurgen Moltmann	116
SIX	<b>The Contribution (The Arguments 'For')</b>	123
	Introduction	123
	The Anthropological View	123
	The Theodical View	129
	The Universalist View	131
	The View of Tradition	132
	The Biblical View	135
	The View of the Doctrines of Justification and Sanctification	141
	The Pastoral View	148
SEVEN	<b>Conclusion (Summation)</b>	151
	<b>Bibliography</b>	156

# **PURGATORY: A BURNING ISSUE?**

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Introduction: The Dispute, or Problem, before the 'Court'**

**A statement of the present problems in the formulations of eschatology  
insofar as they relate to the Afterlife.**

### **1. A PECULIAR ISSUE**

Dust unto dust,  
To this all must;  
The tenant hath resign'd  
The faded form  
To waste and worm –  
Corruption claims her kind.

Through paths unknown  
Thy soul hath flown,  
To seek the realms of woe,  
Where fiery pain  
Shall purge the stain  
Of actions done below.

In that sad place,

By Mary's grace,  
Brief may thy dwelling be!  
Till prayers and alms,  
And holy psalms,  
Shall set the captive free.  
(Scott 2000: 373)

This is a peculiar poem. On the face of it, it seems straight forward and sets out a 'typical' understanding of purgatory as would have been current in the Middle Ages. In other words:

1. Purgatory is a place that the soul goes to after its body's death;
2. It is an unpleasant place of "fiery pain" with the purpose being to purge or purify the soul of all sin or "stain";
3. The residence of the soul in that place is finite to the completion of the purging;
4. The soul's visit there may be shortened or abbreviated by specific actions of the living (i.e. prayers, alms-giving and charity and worship), as well as, it seems, the specific intervention of the Virgin Mary.

Yes, just a typical presentation of the medieval understanding of purgatory.

The peculiarity of the poem, however, is that it is anything but typical. It was written by a thoroughly modern, urbane, Scottish Protestant author called Sir Walter Scott in the early 1800's. It is inserted into a romantic, fanciful tale of English life soon after the Norman invasion of Britain, and its most poignant themes are racial prejudice and anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, this somewhat

eclectic mix of ideas serves, for the purpose of this thesis, to underline the fact that the subject of purgatory is confusing and uncertain from a modern perspective.

What, on the face of it, was a fairly simple doctrine that aimed to understand the operation of the after life, became the focus of much antagonism within the Christian 'family'. Moreover, it was the Doctrine of Purgatory that arguably became the spark that ignited the Reformation cause. In spite of the protests, or perhaps, because of them, the doctrine was further articulated and enhanced in the Counter Reformation. The doctrine persists as part of the dogma of the Roman Catholic Church today. Admittedly, the modern formulation of the doctrine has been shorn of a great deal of its ugliness and has become more appealing to modern people. So much so, that the Protestant dislike of the doctrine, has mollified considerably into something approaching a love affair. Purgatory is a subject that is being increasingly taken up by the Protestant branch of the Church for various good reasons that I will set out hereunder, not the least of which is its reasonableness and versatility.

## **2. WHY A 'BURNING ISSUE'?**

Purgatory deals with the discussions, thoughts and understanding about what happens to the human soul after death. It is concerned about the after life. This subject is a 'burning issue' for the following reasons:

1. Purgatory has, for long periods of its existence, been associated with fires of purgation (or purification). For many centuries, particularly in the late Middle Ages, purgatory was imaged and depicted as a place where souls underwent torment and pain as part of the process of purging souls from sin and the effects of sin. Such purging was often pictured as taking place through the operation of fire. Such imaging was enhanced by a number of biblical images that seemed to confirm this.
2. Nevertheless, the title also implies that purgatory is a subject that may have relevance for people today. It is a subject that is not of 'academic value' alone. If viewed from certain angles, the doctrine of purgatory may have an impact upon today's faith perspectives. In considering the subject, it is possible to extract themes that speak about matters of relevance and of deep consequence. Any subject that is able to immediately address human need and the quest for understanding in faith is a 'burning issue'.
3. The heading is couched in the form of a question so as to indicate that both the subject matter and conclusions drawn are tentative.
4. The heading, in its brevity and simplicity, emphasises that area under consideration is a single one with a narrow focus. Although a number of theological concerns will be addressed and touched upon, the area under consideration remains focussed upon purgatory: where it has come from; its history; the understanding that others have given to it; and its relevance to modern people.

### **3. TERMINOLOGY**

#### **3.1. The word 'purgatory'**

Perhaps a handful of small detours at the outset will ultimately be helpful on the journey we are taking. The first detour concerns the use of the word 'purgatory' throughout this thesis. As this thesis will show, there is little historical consensus as to the appellation, nor of the way in which the ideas that make up the word ought to be described. It is for this reason that much of the language about purgatory is vague and uncertain. There are some theologians who avoid using the word 'purgatory' precisely because of it being associated with certain historically recorded excesses, and the negative and fearful images associated with the word. It is not uncommon, even today, to discover that the mention of the word, "purgatory", has the effect of conjuring up mental images of demon-tormented souls, being treated in a manner of excess acceptable only to the imagined standards of hell! Other theologians are satisfied to make use of the word 'purgatory', as it has an immediate connection with the subject of the 'after world'. Moreover, there is sufficient understanding amongst theologians speaking about the subject to identify it, as what can be described as the 'in-between place' i.e. the place or time between death and resurrection.

For the purposes of this thesis, I shall, wherever appropriate, use the word 'purgatory' in dealing with this subject. I will use the word without a capital



letter so as to emphasize that the thesis here is a form of exploration of the subject, without intending to arrive at too many fixed ideas or conclusions. The absence of a capital letter to the word, also underlines my thesis that purgatory is not to be regarded as a place, but rather as a process. Ultimately, however, the value that is attached to this word is a matter for the readers ('the Court') to decide upon, after having heard the evidence.

### **3.2. The descriptions of purgatory**

The second detour involves the manner of describing purgatory. Many of the witnesses you will hear from in this case, make use of other nouns or expressions to identify purgatory. They do this, in part, to disassociate purgatory from the hard images of cruelty, even savagery, that came to be regularly associated with it. The other reason that synonyms are often employed to identify purgatory, is to provide a fresher image and set of models that appeal more to modern sensibilities. In other words, although the elements or contents of the package have remained unaltered, the packaging has changed.

This raises the problem of the images that are associated with the word purgatory. The most common use to which the word applies (assuming, of course, that people do make any association with the word which, in my opinion, they do), is with the Roman Catholic doctrine of that name. Thereafter, it is likely that any images that people generally possess about purgatory will turn to the picturesque and grotesque imagery portrayed by

Dante's 'Inferno'. This depicts purgatory as a realm, a location, of great pain and suffering; a place characterised by heat and fire; a venue of delay for the soul before it is admitted to heaven once purified, or purged, of all the stain of sin.

If matters were left in this state of relative ignorance, there would only be the problem of informing people about purgatory and of what the doctrine seeks to do. Regrettably, there is more than just general misunderstanding when it comes to the word. It is described by the Roman Catholic Church as one of its doctrines, but it is a doctrine that is not subscribed to by the non-Roman Catholic Christian world. Worse still, it is a doctrine that was, at best, disregarded as nonsensical by many within the non-Roman Catholic Christian world, and anathematised by others within it. The mere mention of the word is something that immediately placed Christians into distinct, and generally opposing, camps.

Yet, if the specific word 'purgatory' is avoided in a discussion concerning the possibility of life beyond death; if the word is omitted as people engage in discussion over the possibility of a 'continued process' of cleansing and purification that may take place beyond death in order that the soul might be better suited for the purity and holiness of Heaven, then one would be likely to find general and substantial agreement. Even if one were to use words like 'expiation of sins', there is likely to be no great obstacle to the idea in principle and an admission, even, that such concepts may be reasonable and appropriate. Yet, there is little difference in the concepts behind words such

as expiation, purification, post-death sanctification and the like, than there is behind the word 'purging' in relation to the healing and cleansing of souls. Such, however, is the power of words to express ideas, patterns of thought and cultural images that serve to divide rather than unify. Mason puts it well when he says,

"If the connotation of the word 'purgatory' could be got rid of, few would object to the name. It is in itself a very good name. If we could only blot out the history of the ages between and get back to St Austin's 'perhaps', and 'it may be true', and 'we may find or may not find', all would be well enough." (Mason 1901: 101).

Research makes it clear that there is a huge weight of cultural 'baggage' or connotation associated with the word. Moreover, because of the uncertainty of the word and the images that people hold in relation to purgatory, decisions must be made at the outset as to what words to use in this thesis when describing purgatory. Accordingly, for the sake of ease of reference, I will simply refer to purgatory as a 'place', being conscious of the fact that it is no more or less a place than is heaven and certainly has no known geographical locale. Where appropriate, I will also refer to purgatory as a 'process'. Ultimately, it is my hope that I will be able to demonstrate that it is reasonable to regard purgatory as a process i.e. a course, a developmental sequence with an end in mind. For what the word seeks to do is to describe an idea, a series of thoughts, even, that speak of a process and a motion of the soul that is of great concern to all (or ought to be).

It is my opinion that the word 'purgatory' has sufficient currency throughout the theological spectrum to be immediately associated with the subject of eschatology and the concerns of the afterlife. Although the word may be divisive to some, it also has the capacity to unite. There is much theological thinking behind the word, as it were, in which people will find agreement, rather than disagreement, as my thesis seeks to demonstrate.

The work of Boulding is a case in point on the subject of this detour. Whilst willing to identify purgatory as a venue of purification, she seeks to move away from the images that were associated with this process in history, particularly the images of fire, pain and suffering. Boulding argues that these images only serve (naturally) to enhance the image of purgatory as a painful place in the sense of cruelty and punishment, akin to torment rather than preparation. The images that she would rather 're-image' purgatory with, are images like 'washing' (especially with its association with baptism), alternatively (or conjunctively) a 'process of maturation', a moving from immaturity to completeness. A further image that Boulding seeks to employ here is that of 'healing'.

"Healing the sinner of the damaging consequences of his (*sic*) sin would seem to be a prerequisite, or rather an actual part, of the process of growth towards maturity." (Boulding 1995: 107)

### **3.3. The 'soul' and 'heaven'**

The final detour takes in the words 'soul' and 'heaven'. I am conscious that there is no consensus as to the meanings of these words and the images that they seek to identify. In any discussion on the subject of purgatory, however, these two words will, of necessity, appear again and again. Purgatory is, after all, the process whereby the human soul is purged of sin and made ready for heaven. Accordingly, some account or recognition ought to be given to these words at the outset.

I point out that it is beyond the scope of this thesis to attempt a definitive definition of these terms, even if that were possible. Furthermore, I deny that the absence of a precise definition of these terms will negate or nullify the points I seek to make herein. It is sufficient that a general, unsophisticated understanding be given to these words and that we move on to the substantive issues to which they relate. Accordingly, for the purposes of this thesis, 'soul' is intended to be understood as the spiritual or incorporeal part of the human being that inhabits the human body. The 'soul' is the essence of being which survives death. 'Heaven' is meant to be understood in broad and general terms, without seeking to limit it to any one particular feature. For the purposes herein, it is as well to describe (rather than define) heaven as paradise, the image of God, the reward, the house with many rooms, the place where God is. However expressed, it is herein understood as the destination of the soul and its final abiding place.

#### **4. ESCHATOLOGY**

The subject of purgatory falls into the branch of Systematic Theology called Eschatology. Traditionally, the subject of Eschatology sought to identify and explain the 'Last Things' i.e. the events of the parousia, the Second Coming of Christ. This aspect of theology tended to be descriptive and speculative. The works of theologians such as Weiss, Schweitzer, Dodd, Bultmann and particularly that of Moltmann, however, have altered this perception irrevocably. By defining Eschatology in terms of human destiny, it has become a subject that, in my experience and understanding, people are deeply concerned about. One's view of the nature of God and one's belief in human destiny, has a profound effect on one's present thinking and behaviour. The works of Jurgen Moltmann are vital in the Christian understanding of hope and this has points of universal application. In particular, Moltmann articulates that, what humans perceive as their hope in the afterlife, will determine the way in which they conduct themselves and live in the present.

As an example of this, although there are many, there is my anecdotal evidence of a profound experience I had as the Chaplain of a High School. Extracting any response from British adolescents in a high school setting, particularly when there are over two hundred of them gathered together in an attitude of indifference, is verging on the impossible. Nevertheless, in persevering and in attempting to engage with them, I asked the question, "What do you think happens to you when you die?". The response was

instantaneous and astounding. As one body, boys and girls alike, they all raised their hands and remonstrated with me their need to explain their views. Everyone held an opinion, everyone was engaged, all teenage taciturn abandoned, such was the significance and importance of the question to them.

No doubt, given time, I would have been treated to a vast array of differing answers, for there are, indeed, many ideas and theories that seek to answer that question. The Christian answer and interpretation of the fact of death, however, also offers a number of viewpoints. It would be neat and easy to posit that the human being is possessed of a soul and, upon the instance of death, that soul goes to heaven. But that is the opening of Pandora's Box - it unleashes a vast array of further questions: What are the characteristics of heaven? How do we know? If heaven is the presence of the purity and holiness of God, how does a human enter into heaven? If one can only enter in by being morally pure and holy (which would seem reasonable), how can humans enter into such a state of 'perfection' so as to gain access to heaven? If one enters into a 'perfect' state upon the profession of forgiveness of sins and faith in Jesus Christ, what about the wrong people do after such professions of faith? What about the consequences of the wrongs they have committed prior to and after such profession? Does the human become morally perfect upon death? Does this not fly in the face of human existence as being one of (often slow) progression, rather than instantaneous transformation? What about the Roman Catholic distinction of sin into that which is venial and that which is mortal? Is there any hope for the latter? On

that note, is there any hope for those who have never even heard of Jesus Christ (or even Christianity for that matter)? And what of those whose lives have been cut short, well off the mark of their making any such choice? If God is a God of love, and if this love was magnificently demonstrated upon the cross of Calvary, is this love exclusively limited and restricted to those who have made professions of faith in God?

This line of questioning reveals, not just uncertainties, but also deep tensions. These tensions seem, on the face of things, hard to resolve: instant perfection versus moral progression; particularistic heaven versus a universalistic one; eternal forgiveness versus gradual purgation. How are these tensions and to be overcome, resolved or understood?

## **5. The Potential of Purgatory**

Many of the questions and tensions exposed in the previous section have the effect of creating contradictions. For instance, the arguments for a Particularistic Heaven (that only those souls who have met certain conditions may enter in) and a Universalistic Heaven (that all souls will eventually 'find' heaven) would appear to be based upon entirely different philosophies. The effect of this is to arouse a sense of unsuitability in respect of the topic of the afterlife, an unsuitability that is unsatisfactory for modern people. Furthermore, it results in people being left with having to choose between alternatives.



To people faced with these difficulties, the modern notion of purgatory is able to offer much comfort and assistance. In particular:

1. It is able to resolve many of the tensions and difficulties set out above, with reasonable cogency, as well as to provide a satisfactory answer to many of the questions raised;
2. It is able to provide a different perspective of the afterlife that has the potential of appealing to modern humans and assisting them in times of great existential need;
3. It is not a current idea, but has a long vintage as a doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. As such, it is something that can be taken seriously as well as be beneficial to present needs.
4. Although it has, arguably, only a small measure of biblical support, it clearly falls within the ambit of Christian theology regarding the questions of the afterlife and, as we shall see, does not contradict or denigrate other biblical understanding or teaching;
5. Not only is it possessed of longevity in the thinking of the Church, it is also finding support and a growing profile amongst many contemporary theologians across the theological spectrum;
6. Perhaps its greatest recommendation is that it explains life, and the after life, as a process.

These 'claims' will be more fully explored in the remainder of this document.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **PERSPECTIVE (MY INTEREST IN THE CASE)**

**A brief motivation for the case for Purgatory and the approach followed.**

#### **Methodology and Operative Presumptions**

My interest in the subject of purgatory does not arise from nowhere. I was born into a devout Roman Catholic family and was immersed into all the culture, traditions and theology of the Roman Catholic Church. As I have journeyed in life and sought to understand and articulate my faith, my journey has brought me into full-time ministry as the minister of a large church within the Presbyterian tradition of the Church of Scotland. Through this journey, I have become convinced that concern for human destiny is a deep concern for all humans everywhere and at every time.

It must be taken as an assumed fact that there are numerous ways within the Christian community as to the manner in which the Bible is read and understood, as well as how the Christian faith is to be expressed and explained. This being true, it is important that I make clear from the outset the presumptions within which I operate in considering the subject of purgatory. In particular:

1. In my world view, time is linear and that all things move towards a conclusion destined by God. Such a view of the passage of time is one that is generally accepted as given in the Western world. This view:

“sees time as moving irreversibly in a certain direction towards a fulfilment or ‘end’ of some sort. It is called the ‘linear’ concept because time is pictured as moving in a straight line.” (Olivier 1991: 11).

Not only is time linear, but so is life in the sense that humans are progressive and developmental.

“... there is that about us which continues consequentially through the process of time, ..., that even though death may be regarded as an intrusion and perhaps even as a punishment, it is also necessary as a means to life.” (Bowker 1991: 211)

2. There is the assumption, deriving from my Protestant faith, to seek to recognise the plain and ordinary meaning of the Bible. This obliges me not to ‘fit’ the words of the Bible into predetermined concepts. This allows the Bible to speak for itself as much this can be achieved, whilst taking into account the limitations of such an approach.
3. My reading of the Bible informs me that the end of time is predicated upon the event described as the *parousia*. This is the event towards which all of time moves. The *parousia* is broadly understood as the return of Christ

and all of the events and consequences that flow from this. These events and consequences include the resurrection, the judgement and realisation or fulfilment of the kingdom of God. These events are described in the Bible and they serve to direct the reader's attention to God's promises and what these promises point to.

“The Judeo-Christian belief in historic progression is largely due to the understanding of history as salvation history. The God of Israel is not a God of the past but the future.” (Olivier 1991: 18).

The Bible regards these promises as having been made by God through Jesus Christ and these promises concern human destiny. Further, these promises are reliable and trustworthy because the One who made the promises is reliable and trustworthy.

“My yes means yes because Jesus Christ, the Son of God, never wavers between yes and no. He is the one whom Timothy, Silas and I preached to you, and he is the divine Yes – God's affirmation. For all of God's promises have been fulfilled in him.” (2 Corinthians 1: 18 – 20).

As the promises and prophecies regarding the Messiah were met in the person and life of Jesus, so it is reasonable to have confidence that the promises that Christ made of the future will attain a form of fulfilment. If this is accepted in faith as true, human hope becomes inspired and invigorated by the promises.

4. A feature of linear time infused with the promises made by God in Christ, is that there is a presumption in favour of the continuation of life and its development beyond the grave; further, that this is a reasonable belief.
5. There is a presumption in favour of the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. This is understood as a function and feature of the *parousia*. It is a belief shown to be held by Jesus in his disputes with the Sadducees. In other words, there is a form of life that proceeds past death and its form is expressed as the soul.
6. This continuation of life is specific to each individual. There is the rejection of the concept that human destiny amounts to being simply a retention of the human ego in the 'memory' of God, or as part of the great 'matrix' of the universe (Ruether 1993) or that individual lives are taken up into the process of God. Such concepts are unfulfilling, limiting and not justified by the Bible.
7. As stated above, I was raised in a Roman Catholic home. My experience of the Roman Catholic Church tended to be of a conservative bent and incorporated the traditional teachings of that denomination. This included purgatory as a place where sins were atoned for - a none-too pleasant place, and one where the souls within that could be affected by prayer. This background needs to be recognised and accommodated within my thinking. At the very least, it must be acknowledged from the outset, that I

am not predisposed to reject the concept out of hand. At the same time, I must balance this by the fact that I am a part of the Protestant community with its strong emphasis upon the significance of the Bible when it comes to matters of faith. Part of this latter tradition contains the historical fact that the Protestant movement was hostile towards the notion of purgatory.

8. I possess an experiential Christianity that believes that the Holy Spirit is 'moving' and is at work in the world; that the Spirit is operative amongst people and that the Spirit manifests itself in the world today.
9. There is a presumption in favour of common sense and reasonable argument. This seeks to balance conflicting positions and render them harmonious from an intellectual point of view; or to hold them in a reasonable tension.
10. My role as a Minister of the Church of Scotland serving a parish within the Scottish Central Belt, requires me to provide a foundation for pastoral intervention in human lives so as to render life meaningful. Hope and encouragement are my preferred 'tools' in meeting human need. In this regard, it is assumed that the subject of purgatory is not merely a cerebral issue, but one that can affect humans here and now. As the following quotes confirm:

"What Christians believe about the last things may be first in terms of their influence upon their behaviour in the world." (Sauter 1999: 139).

Also, as per Moltmann:

“Christianity is eschatological, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionising and transforming the present.” (Moltmann 1967: 30).

The practical rendering of Eschatology, and particularly purgatory, enable humans to see their present lives from a different, positive and wholesome perspective.

### **The manner in which I am approaching the argument**

In a number of places above, I have made reference to ‘courts’, ‘evidence’, ‘witnesses’ and the like. This now requires an explanation. The purpose of this thesis is to set out a cogent argument, or rationale, that is consistent and holds together. The objective of this approach is that, at the very least, it can be said of the thesis, “There is a good argument for the conclusions that are drawn.”

Accordingly, in my approach, I make use of my training and experience as an Attorney and an Advocate in presenting an argument for the case. Careful regard will be given to the evidence and a proper presentation made of the same. There is recognition that the ultimate decision of the case does not lie with me. If the facts point towards a certain direction, there is every reason to

accept the case will be valid. Contained within this, is the acknowledgement that even the best judicial system can never be fully objective, but that there will always be a measure of subjectivity. So it is with matters of faith. In other words, whatever finding is made on the evidence given, such finding will be regarded as provisional whilst other points and arguments are made and explored.

By this approach, I mean to make a sound argument for belief in purgatory.

There are three parts to this approach:

1. The motivation is found in the numerous problems, difficulties and logical issues that arise from the theological thinking that surrounds issues that encompass life after death and human destiny. This represents the 'legal issue' at stake. The core of these problems and difficulties has been set out above.
2. To overcome, or integrate, these problems, there are numerous strands of theology, history and logic that can be brought to bear. These represent the 'evidence'. These items of evidence are both for and against the issue I am concerned about. Every good Advocate knows that, in presenting a case before a judicial authority, you must present both sides of the argument, including those facts that don't 'fit' well into your case. This is done because, at the end of the day, it is the judicial authority that makes the decision and the said authority requires that all the relevant facts be placed before it. A good Advocate, however, will be able to present the



evidence in such a way as to seek to draw the Judge's attention to those factors that are compelling in the Advocate's argument.

There are three broad avenues of 'evidence' that I intend to place before the Court:

- a) The first is a consideration of the biblical evidence. This is not to suggest that the Bible offers a source of evidence in favour of a doctrine or otherwise. What is intended here is to review the manner in which biblical texts have been utilised and interpreted in the past, either to support or to refute the doctrine of purgatory. In addition, an attempt will be made to assess the relative worth of such interpretations.
- b) The second avenue is that of 'precedent'. Every Advocate is aware that seldom, if ever, is a particular case unique and without precedent. Minds have been applied to the subject in the past and it is imperative that their considerations on the topic be brought before the Court. Considerations pertaining to purgatory have a long line of precedent. It is imperative to explore these. To this end, there, a fairly extensive summation of the history of purgatory will be introduced and weighed in the balance.
- c) Expert witnesses. Witnesses are invaluable to enable the Court to consider the relative worth of the evidence being presented. 'Expert'

witnesses are distinguished from 'ordinary' witnesses: the latter represents people who have had an experience of one event or another and who hold an opinion as to what it may mean; the former represents people who have studied and examined the issue in great depth and whose views have been recognised as important by their peers. Even though expert witnesses may express their views as opinion, their views are generally regarded as being evidentially superior. In this case, the views of the high school students referred to above are those of ordinary witnesses, whilst the theologians I will introduce below, are expert witnesses. I intend to produce a number of such expert witnesses, from a fairly broad theological spectrum, for the Court to consider.

3. Finally, there is the conclusion of the argument, a 'summation', coupled with an appeal for the court to decide in favour of the way in which the evidence leads. It pulls the strands of the evidence together to answer the issues raised.

An Advocate is also concerned to represent his or her client's best interests. This is not to suggest a 'win at all costs' approach i.e. what is presented must NOT be accepted as incontrovertible. Nor does it mean that evidence is somehow 'tailored' to suit the exigencies of the argument. I find this to be a helpful device in the presentation of this thesis. I make it clear from the outset that I am in favour of a position that accepts a reality of purgatory i.e. I am representing its interests to the 'Court of Public Appeal'. There is honesty in

this approach because it declares one's operative presumptions right from the outset. It avoids the pretence of presenting information to see where it leads and, miraculously, discovering that it somehow led to the conclusions that were inwardly held in the first place! The evidence is not crafted or contrived, but arguments 'for' are highlighted, and arguments against are honestly recognised, contextualised and ameliorated into the argument as a whole. The conclusion ought to be that, at the least, there is a good argument, given the evidence and the approach.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE BIBLE

The notion of purgatory has not developed independently from the Bible. Throughout the history of purgatory, reference has been made to a number of selected texts which many supporters of purgatory have made reference to in order to buttress it. These references are widely scattered throughout the Bible and are few. As these references have been held up to support a doctrine, it seems only fair that they should be examined in some detail and an opinion formed as to their putative value *vis-à-vis* an understanding of purgatory. Unless otherwise stated, all the quotations of these selected texts are quoted from the New Living Translation of the Bible and are designated by the initials 'NLT'. Further, as the references are few in number, I have taken the liberty of quoting them in full.

Consistent with the approach that I have embarked upon, and in terms of my faith and that upon which it stands, I make reference to the Bible from the outset. I seek to locate words from which the considerations concerning purgatory have been commonly formulated. This involves drawing out such biblical references as there are and giving them the meaning ascribed to them. Also consistent with this approach, is an attempt to make sense of these references by regarding the words in their plain and ordinary meaning, whilst understanding of the context within which they are used.

The texts to be considered in this regard are as follows:

**2 Maccabees 12: 40 – 46**

The ‘apocryphal’ book of Maccabees, is accepted by the Roman Catholic Church tradition as part of the canon of Scripture, but rejected by the Protestant strand of the Church. 2 Maccabees 12: 40 – 46 speaks of the collecting of money for sacrifice to be offered to those who died in battle.

“And they found under the coats of the slain some of the donaries of the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbiddeth the Jews: then they all blessed the just judgement of the Lord, who had discovered the things that were hidden. And so, betaking themselves to prayers, they besought him, that the sin which had been committed might be forgotten. But the most valiant Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves from sin, forasmuch as they saw before their eyes what had happened, because of the sins of those that were slain. And making a gathering, he gave 12000 drachmas of silver to Jerusalem for sacrifice to be offered for the sins of the dead, thinking well and religiously concerning the resurrection, (for if he had not hoped that they that were slain should rise again, it would have seemed superfluous and vain to pray for the dead) and because he considered that they who had fallen asleep with godliness, had great grace laid up for them. It is therefore a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins.”

The first difficulty that this quotation has is that the book from which it derives is in dispute. Although accepted as part of the canon of the Roman Catholic Church, it is not found within the canon of the 'Protestant' Bible. There are numerous reasons for this, but this is beyond the scope of this document. Suffice to say, the putative worth of the Maccabees text is diluted by its disputed place within the Canon of Christian texts.

The second difficulty is that the quotation is merely indicative of certain aspects of the doctrine of purgatory and does not cover many aspects of the same. For instance, no comment is made as to the process which the souls of the dead undergo in purgatory i.e. the process of the purgation of the souls of 'residual' sin and its purification for the continued journey towards heaven. Further, no mention is made of such a place as purgatory as a specific realm.

What the text does underline, however, is the practice of praying for the dead which is regarded as a natural process, widely followed. This in itself implies that the practice was a venerable one, widely accepted before the time of Judas Maccabeus. Further, there lies within this practice the expectation and belief that the souls of the dead may undergo a type of alteration which is a beneficial and an improving one. This implies that the soul is capable of being purified, or made ready, for the next stage of its journey. The souls of the soldiers who died are understood to benefit from the offering that their sin of relying upon 'foreign' gods would be expiated. Finally, there is the

expectation, too, that the prayers, as well as, the actions of the living, were believed to have a profound and beneficial effect upon the souls of the dead.

It is interesting to observe, at this stage, that the practice of prayer for the dead was one that was continued, apparently seamlessly, into the liturgy and practice of the early Church. Prayer for the dead, and specifically their journey into the next world, forms part of the earliest traditions of the Church, namely, the monuments to the dead in the catacombs and the remembering of the dead (even their inclusion) in the prayers and lives of the living. Such prayers are understood and interpreted to have some measure of efficacy for the departed.

It is of further interest in observing that even in the current tradition of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa, there is a prayer in the liturgy for funerals that contains this expression.

“We bless you for all that Jesus has done for (Name of the deceased) for whom we have asked safe journeying and a glad arrival” (Manual of Law and Procedure Pg 146.09E).

Again, there is the deliberate understanding that the soul of the deceased is engaged upon a form of journey. It recognises that the destination remains heaven, but that the soul ought to be in some manner or form prepared for this journey and readied for the encounter with God.

**Genesis 3:24:**

“After banishing them from the garden, the Lord God stationed mighty angelic beings to the east of Eden. And a flaming sword flashed back and forth guarding the way to the tree of life”. (NLT: 12).

The ordinary reading of this extraordinary scene would seem to state that the way back to the tree of life has been permanently removed or sealed off and that this is (another) consequence of the fall of humanity from God. The early Church Fathers sought to remove this verse from its context in order to render it as an apocalyptic vision depicting the end times and the judgement of humanity. From this perspective, the earliest depictions and translations of this scene had angelic beings (cherubim) themselves standing in a river of fire so that, in order for the souls to cross to the tree of life, they must of necessity pass through this fiery river. The tree of life becomes representational of the destiny of the soul (heaven) and the angel is often translated into Jesus himself.

So we have Origen, who is attributed with the initiating of this depiction, stating:

“The Lord Jesus will stand in the river of fire beside the flaming sword. Whoever departed this life wishing to pass (*transire*) into paradise and has need of purification he baptises in the river and causes him to reach the place of his desire; but anyone who does not bear the seal of



preceding baptisms (that is the baptism of John and the baptism of Christ), he will not baptise in the bath of fire.” (Lanne 24).

The effect of decontextualising the text is a clear example of the wayward and extreme versions of interpretation that are likely to result. The text, where it belongs, is complex and difficult enough, but to remove it from its location and attach the apocalyptic plot to it is bizarre. There is little that can be said of this text that assists in our enquiry about the purgatory. In its peculiar apocalyptic context, it depicts the sense of transition from death to a new life, but which transition involves a purification (the fire). Fire was often regarded as an element of purifying or purging in order to render something clean and pure. Suffice to say, in this context, this verse was used as a ‘proof-text’ by the Early Church Fathers in support of their opinions.

### **Matthew 12: 31**

These verses are intended to highlight the expression of forgiveness in this world and *“in the world to come”*.

“Every sin or blasphemy can be forgiven – except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which can never be forgiven. Anyone who blasphemes against me, the Son of Man, can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit can never be forgiven, either in this world, or in the world to come”. (NLT: 1431).

There are a number of observations that need to be made in respect of this text:

1. Firstly, at an early stage, the Church Fathers pointed out that this verse suggested that forgiveness can operate beyond the grave.
2. Secondly, these words are spoken by Jesus and so ought to be given something of a high profile.
3. Thirdly, Jesus here is speaking in a direct manner, in the sense of teaching. He is not using parabolic language, so the words ought to be understood in their ordinary sense.

In consideration of the Early Church understanding of the extreme poles of the after life, namely heaven and hell, heaven was regarded as a place of purity and the souls that dwelled there were sinless and themselves pure. If this were not so, the very nature of God would need to be reconsidered. Also, in the world view of the early Church, hell was regarded as a state of separation from God where the soul was beyond the reach of forgiveness. In the circumstances of these extremes, the verses above must point to a state, beyond death, and before heaven, whereby forgiveness and preparation for heaven was still viable and able to operate.

**Matthew 5: 23**

In terms of this verse, in considering the notion of purgatory, emphasis is placed upon the jailed servant who was not to be released until “the last penny” should have been paid.

“So if you are standing before the altar in the Temple, offering a sacrifice to God, and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, leave your sacrifice there beside the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God. Come to terms quickly with your enemy before it is too late and you are dragged into court, handed over to an officer and thrown in jail. I assure you that you won’t be free again until you have paid the last penny.” (NLT: 1412)

In expressing his opinion as to the existence of a place of purification that exists beyond death, Tertullian used this particular text as his starting point. Tertullian sought to interpret this text as indicative of the world to come and so saw it in apocalyptic terms.

“Interpreting this text in terms of human destiny in the world to come was made easier by the fact that *phylakē*, the word for ‘prison’, was also one of the current terms for Hades.” (Ratzinger 223).

Accordingly, for Tertullian, this text held eschatological meaning. It was part of the journey of the soul from death to resurrection. The soul was in a form of imprisonment brought about by the sins that had not been accounted for or resolved in life. This 'in between place', however, was not the destiny of the soul. It was a place where it was possible for sins to be pardoned and purged from the soul so as to enable it to progress to the resurrection. The reference to "the last penny" was to state the need for complete purity for the soul to enable it to participate in the resurrected life.

Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) also made extensive use of this verse in order to state that penance and purification were possible in the life after death and this had the effect of rendering the soul pure. The context of his thesis in respect of this text arose out of a series of persecutions that the church was undergoing at this time, which will be explained more fully hereunder.

Again, it is pertinent to observe that these words are described as coming from Jesus and so ought to be considered carefully. Jesus' use of the expression, 'the last penny', would appear to be significant. It was an accepted fact (and still is) that debtors could enter into arrangements whereby their debts could be cleared over time, or that they could be partly cleared, so as to effect an early release from prison. By Jesus insisting upon a complete resolution of the debt, implies that Jesus was referring to something spiritual, rather than temporal. Unlike Matthew 12, Jesus' words here are formulated in the device of a parable which has a spiritual meaning and, often, different layers of meaning. The understanding attributed to these verses then, was

that the wrong that people commit has eternal ramifications. Such wrongs have the effect of placing humans in a position of constraint, and that even the smallest wrong must be atoned for before the constraints are all removed.

### **I Corinthians 3: 11 – 15**

These verses echo the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus speaks of houses built upon the 'rock' of human faith in God. These verses extend the analogy to the manner, or structure, of the houses so built. These structures shall be tested by fire and if any person's work is burnt, that person will suffer loss, "The builders themselves will be saved, but like someone escaping through a wall of flames". This text was regarded by the early Church, and largely by all proponents of the doctrine of purgatory, as the most important text to describe the reality and nature of purgatory.

"Because of God's special favour to me, I have laid the foundation like an expert builder. Now others are building on it. But whoever is building on this foundation must be very careful. For no-one can lay any other foundation than the one we already have - Jesus Christ. Now anyone who builds on that foundation may use gold, silver, jewels, wood, hay or straw. But there is going to be a time of testing at the judgement day to see what kind of work each builder has done. Everyone's work will be put through the fire to see whether or not it keeps its value. If the work survives the fire, that builder will receive a reward. But if the work is burned up, the builder will suffer great loss. The builders themselves

will be saved, but like someone escaping through a wall of flames.”  
(NLT: 1805).

The analogy here was interpreted to depict what humans have constructed in the building of their lives. The foundation refers to Jesus as the founder of the Christian faith. What humans build upon this foundation in the construction of their lives is either of value or not. ‘Value’ is understood here to mean that which is consistent with the principles of the kingdom of heaven. After death, each human soul will undergo a form of testing - that which is built that has no value in the commerce of God’s kingdom will be cleansed away as dross; that which has value will be refined by this cleansing process.

As far as an accurate or systematic depiction of purgatory is concerned, this quotation leaves much to be desired. The context in which the quote appears is that of the work that Paul and Apollos undertook to build up the church in Corinth. This verse can easily be attributed as having another, less ‘spiritual’ meaning: whomsoever was involved in the establishment of the Church, Paul states that the foundation, or start, of the Church was none other than Jesus Christ. The human agents who told the Corinthians about Jesus were simply that, agents acting on behalf of the principal, Jesus Christ. In principle, the Corinthian church was part of the Church of Jesus Christ and not of any other person. The text also observes that, in building upon that foundation, the ‘builders’ would have used various methods and techniques in order to communicate the elements of the faith. The value of this will be determined at the end of time, at the Judgement. If anything, Paul is speaking about the

qualitative value of the leadership interested in the building up of the church. In addition, the use of the word 'fire' is to employ the image of Judgement, with which fire was closely associated.

“As regards the text, exegetes comment that the fire spoken of here is the fire of the last judgement and is not concerned with the purification of the sins of the sinner after death.” (Lanne 1992: 22).

Divorced from its context, and employing a technique that looks to find a 'deeper meaning' in the Bible, it is possible to regard this text as pointing to the outlines of the doctrine of purgatory. This technique of looking for a deeper meaning in the biblical text was adopted by many of the Early Church Fathers and this served to 'fit' the text into the outlines of the doctrine. In particular:

1. The foundation was the belief and trust that the Christian had in Jesus Christ. On the whole, it was this belief, and the concomitant practices of faith, that rendered the human soul suitable for the kingdom of heaven.
2. Upon this belief, humans 'constructed' their lives. That which was of eternal and lasting value represented the 'gold, silver and jewels' which were those works and practices of value that drew the human towards God and, presumably, helped others to do so as well.

3. The works that were constructed of 'wood, hay or straw', were those works and practices of human life that had no eternal value. These tended to be equated to venial sins in terms the codification of sins into mortal and venial, as understood by the Roman Catholic Church.
4. All of these human works would be subject to a 'testing' or scrutiny. That which was of eternal value would last, that which was dross, would be burned up by the fire of judgement.
5. The concept of the fire was expanded over the course of time. It represented a process that took time whereby the valueless works were destroyed and the soul purified for heaven.

Whilst the interpretation of these verses is neat and there is an integrity about them, it is pertinent to reiterate, that this integrity only comes at the expense of the text being read out of its context and in the pursuit of a hidden, or deeper, meaning.

The most that can be said about the text in conjunction with the doctrine of purgatory, is that the works, efforts, undertakings, *et cetera* of humans during their lifetimes, have eternal and lasting significance. The choices made in the here and now, have consequences to ourselves, to those around us and to the world in general. At most, the text points to a general truth that the way we live our lives does matter and does have consequences. The encouragement then, is that we ought to make our life choices wisely and be in the business,



as it were, of constructing our lives in meaningful and authentic ways. Another 'truth' which this text points to is the Christian belief in the judgement that there will be a general accounting for the choices made in life and the manner in which we have conducted ourselves.

Whilst these thoughts may, or may not, be relevant and encouraging, that is really the work of homiletics, but it does not qualitatively advance the doctrine of purgatory.

### **Summary**

The interpretations that are offered to these verses as pointing to a doctrine of purgatory are, on their own, clearly inadequate for this purpose. These texts are limited in describing such a doctrine and, based upon a plain reading, are open to other, more reasonable interpretations. Furthermore, in order to extract a meaning from these texts that speak of purgatory, requires that the verses are read out of their natural context and have a particular interpretation placed on them.

Even modern Roman Catholic writers, such as Emmanuel Lanne accept that the references to purgatory in the Bible are vague, capable of other reasonable interpretations and do little to advance the shape of this doctrine. It is also clear that the manner in which such references as there are have been treated is largely unscientific. It amounts to excising the text from its context and seeking to interpret it in such a way as to make it fit into the

parameters of the doctrine. This is an unhelpful approach from the perspective of modern people.

Nevertheless, there are seams of value that do run through these verses. The practice of the prayer for the dead, which we shall examine a little further hereunder, suggests a continuity of being that exists *post mortem* and which practice is understood to benefit the dead as well as the living. The general principles of the accountability of the actions and works of life and the realisation of a perceptive judging of these actions and works after death, is also apparent. Again, this speaks of continuity and a process whereby change, even if it is a change in self-awareness or self-realisation, is effected. Accordingly, although none of the texts provide

“a conclusive demonstration of belief in purgatory. ... they do presuppose a cosmology and eschatology in which access to paradise comes at the end of a road which runs through earthly life but goes on after death through stages which Clement of Alexandria already saw as the action of a purifying fire in successive phases”. (Lanne 1992: 28).

It is admitted that, on its own, this strand of evidence of the interpretations offered from the Bible, is inadequate to establish anything like a doctrine of purgatory. But this strand is one of several, and we must now turn to examine another, and this is in the form of the Churches' history in connection with this subject.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

#### Introduction

The consideration of the afterlife, its form, content and justification, was not, initially, an issue as far as the new church was concerned. The earliest church operated within an understanding that the *parousia* was an imminent event and that life was to be lived in preparation and expectation of this. As time progressed, however, and the immediate expectation receded, the Church began to rationalise this 'delay', and so greater attention was given to the meaning of death and the afterlife in the context of the *parousia*.

Within this contemplation, the seeds of understanding of a doctrine of purgatory began to put out their roots in the minds of the Church Fathers. The blossoming of the doctrine, however, came about in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century. Specific reference will be made here to Augustine, and his affirmation and articulation of the doctrine. Thereafter is summarised the emergence of the practice of the sale of indulgences and the corruption associated with it. The reaction of the Protestant movement was, in part, based upon the argument that the doctrine of purgatory, along with all other doctrines, lacked biblical substance. As a consequence, the Reformers argued that such doctrines were to be abandoned as discredited.

Since the invective of the time of the Reformation and its consequences working themselves out through Western Europe, there has been a softening of attitudes towards this doctrine. The fact that the Roman Catholic Church continues to hold to the doctrine, together with revision amongst historians and theologians concerning the doctrine, has led to a point where modern presentation of purgatory is more widely accessible. This is particularly so with the excesses of the doctrine stripped away.

### **Early Origins**

**Clement of Alexandria** (c. 155 – c. 220) is regarded as the first of the Church Fathers to have introduced, or more likely articulated, the possibility that there may be some manner or form of discipline to which souls will be subject to in the afterlife. The nature of this discipline was not certain, but it was regarded as that which would be compensatory in the sense of ‘making up for’ that which was deficient in the soul at death i.e. unforgiven sin.

“Clement of Alexandria, ..., at the end of the second century, had made provision for the possibility of a ‘saving discipline’, a ‘discriminating fire’ which might purify, educate and sanctify the souls of those who were not beyond correction.” (Atwell 1987: 174).

It was Clement’s view that,

“the souls of sinners who die reconciled with God but without having had time to do penance are ‘sanctified’ by a ‘fire which is not a consuming fire (*to pamphagon*) like the fire of a forge, but an intelligent fire (*to phronomon*) which penetrates the soul traversed by it.” (Lanne 1992: 23).

**Origen** (c. 185 – 254) was in a broad agreement with this view and added that there was a need to render a distinction between the fires of hell and the fire that sanctified, or purified. He seeks support for this idea in the writings of the scriptures and, in particular, finds this in 1 Corinthians 3: 13 ff. Origen is also the first to make reference to the Genesis reading referred to above in support of his opinions. His reading of the Genesis text was followed by St Cyril of Jerusalem, the Cappadocians, Hillary and Ambrose.

**Tertullian** (d. 235) of Carthage was instrumental in setting the doctrine of purgatory on its way to acceptance within the Western Church. Tertullian was the first of the Church Fathers to make use of the text of Matthew 5: 23 – 26 in respect of ‘the last penny’. His eschatological interpretation of these verses was that the soul underwent a journey between death and resurrection. This journey necessitated a form of purging of all the stains of sin in order to render the soul able to participate in the resurrection. Tertullian spoke of the soul as being imprisoned until the requirements of purification had been fully effected.

**Cyprian of Carthage** (d. 258) was faced with a distinct pastoral problem concerning those who had, on the face of things, renounced their Christian

faith. Under a time of persecution, there were many people who professed themselves Christian, yet, when confronted with the need to either carry out the demands of the state religion or face the penalty of death for not doing so, chose the former route. In spite of this, they desired to remain as part of the church and sought a way of reconciliation. The solution to this pastoral concern was located by Cyprian in the verses of Matthew 5: 23 ff. They:

“offered Cyprian an occasion for thinking through a possible continuation of penance in the afterlife. Against the protesting voice of the rigorists, this enabled him to re-admit the weak to communion with the Church. Certainly they cannot, in their present condition, enter into definitive communion with Christ ... But they are capable of purification. The penitential way of purification exists not only in this world but in the world to come.” (Ratzinger 1988: 224).

Accordingly, Tertullian, Origen, Clement of Alexandria and Cyprian of Carthage were amongst the earliest of the Early Church theologians to articulate the idea that God may act to permit the further purification of the human soul after death. These statements are only, at this stage, expressed opinions. A carefully formulated doctrine has not yet been arrived at. Nevertheless, much of the groundwork is clearly apparent and the progress of the doctrine would appear to be secure.

Further, these opinions themselves do not come out of nowhere; they are expressions of the Jewish practice of the prayer for the dead, a practice taken on board by the Early Church.

A common theme in these ideas was the concept of fire as being in the nature of a cleansing instrument. It seems that the nature of this fire was a point of interest amongst theologians of the Early Church. This, in itself, indicates the measure of the acceptance that the concept of purgatory (if not its articulation) had, as well as the extent to which it held theological currency. The discussion about fire was

“continued in the works of many other Fathers, such as Lactantius, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and Ephrem the Syrian...” (Boulding 1995: 102).

The theme of fire was expressed in three ways:

1. A punitive fire which destroys;
2. an educative fire the purpose of which is to purify and to refine; and
3. “a probative fire which tests and reveals” (*Ibid*)

The point of the debate about the fire, is a deliberate act of seeking to understand the process by which the purification of the soul was effected. The

debate seeks to articulate the imagery that the Bible offers as to how the purification takes place. It seems that, even at this early stage in the life of the Church, there is acceptance of the idea of a process of purification in order to make the soul ready for heaven. There are no apparent dissenting voices of the reality of purgation, only debate about its form. Accordingly, there is no contest regarding the 'what' of purgatory, only the 'how'.

### **St Augustine (354 – 430)**

The most important work of the Early Church period pertaining to this subject, is the work of St Augustine and in particular, his 'Confessions'. These opinions in respect of the after life would have been current in the church during Augustine's lifetime and were well known to him.

Augustine's views on the afterlife in respect of purgatory, were not concisely formed and were speculative and tentative. There are two views of his that are relevant. The first is his written prayer on behalf of his mother soon after her death.

"And so, my Glory and my life, God of my heart, I will lay aside for a while all the good deeds that my mother did. For them I thank you, but now I pray to you for her sins. Hear me through your Son, who hung on the cross and now sits at your right hand and pleads for us, for he is the true medicine of our wounds. I know that my mother always acted with mercy and that she forgave others with all her heart when they



trespassed against you in all the long years of her life after baptism. Forgive her, I beseech you; do not call her to account. Let your mercy give your judgement an honourable welcome, for your words are true and you have promised mercy to the merciful. If they are merciful, it is by your gift; and you will show pity on those whom you pity; you will show mercy where you are merciful. (*Confessions* 9:13)" (Marmion 1994: 125).

Augustine is convinced of his mother being in a happy place given the nature of the life that she lived and the confession that she made. His prayer, though, is that her sins that were left unforgiven at the time of her death may be forgiven and that she be inwardly purified. To some extent, Augustine is continuing the tradition of prayer for the dead in offering this prayer. What is of interest is the specific petitions of the prayer, namely, that Monica's sins be forgiven *post mortem*.

The second relevant piece of 'precedence' here is the following quotation attributed to Augustine in his comment upon the 1 Corinthians text:

"It is not beyond belief that something of this sort takes place even after this life, and there is room for enquiry whether it is so, and the answer may be found (or not found) to be, that a certain number of the faithful are more belatedly or the more speedily saved, through a sort of chastening fire, the more they have or the less they have set their affections on the good things that perish: not, however, those of whom

the pronouncement was made that they shall not obtain possession of the Kingdom of God, unless, on their doing appropriate penance, those crimes are forgiven them.” (Atwell 1987: 176).

What is clear about these comments by Augustine is that the discussion about purgatory remains in the realm of opinion and has not traversed into the realm of doctrine. The most that can be said of Augustine at this stage, is that he allows for the possibility of a post-death purging or purification. He further allows that this possibility would appear to be consistent with the corpus of the scriptures then available. In particular, it may have a direct reference to the Bible through the 1 Corinthians reading, and would further be consistent with the nature of God and natural justice.

“While an increasing rigour can be discerned with regard to the reality of the punishment of sin, stimulated perhaps by his reaction to the *miseriordes* whom he regarded as the heretical heirs of Origenist universalism, a gradual shift of focus is traceable from sin and punishment towards spiritual growth and development.” (Boulding 1995: 102).

Augustine maintained a clear distinction between the poles of heaven and hell in the afterlife, but allowed for a state of being that benefited from the efficacy of suffrages<sup>1</sup>. In other words, and to use his own words,

---

<sup>1</sup> A suffrage is defined as “a prayer of intercession or supplication”. (Deist 1964: 246). Suffrages are deemed also to be in the nature of ‘good works’ which are beneficial to the human and aid her or him in the process of purification and sanctification. The chief or main of these was the offering and sharing in the Eucharist. In this sense the Eucharist was, *inter alia*,

“There is a way of living which is not so good as not to need the help of suffrages after death; nor so bad as not to be able to profit from them.”

*(ibid)*

Augustine accorded a place to the possibility of human purification and improvement after death, but before the final judgement. The writings of Augustine disclose, in addition, that the reference in Matthew 12, in connection with the unforgivable sin, necessarily implied that sins could also be forgiven in the ‘next world’.

Augustine is led, by the use of certain choice scriptures, to tentatively accept that forgiveness is possible after death. If this foundational statement is true, there must be a manner or process by which this is effected. He argues that this process is one of purification whereby the sins of the soul are purged in the real fire of judgement.

“There are people who, although Christians at heart, have remained entangled in earthly loves, and it is natural after this life they should undergo purification by ‘purgatorial fire’”. (Kelly 1978: 485).

The progress of opinion towards doctrine was hastened by the liturgical, and venerable, practice of the prayer for the dead. Although the twin concepts of purgatory, as the place where the faithful departed endured a form of

---

understood to be a suffrage for the dead as part of the Communion of all the Saints, dead and living.

punishment for the purgation of their venial sins, and the concept of prayer for the dead, need not be regarded as synonymous, they came to be regarded as more and more so through the persistent practice of prayers for the dead.

“Pious devotion and the liturgical practice of the Church, however, proved to be the catalyst which promoted the development of a more systematic doctrine of Purgatory”. (Atwell 1987: 174).

### **Gregory the Great (540 – 604)**

Further progress of the doctrine was aided by the ‘opinions’ of the other Church Fathers, particularly that of Gregory the Great. ‘Opinions’ is in inverted commas here, because Gregory did not in any way share the tentative, exploratory approach to this aspect of theology demonstrated by Augustine. Either it is the progress of theology, the continued practice of the prayers for the dead, or the character of Gregory himself, or perhaps a combination of all, but by the time of Gregory, purgatory was established as part of the Christian’s world. Gregory is certain of its reality. His stance on the same Pauline text of 1 Corinthians is markedly different from that of Augustine:

“Although it is possible to understand this text of the application to us of the fire of tribulation in this life, yet if any should take it of the fire of tribulation to come, it must be carefully remembered that he is only capable of salvation by fire ... who builds upon this foundation ... wood, hay, stubble; that is, very slight and inconsiderable sins, which

the fire can easily consume. But observe that no man will obtain there any purgation of even slight sins, unless in this life he has deserved to obtain it by good actions.” (Atwell 1987: 177).

There is little doubt that Gregory accepted the reality of purgatory and that its purpose was to purify the faithful, through the fires of purgation, to ready them for heaven.

A further buttress to this view of the after life, were two other features of Gregory’s theology:

1. *Prayers for the dead*: He underlined the importance of prayers for the faithful departed and insisted on their efficacy and help to those to whom they were directed. Of particular efficacy were the prayers offered during the Eucharist.

“If guilty deeds are not beyond absolution even after death, the sacred offering of the saving victim consistently aids souls even after death, so that the very souls of the departed seem sometimes to yearn for this”. (*Ibid* 180).

The role of the prayer for the dead in the Eucharistic celebration cannot be underestimated in its potency to frame the doctrine of purgatory. Interestingly, the prayers offered in this regard by both the Roman

Catholic and Coptic Orthodox Churches are hugely similar and express much the same sentiments. The prayer;

“Remember, Lord, those who have died and gone before us marked with the sign of faith, especially those for whom we now pray, N. and N. May these and all who sleep in Christ find in your presence light, happiness and peace.”

“At the heart of the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice the Church remembers the faithful departed and prays for their eternal rest.” (Lanne 1992: 14).

The practice of praying for the dead was not restricted to the celebration of Communion, but was also expressed at other liturgical events and particularly at funerals. The understanding behind this expression and practice of the Church was that these prayers were effective.

“... it helps the dead who, because of the sins committed during their earthly lives, are not yet in that place of ‘refreshment, light and peace.’” (*Ibid* 15).

2. *The Exempla*. This was the expression given to the numerous stories and anecdotes that were entering into common circulation around Gregory’s time and in which he placed great store. These stories served to provide examples of the nearness of the here and the

hereafter. It served to popularise the idea that those who had died were able to communicate with the living. The specific features of these communications were to seek the aid of the living, through prayer, and (with increasing regularity) suffrages for the specific purpose of aiding those who had died.

The features of these *exempla* were reasonably regular: the vision is seen in an unusual location, the vision appears to someone who is alone and of reasonable purity or sanctity; the vision communicates or shows that the soul of the departed is in torment or difficulty; the vision asks for the assistance of the living (often directing the nature of this assistance in specific terms); in response to the vision, the charitable works are faithfully accomplished; there is a second, or subsequent, vision showing the soul to be at peace and grateful for the works undertaken on its behalf.

One of the most persistent and persuasive *exempla* was one that was attributed to Tertullian and was widely known and frequently used in support of the doctrine of purgatory. It revolved St Perpetua who, in a dream, sees a vision of her younger brother, Dinocrates, who had died several years before from cancer. In her vision, she sees him in a dishevelled and dirty condition and the cancer wound is still visible. He stands in a place of obvious heat which is causing him pain, and before a fountain of water which is too high for him to reach. In response to this dream, Perpetua embarks upon regular and persistent prayer for

her brother. After a time, she is afforded another dream of her brother. In this second vision, she sees him clean, dressed well and clearly healed. He is able to reach the water and is obviously happy and content.

“Visions such as these reinforced the emerging understanding of the power of the Eucharistic sacrifice to aid the souls of the faithfully departed, and gave dramatic expression to the general pattern of beliefs about the destiny of the souls after death, beliefs which Gregory shared and approved.” (Atwell 1987: 181).

By the time of Gregory’s death, the framework for the doctrine of purgatory had already been constructed, and this framework, in turn, was built upon the foundations of the tentative suggestions and opinions of the early Church Fathers.

### **Mortal and venial sins**

A further feature of this line of reasoning was the emergence of the Roman Catholic distinction between sins that were venial and those that were mortal.<sup>2</sup> Mortal sin was regarded as the effective turning of one’s back on God; a rejection of God and of the things that the kingdom of God stands for and

---

<sup>2</sup> A venial sin is defined as: “grave but pardonable sin committed against the express will of God” (Deist 1984: 271). Mortal sin is defined as: “Sin committed deliberately against the command of love and therefore deserving of eternal damnation.” (Deist: 1984: 162)



represents. It is a deliberate act and is irreconcilable. A venial sin, on the other hand,

“is a slackness on the way to Him, an enjoying, though only in passing, of the pleasures of the world which we ought to leave on one side, a standing still when we ought to press onward. Of such faults we are all guilty.” (Bartmann 1936: 206).

The biblical reference most often used in motivating for this distinction of sins, was that of 1 Corinthians 3: 10 -15.

“The increasingly pragmatic way in which Purgatory was conceived seems to have been part of the increasing institutionalisation of Christendom between the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century and the high point of civilisation and culture in the thirteenth.” (Boulding 1995: 103).

One of the features of this process of institutionalised Christendom is the categorising of the states of the world into three, namely:

1. The Church Militant, meaning the church that is still on the earth and engaged with the ongoing struggle of good and evil;
2. The Church Triumphant, being the church that comprises those who are already in heaven; and

3. the Church Suffering, being made up of those who are in the in-between state of purgatory, with the word 'suffering' being a reference to those who are undergoing the process of purification and who long for their release into the Church Triumphant.

An interesting feature of the understanding or appreciation of purgatory around the time of the Thirteenth Century, was that it acquired a location. With the role of purgatory being underlined more frequently in popular theology (as opposed to intellectual speculation) so the use of the word '*purgatorium*' was devised and became commonly used. The significance of this is that *purgatorium* is a noun. (Le Goff: 1990). The features that improved the popular knowledge of purgatory included:

1. The fact that suffrages became increasingly common and were increasingly associated with the indulgences and prayers for the dead;
2. A series of events took place, such as the cave of St Patrick and other such *exempla*, which were published widely and appeared to verify and confirm the reality of purgatory to the popular mind;
3. In the Thirteenth Century, "when the Orders of Friars began to establish lay confraternities who would share in the spiritual life of the Order, suffrages to alleviate purgatorial punishment were

commonly an explicit item in the establishing charter.” (Boulding 1995: 103).

4. Western Europe itself was undergoing an advance in legal ordering and practice. Legal Codes were being produced and refined. Insofar as this relates to our topic, criminal justice, penalties and their execution were being gradually codified and ordered. What was seen to be relevant to the ordering of civil life was relevant to ecclesiastical life and, by extension to the after life as well.

“The early scholastics had refined the notion of intention, and with it the doctrine of sin. This led to a deeper understanding of penance; and the notion of venial sin fitted very appropriately with the idea of purgatory. As the categories of sinners became more complex, through all this refinement, humans at death were categorised as the entirely good and the entirely bad, with two intermediate categories for the not entirely good and not entirely wicked. And eventually these four groups were reduced to three.” (Marmion 1994: 127).

The effect of this was that there was deemed a small category of people whose exemplary lives or deaths gave them, in the eyes of the Church, immediately access to heaven. Those that had committed mortal sin/s were destined for hell. The vast majority were of the ‘in between’ category who, though not guilty of mortal sin, had nevertheless a plethora of other sin which

was venial i.e. capable of forgiveness or pardon. If such forgiveness or pardon was not acquired during life, such sins were purged in purgatory.

### **St Thomas Aquinas (1224 – 1274)**

Although purgatory was spoken of widely throughout the Roman Catholic Church, it was only at the Council of Lyons in 1274 that the doctrine was formally articulated as part of the process of discussion with the Greek Orthodox Church. It was particularly the work of St Thomas Aquinas that provided the framework for the expression of the doctrine at this Council. It is useful to note that Aquinas' expression of the doctrine was based upon three foundations, that of the scriptures, that of church practice and that of reference to other 'self-evident truths' i.e. the force of reason.

1. As far as the Bible was concerned, Aquinas also emphasised the classic text of 1 Corinthians 3 as scriptural support for the doctrine.
2. As far as the liturgical practice of the church is concerned, Aquinas refers to

“the ancient, apostolic practice of praying for the dead is itself evidence of a state of purgatory, for there would be no point in praying for those in heaven or hell.” (Ombres 1981: 279).

3. Thirdly, as far as common truths are concerned, there are a number of these referred to. In particular, Aquinas

“holds it as *omnino improbabile* that purified souls should have to wait till the Last Judgement to enter into glory, and the scriptures copiously show that no-one can attain to the glory of heaven if still stained with imperfections.” (*ibid*).

In addition, he refers to the fact that sin represents a disordering of the relationship that exists between God and humanity. In order that humans can be restored to a proper relationship with God, there is need for this sin to be ameliorated and resolved in the human’s life.

“it is in terms of having to totally appropriate forgiveness by means of adequate satisfaction either in this life or the next that the doctrine was to be worked out.” (*Ibid* 280).

Aquinas argued that, for the soul that was not pure at the time of death, there was a requirement, a just and reasonable one, that a form of purification took place in order to render that soul pure and, hence, proper, to receive the ultimate reward of the vision of God.

“To that vision no rational creature can be elevated unless it is thoroughly and entirely purified, given that as a consequence of its involvement with sin the soul is unclean ... “ (*Ibid*).

In stating the doctrine of purgatory in this way, Aquinas was persuasive in stressing that the goal of the soul still remained heaven and that purgatory was a place of cleansing for the soul to be made ready for heaven. In doing so, as well as by his insisting that purgatory did NOT employ demons in the process of purgation, he was able to locate purgatory much closer to the realm of heaven than had previously been the case in the mind of the Medieval theologian.

Perhaps it is just as well to point out at this stage, that Aquinas' view of purgation was based upon a two-fold distinction of sin. Sin was understood to involve two elements: guilt (*culpa*) and punishment (*poena*). The former is in the nature of a 'status' that a human possesses i.e. a sinner. This status, however, was understood by the medieval theologian to have been fully atoned for by the sacrificial death of Christ. The punishment of sin, however, was only resolved by the forgiven sinner undertaking penance. In the event of the human dying without the punishment of sin resolved i.e. penance made, this was accomplished by purgatory.

On the medieval view, God forgives the penitent his (*sic*) guilt (*culpa*) but because sin violates a divinely established order, satisfaction or reparation (*poena*) is necessary to restore the violated order. Such satisfaction is not usually completely achievable in this life, especially in the case of venial sins of which we may not be fully aware. That being so, an intermediate state is required to make up what is wanting

in the satisfaction so far given in order to restore the offended divine order.” (Brown 1985: 455).

The punishment that the souls in purgatory endure were, to Aquinas, also two-fold:

1. Firstly, they were denied access to the vision of God - that vision for which, ultimately, there is a yearning and a desire to achieve. The punishment here is the realisation that it is the fault of the human that incurs this delay.
2. Secondly, and significantly, Aquinas pointed out that there was also a punishment of the senses, which the soul could experience, but which it did not object to, aware that it was the sort of punishment that, in the end, would produce purification and progress.

“Guilt ... cannot be set right except through punishment. If satisfaction has not been given during life, by means of suffering, of good works and self-denial voluntarily undergone, it must be given after death. Purgatory is the working out, under immeasurably more painful conditions, of the penance which would be laid upon a sinner in sacramental confession.” (Mason 1901: 51).

This was the high water mark understanding of “the last penny” and it opened the way for more and greater expressions of fancy as regards the punishments to be inflicted. This notion also gave rise, as a consequence, to

the practice of the sale of indulgences.<sup>3</sup> Indulgences were understood to be unable to alter the guilt of sin, but were able to remit the punishment.

It was the decision of the Council of Lyons, based upon this teaching of Aquinas, that there were two specific features of the doctrine of purgatory that were to be taught and adhered to:

1. “the souls of the faithful who have died ‘truly penitent’ and ‘in charity’ (or: ‘the love of God’) are purified after death by purifying pains;
2. the prayers of the living (that is, the offerings of masses, prayers, almsgifts and other acts of piety which the faithful are accustomed to do on behalf of other believers in accord with the Church’s institutions) serve to relieve their pains”. (Lanne 1992: 18).

### **Subsequent Councils and Further Development**

The subsequent Council of Ferrara-Florence from 1438 to 1439 also took time to discuss the doctrine of purgatory and its conclusion was to endorse the findings of the Council of Lyon.

---

<sup>3</sup> An indulgence is defined as: “Intercession by the church on a sinner’s behalf for exemption of punishment for confessed sins”. (Deist 1984: 124”). This punishment is understood as the *poena* set out above and its remission absolved the penitent of the consequences of the sin.



It is noteworthy that part of the effort expended in these Councils was to seek a form of unity with the Eastern Church after the Schism. The issue of the afterlife, and implicitly, the role that purgatory played in this, was one of the features that both divided and united the churches.

“The Greeks rejected the idea of punishment and atonement taking place in the afterlife, yet they shared with the church of the West the practice of interceding for the dead by prayer, alms, good works, and, most notably, the offering of the Eucharist for their repose.” (Ratzinger 1988: 219).

What renders this of interest is the fact that, in the Eastern Church, the practice of prayer for the dead did not develop into a doctrine of purgatory in spite of the fact that the practice was the same in both sides of the Church. It is of interest as to why such practice still persists unless it has a form of efficacy for the souls of the departed.

With the codification of penalties for sins, particularly with the distinction between venial and mortal sins, the sale of indulgences was advanced. A corollary of this practise is that, to desire such forgiveness in the future, there ought to be a reasonable fear of what the future would hold in the event that such forgiveness was not obtained. Aquinas gave fuel to this spark of logic by agreeing that there was no logical reason why merits earned by the living could not be transferred to the dead. Practice and fear produced a lethal

combination that resulted, from this point on, in an increasingly lurid and vile picture of purgatory.

“The Medieval imagery defies comment. From pre-Christian Virgil to the thirteenth century scholastics the furnishings of the other world become more and more bizarre – a paradise for students of folklore and mythology.” (Boulding 1995: 105).

Certainly, by the time of the Reformation, purgatory had come to hold a vast and important position within Western European society. The social significance of the Roman Catholic Church cannot be underestimated as it permeated every aspect of life. The structure of the Church in many ways can be argued to have the doctrine of purgatory as its apex. If the church influenced all of human discourse and structure, if the focus of the church was to ensure the good life of the human being, the friendship with God and the entering into a state of perfection with God after death, then the doctrine of purgatory fulfilled a vital role within this. Purgatory was part of a complete and clear cosmology that the people of Western Europe lived under – a cosmology that was so complete that it governed society from the cradle to the grave *and* into the afterlife.

Life was reduced, it can be argued, to the avoidance and the remitting of sin so as to ensure that hell was avoided, and heaven achievable. It was acknowledged that the life of purity was impossible to attain and so the twin pillars that held up the portal to the afterlife, as it were, were the Last Unction

(by which all the 'residual' sins of the human were forgiven) and the doctrine of purgatory (whereby the sins still not resolved would be purged). Without purgatory, the medieval mind would have been left in doubt and apprehension as to the soul's progress into the next world. The ghastly depictions of the realm of purgatory left the followers of Christ in Western Europe in no doubt that purgatory was to be avoided if at all possible. It is this fear and apprehension that made the practice of the sale of indulgences such a success and provided the stimuli for such an achievable and widespread market.

“The invention of purgatory had a profound effect on the development of Western society and on Western social character because it touched on all levels of personal and social experience. The way individuals experienced their lives, their present as well as their past and the future, in short, their 'subjective' sense of time, was structured by the awareness that the salvation of their own souls, not only of those of the departed, depended on what the living could do from moment to moment in time, on time, over time, and throughout a lifetime.” (Fenn 1993: 265).

This quotation underlines the significance of the doctrine and the way in which it was appreciated by the Western European mind. The eternal destiny of the soul was a philosophical consideration that was always in peoples' minds. The regular performance of the Mass, the constant reminder of the shortness of time and the need to live as pure a life as possible, were ever present and

constant reminders. What purgatory highlighted, above all, was the sense of time and the need to consider it as a resource that was to be made the most of.

What is significant in Dante's portrayal of purgatory, is that it is also contingent upon time. It functions according to the same time scale as the 'ordinary' world and the greatest source of pain and regret experienced by those in purgatory, is the sense of delay, the frustration of being denied the opportunity to progress and move forward until the purgation is complete 'to the last penny'. Aware of this, humans became ever more conscious of the need to make the most of time afforded to them. There was engendered the need for *carpe diem* and to realise fully the potential that time afforded. The motivation here was to enter into the next world in as pure and untroubled a condition so as to limit the time in purgatory.

Further, time becomes a form of oppression in that purgatory is a place or dwelling wherein time is required to settle those sins outstanding. In this sense time becomes something to be feared as well.

“... purgatory also carries within itself the seeds of a new tyranny, the tyranny of time. There is no escape from the past until and unless every old debt is paid, every score settled, every real and imaginary act of pride is compensated for by years of penance and self-mortification under weights commensurate with the burdens one has imposed on

others; the past weighs heavily on the soul that is seeking to make the most of the time remaining.” (*Ibid* 273).

It was no wonder, then, that the practice of the sale of Indulgences became as popular and widespread as it did. It was a means whereby people were assured, within the cosmology of the time, and under the sanction of the Church, that the punishment of sin committed in this world would be remitted and resolved in the next. It had the effect of rendering time less of a tyrannical task-master.

### **The Reformation and Beyond**

“In the later Middle Ages ... The doctrine of purgatory was developed and encouraged to an extraordinary degree,” (Hebblethwaite 1984: 60).

Whilst the intention of purgatory remained that of the purification of the soul to render it fit for heaven, another concept was developed relating to the justness of God. This was the natural extension of the concept of *poena* in relation to sin i.e. notwithstanding the removal of the guilt of sin by Christ’s sacrificial death, all the punishment of sin also needed to be expiated, or resolved, in order that the soul would be purified. This could be achieved by the imposition and working out of a penalty in relation to each sin. In the event that this was not undertaken in life, then the requirements of God’s justness would remain unfulfilled.

“Penalties not endured in this life (and penances such as fasting were seen as ways of undergoing or ‘paying off’ temporal punishment) must be endured in the next.” (Olivier 1991: 138).

The effect of this rationalisation on the doctrine of purgatory suffered the emergence of a legalistic system of sins and penalties, and the ways in which they were to be expiated. This proved to be the foundation for the system of Indulgences. Purgatory remained a realm for those redeemed by their faith in Christ, but who were to be sanctified in purgatory by expiation of their sins. Aquinas placed great store in the doctrine and systematically set out the scriptural references in support of it, as well as the traditions of the Church that supported it. The ordered and predictable world of the Middle Ages, as well as the ordered and predictable realm of the afterlife, was epitomised by the work of Dante Alighieri in his ‘Divine Comedy’. This work amply demonstrated that the worldview of the mediaeval was complemented by the worldview of the afterlife, as something fixed by God, static and unchanging.

The Protestant view of the doctrine of purgatory was, however, altogether negative and amounted to no less than the outright rejection of the doctrine.

“The Reformation began with Luther’s attack on Tetzels trade in indulgences, an advertising slogan for which has come down to us: ‘The moment that the money rings, the soul from purgatory springs’.” (Polkinghorne 2000: 248).

Simplistically explained, Protestantism operated from a methodology that emphasised the plain and ordinary reading of the Bible. The Reformers correctly observed that the Bible did not contain any direct reference to the doctrine and that it clashed with the Protestant tenet of justification by faith. Further, the application of the doctrine of purgatory was the source and reason of some of the worst abuses of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Reformed Church's antipathy towards purgatory thus derived from three sources:

1. Firstly, the Reformers reacted to the abuses apparent in the sale of indulgences.

“The main reason why the doctrine of Purgatory became so suspect ... was not so much the notion that was expounded by Aquinas, but rather the practice that grew up in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, first of the granting and then of the sale of indulgences, remissions by the Church of the temporal penalty of sin.” (Hebblethwaite 1984: 63).

The complaint concerning the sale of indulgences was that it effectively meant that a commercial activity of the Church outweighed the grace of God, whilst encouraging moral laxity and all manner of sharp practices regarding the sales.

2. Secondly, the Reformation emphasised the Bible as the primary source of doctrine i.e. '*sola scriptura*'. Doctrine was to be founded on the Bible alone and in the event that a doctrine, whether well established or otherwise, was not to be clearly demonstrated from the Bible, it was to be rejected. This approach to theology, in the context of Eschatology, is described by Sauter as falling into the category of the doctrine of 'Last Things', meaning that,

“the material for this form of eschatology is taken from biblical texts” (Sauter 1999: 3).

Given that the biblical references to purgatory are oblique and insubstantial, as we have seen above, the Reformers could not find it in their philosophy to accept such a doctrine.

3. Thirdly, in adhering to the doctrine of salvation (justification) by faith alone, the Reformers deduced a contradiction between this and the doctrine of purgatory. The acceptance of Christ, by faith, was understood in the Reformed tradition to mean the instant righteousness of the human in the eyes of God, such that the perfection of Christ was imparted to the human and that no further purification was needed. Thus the distinction between guilt (*culpa*) and punishment (*poena*) was disregarded. The status acquired by faith in Christ of 'forgiven', also obviated the need for punishment. The human expectation after death was that of immediate



judgement and eternal punishment or reward. In the light of this, purgatory held no further place in the scheme of eternity.

“eternal life is already possessed by the faith which has seized hold upon justification. ... assurance of salvation overcomes the fear of the end. Purgatory, as a place of atoning satisfaction, disappears with the righteousness of works.” (Olivier 1991: 151).

The Protestant response, then, to the doctrine of purgatory was to denounce it as an invention of the devil and urged that no account be taken of it. This response was aided and abetted by the fact that the Roman Catholic Church was undergoing a painful period of corruption, particularly centred around avarice and an interest in promoting the material wealth of the Church.

“The larger issues and passions involved in this controversy are reflected in the words of Calvin, who wrote that, ‘we must cry out with the shouting not only of our voices but our throats and lungs that purgatory is a deadly fiction of Satan, which nullifies the cross of Christ, inflicts unbearable contempt upon God’s mercy, and overturns and destroys our faith.’” (Walls 2002: 27).

### **The Counter Reformation**

In response to the theological challenges of the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church re-affirmed the doctrine of purgatory which has remained a

doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church to the present day. As with most matters pertaining to a conflict of theological views, there has been little in the way of accommodation of each other's views until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Much systematisation of the doctrine of purgatory came about as a result of the strongest challenge to its efficacy by the Protestant movement. What is noteworthy is that, in his *initial* attack upon indulgences, Luther did not dispute or deny the reality of purgatory.

“Later the whole concept was explicitly rejected by him, as by Zwingli and Calvin, as incompatible with his understanding of justification by grace through faith” (Boulding 1995: 105).

In many ways, this conflict between the ‘mother church’ and its offspring, centred around the understanding that humans had over the fundamental question of life, namely, death – or more specifically, what happens after death. The careful codification and settled universe of the Thirteenth Century was being radically challenged, not only by scientific and academic advances, but also by Protestantism. The role of grace, justification by faith, the existence or not of purgatory, were all under radical revision. Sides were most definitely being taken, as the following quotation exemplifies:

“No. XXII of the Thirty Nine Articles says that ‘The Romish doctrine concerning Purgatory, pardons, worshiping and adoration as well of images as of relics ... is a fond thing vainly invented, grounded upon

no warranty of scripture, but rather repugnant to the word of God” (*Ibid* 101).

The Council of Trent, *inter alia*, was obliged to respond to the claims that were being made against the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. In doing so, it responded to the charge that purgatory was an accretion and did not belong to Christian doctrine whatsoever.

“Canon 30 took Purgatory for granted in asserting that sin does carry a debt of temporal punishment, to be discharged in this world or the next, even if eternal punishment has been remitted and the sinner is not liable to hell. (*Ibid* 105).

The Council, however, did not spell out the doctrine with any high degree of clarity. It was content to state that the doctrine had been considered within other Councils of the Church and it stated the position regarding purgatory briefly. It re-affirmed it as a reality and as part and parcel of the Church’s doctrine. Its restatement was to the effect that:

“The Catholic Church, instructed by the Holy Spirit, has followed the sacred writings and ancient traditions of the Fathers, taught in the sacred Councils and very recently in this ecumenical Council, that there is a purgatory, *purgatorium*, and that the souls detained therein are aided by the suffrages of the faithful, and chiefly by the acceptable sacrifice of the alter.” (Ratzinger 1988: 220).

It is noteworthy that the structure of the doctrine, as disclosed in this summation, relies chiefly upon the triple pillars of:

1. The guidance by the Holy Spirit (Inspiration);
2. The tradition of the Church (Tradition); and
3. The fellowship of believers (the Councils).

Notable is the absence of the 'pillar' of the Bible. The Council of Trent, however, pointed to a strong move away from the lurid visions of purgatory and certainly a distancing from the abuses of practice that had become so closely associated with the doctrine. Accordingly, it was stated:

“While we must believe, hold, teach and preach the doctrine of purgatory, we must exclude from popular sermons to simple people the more difficult and subtle questions which contribute nothing to edification or the increase of piety.” (Lanne 1992: 19).

This practice has continued into the modern day Roman Catholic Church.

### **Contemporary Roman Catholic Teaching**

The Second Vatican Council affirmed the doctrine of purgatory as part of the *corpus* of church doctrine. It further affirmed the three-fold perspective of the church set out above.

“The Church believes in the possibility of a purification for the elect before they see God, a purification altogether different from the punishment of the damned. This is what the church means when speaking of hell and purgatory. When dealing with man’s (*sic*) situation after death one must especially be aware of arbitrary, imaginative representations; excess of this kind is a major cause of the difficulties the Christian faith often encounters. Respect must however be given to the images employed in the scriptures.” (Boulding 1995: 106).

This quotation is helpful in the understanding of present day Catholic views on this subject for the following reasons:

1. Firstly, it is as strong an affirmation as possible for the continued belief in the existence of purgatory.
2. Secondly, it is concerned with the purification of the elect; in other words, those souls whose journey is towards heaven and who are being made

ready, as it were, for that destination. It entails a process, a time of cleansing and of being made holy.

3. Thirdly, it is an acknowledgement that, in spite of the belief in the reality of this process, the language about it must remain tentative. The biblical accounts are limited in scope and the most that can be ascribed to them is that the Bible makes use of certain “images”, but that these are more akin to ‘types’ rather than a description of the reality of the thing.
4. Finally, there is a clear acknowledgement that the imagery of the past concerning purgatory has been, at best, unhelpful and, at worst, divisive. It has had the effect of seeking to instil fear as the motivating factor to being a Christian. The picture of God that is portrayed by this imagery is of a being that is vindictive, callous and cruel.

“Certainly much of the earlier imagery is now unsympathetic and unconvincing, even misleading. The doctrine is distorted if it suggests a vindictive God exacting the last ounce of punishment, or a system by which we can, though laboriously, buy our own salvation.” (*Ibid* 106).

These final characteristics demonstrate that the present articulation from the Roman Catholic church, is not, as we shall see, very far off the mark of what has been stated by contemporary Protestant theologians relating to the same subject. In anticipating the section below, which offers a cross section of

modern theologians, it is observed that there are broad lines of agreement. In particular, there is consensus that:

1. The doctrine of purgatory is a reasonable doctrine that there is, or must be, a place which is not the destination of heaven, but an 'after world' where those souls who are on the journey towards God are purified and made ready for that meeting;
2. The process of purification is not one that involves punishment, but that it is intended to be restorative and healing, a bringing about of wholeness and completion;
3. The imagery used in the past was unhelpful and that gentler images are to be sought, whilst seeking to uphold the essence of scriptural understanding.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **THE OPINIONS OF EXPERT WITNESSES**

#### **Introduction**

What follows is a selection of (mostly) contemporary theologians whose general ideas on the after life are set out. In addition, there are their specific views and opinions on the merits of purgatory. This selection is motivated by a desire to have as broad a selection of theologians as possible. It includes theologians who are from both the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions, as well as those who profess themselves to navigate the middle road between the two. Part of the motivation for selecting these theologians also derives from their willingness to discuss the subject of purgatory at all.

The 'revival' of the eschatology as a 'serious' Christian doctrine, was arguably initiated by the works of Weiss and Schweitzer in their view of Eschatology as 'Consistent'. This was followed by the works of Dodd and others, many of whom have adopted or followed different 'approaches' to Eschatology. This fertile conversation has lifted the doctrine from a description of the events of the end of time, to a philosophy of life that determines human decision making, understanding of the present, and concerns the destiny of humanity and the world.



Within this revival, purgatory has generally appeared in a positive light. There has been an adjustment of the doctrine away from the traditional Roman Catholic scheme. The doctrine is not explained or conceived of in medieval terms, but is understood as a time of development and maturation beyond the grave. It will be argued that this doctrine is a current field of theological development. It will also be argued that the Reformer's ire with the doctrine was not so much with the concept itself, but with the abuses associated with it; further, that it is a doctrine that can be accommodated within the Protestant family.

The first two theologians considered here, Bartman and Ratzinger, are inserted because they are Roman Catholic theologians who defend the doctrine (understandably) and who seek to give a modern sheen to it. The task of scraping off the accretions to the doctrine and paring it down to the characteristics that would be acceptable to modern people is evident in their writings.

### **Bernhard Bartmann**

Bartmann was a Roman Catholic theologian and a strong defender of the doctrine of purgatory. His approach to the subject follows traditional lines. In 1936, he published a book on the subject entitled, 'Purgatory: A Book of Christian Comfort'. His views are orthodox to the Roman Catholic Church and, as such, he is a good starting witness to the doctrine of purgatory for the purposes of this thesis. He sets out the traditional framework of the doctrine

and in doing so, distances himself from any vicious depictions of purgatory or any images that may have the tendency to render it diabolical in its appearance. Instead, he seeks to locate images that are gentler in their depiction of a state that he considers to be one that is both hopeful and joyful.

In his book, Bartmann sets out the parameters of the doctrine and then defends it against all comers. In doing so, he questions the Eastern Orthodox Church in its rejection of the doctrine. Having traced the origins of the doctrine, Bartmann concludes that it finds its essentials as having come from the Greek writers, passed on to the Western Church and embraced by it. He also questions why the Greek Church, whilst up until the Thirteenth Century it worked within the parameters of the doctrine, it then began to raise objections to it in dispute with the Roman Catholic Church.

In regard to the widespread rejection of the doctrine within the Protestant churches, Bartmann also raises serious objections of his own, particularly in regard to the argument that the death of a believer entails automatic entrance into heaven. To this argument, Bartmann questions what happens to the imperfections, sins and failings that humans are in possession of when they die? What has been learned? What contrition has there been? What healing, forgiving penance?

Bartmann commences his analysis of the subject on the 'pillar' of the biblical references to the doctrine. He identifies three of these:

1. Matthew 12: He asserts that the clear implication of these words is that there is the possibility of sins being forgiven in the next world, i.e. after death. He also observes that heaven is a place of perfection and holiness. He persists in the claim that:

“In heaven ... there are nothing but pure, sinless souls, for, according to the emphatic teaching of revelation, nothing defiled can enter heaven.” (Bartmann 1936: 77).

If this is accepted as true, in faith, then it is necessary for there to be a venue or realm whereby the sins that are not forgiven at death may be purged before entrance to heaven. Accordingly, it is reasonable to accept the possibility of purgatory.

2. Matthew 5: ‘The last penny’ is referred to in conjunction with the Roman Catholic distinction of sins into those that are mortal and those that are venial. The purpose of the text, according to Bartmann (and traditional Catholic teaching), is that, for the soul to progress to heaven, there is need for all sin and the traces of sin to be expunged from it, to the utmost degree. All sin must be atoned for and the smallest kinds of sins are those that are readily forgivable and are in the venial category. But, according to the text, even these sins require expiation. As it would seem to be humanly and spiritually impossible for this to happen during the course of an ordinary human’s life, there is the conclusion that it is reasonable for there to be a purgatory where this expiation is effected.

3. 1 Corinthians: The symbolism of this verse has an appeal to that of the sermon on the Mount, where Jesus speaks of faith being built upon the secure foundation of the word of God. Consistent with Roman Catholic teaching on the subject, the fire that tests is the fire of judgement. The effect of the fire is to purge from the soul all that was built upon the foundation that has no value in the economy of heaven. The fire is not described in a punitive, vindicatory sense, but is a 'discerning' fire able to discriminate between the works that are of value, and otherwise. Within this text, Bartman finds meaning in the words, 'he shall suffer loss' and 'he shall be saved' as being useful in depicting the process of purgatory. In particular:

"The Fathers and theologians, beginning with St Augustine, have applied them to the place of purification of which they knew from Tradition, the existence of which is protracted until the end of the world". (*Ibid* 84).

Of particular interest here is the reference that Bartmann makes to the role of tradition in the formulation of the doctrine. Whilst the biblical readings, if interpreted under certain conditions, give rise to the possibility of a purgatory, the texts themselves are by no means definitive in explaining the doctrine. This explanation has to be 'filled out', as it were, from other sources. It is for this reason that Bartmann expends time and effort to relate the texts to the

works and opinions of the Church Fathers. In working these two pillars together in the explanation of the doctrine, Bartmann states:

“since the Fathers knew of the existence of a place of expiation, from other revealed sources, they were fully justified not only in supporting their belief, but even in describing it, by means of biblical texts which are only mediately, analogically, or remotely connected with it. ... they have not hesitated to quote in support of dogmas which were generally believed, Bible texts that were not strictly cogent.” (*Ibid* 85).

Moving on from the sources that Bartmann relies upon, he begins to speak of the content of the doctrine. In doing so, he expressly disowns the imagery used by many within the Roman Catholic Church in the past that described purgatory as an horrific realm, little better than the worst imaginings that pertain to hell. Similarly, he seeks to work through ‘softer’ images of purgatory which he finds are more in keeping with the character of the place and which would be more readily engaged with by modern people.

What is that character? Fundamentally, to Bartmann it is a place of grace and joy. To begin with, Bartmann reverts to the mortal sin / venial sin distinction, which is based upon his reliance of 1 Corinthians and Matthew 5. Mortal sin is the rejection of God; a deliberate turning of one’s back with resolution to have nothing to do with the grace that God offers. It is an irreconcilable decision. Venial sin, on the other hand, is forgivable and does not destroy friendship

with God. Nevertheless, by reference to Aquinas, Bartmann points out that sin has two aspects to it:

1. The first is that sin renders the human impure and this is equated to guilt – it is the verdict that is passed;
2. The second aspect is that the verdict of guilt carries with it a consequence, namely, that the soul is impure and not able, in that condition, to enter into heaven. This is the punishment for sin. In traditional Roman Catholic teaching, it is possible for this punishment to be resolved and removed by penance and contrition. As Bartmann says:

“Every sin entails guilt and penalty. ... How is guilt cancelled? We may say at once that in the next world, guilt is remitted in exactly the same way as in this life – that is in consequence of the sinner’s repentance and by the grace of God.” (*Ibid* 124 – 125).

The first point, then, is that purgatory is a place of grace. It is where souls, who are on their way towards God, are able to have the punishment of their sins ‘worked out’ and resolved so that they are purified and made ready for heaven. The fundamental choice of the human has been made – faith in God as the response to God’s grace. The direction of the soul is now determined towards God.

“Purgatory is only intelligible as an abode of grace, as a place where in His goodness God remits sin in the same way as He does here on earth: ‘Guilt is only remitted by the power of grace.’” (*Ibid*).

The removal of guilt, however, does not absolve the need for the consequences of sin, the ‘punishment’ as it were, to be resolved. This requires a willingness on the part of the human to participate in the work of God. Here, Bartmann employs the first of his ‘softer’ images, that of the hospital. Purgatory is to be viewed as the place where those who have sinned go to have their sins forgiven and to be made healthy again so as to be able to continue with the journey of the soul towards God. Purgatory is, accordingly, not a place of torment, but a place of healing and of being made whole. Purgatory is:

“a hospital where ailing souls patiently wait complete restoration to health.” (*Ibid*).

Inasmuch as a hospital holds out hope for those who are unwell that they may be healed and restored to the wholeness of life, so purgatory is a place of hope. The souls there are certain of their salvation and ultimate progress towards heaven. Admittedly, there is a period of delay or transition as the healing process is effected, but the direction and destination of the souls are assured and expected.

“The Holy Souls live in hope of salvation, but a hope of which the fulfilment is delayed through their own fault; a hope that knows but one object which, for the moment, remains out of reach ... Such is the hope of the sick man to whom the physician at long last holds out the perspective of a cure.” (*Ibid* 138).

Another feature of this image which helps to describe something of the nature of purgatory, is that of suffering. Just as healing is expected to take place in a hospital, so is it expected in purgatory. Often there is pain involved in the healing process, but this is something that is endured, even anticipated, as the end result of the process will be wholeness. Similarly, Bartmann identifies this as a feature of purgatory. He points out that suffering for its own sake has little merit. He stresses again, in order to point away from the lurid visions of purgatory of the past, that suffering is not the objective of purgatory. What is the objective, is healing i.e. purification.

“In a hospital those sufferers are the most patient who are firmly convinced that the pain of their wounds is a healing pain. ... Sufferings, say St Thomas (Aquinas), are an evil, and cannot be desired for their own sake, but they may be desired, not for themselves but because of the profit we can derive from them.” (*Ibid* 230)

Another of the images that Bartmann employs in describing purgatory, is that of it being “Heaven’s ante-room” (*Ibid* 237). The effect of this image is to underline purgatory as a place of grace; that the souls in the ‘ante-room’ are



on their way towards heaven. This image also portrays an essence of the sense of suffering that has long been associated with the doctrine, and that is the suffering of waiting. The souls are still deprived of the object of their desire, that nearness and presence of God. The intensity of the image is highlighted in that such waiting, in itself, is likely to bring about a desire to do all that is necessary to end the delay and bring about admission into the room proper.

“...heavenly patience is found in Purgatory which is itself so close to heaven and where everything is appraised by its standards and directed towards its attainment.” (*Ibid* 232).

Another feature of this gentler image, is the sense of anticipation it engenders. Here, the destination is assured and the endurance is finite. This endurance includes the excitement of what lies beyond the ‘ante-room’. Purgatory, in this sense, is described as a place of joy. The objective of faith is close within the grasp of the souls within purgatory. There is a sense of purpose, progress and advancement that is wholesome and productive. Perhaps, most significantly, there is a heightened sense of hope.

“Hope brightens the whole of Purgatory: it is far more lovely, active, and infinitely more justified there than it ever was on this earth, for the holy souls almost have within their grasp that which is promised to them.” (*Ibid* 236).

## **Joseph Ratzinger**

Joseph Ratzinger is now better known as Pope Benedict XVI following his election in 2006. Ratzinger co-authored a series of books with Johann Auer, entitled 'Dogmatic Theology'. The last book of this series is written by Ratzinger alone and is entitled, "Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life". Within this work, he sets out the Roman Catholic theology insofar as purgatory is concerned. In comparison to Bartmann, he is a more contemporary theologian of the Roman Catholic Church. His theology is expressed in modern language and with a heightened sense of inclusiveness.

His explanation of the doctrine follows a biblically conservative line. What is of particular interest, however, is that he, like Bartmann, also starts from the perspective of the biblical references traditionally associated with the doctrine and works to render them in a way that is accessible to modern people. Not only to contemporary people though, but also with a specific eye to the Protestant branch of the Christian church. His seeking to engage with the Bible and tradition on this subject is conciliatory. So is the language that he uses. Whilst Bartmann clearly sought to defend the doctrine of purgatory against the accusations brought against it by both the Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Protestant communion, Ratzinger seeks out the areas, or ground, where common causes are likely to be followed and fruitful discussion pursued.

In talking about the authentic 'heart' of the doctrine, Ratzinger uses as his starting point the 1 Corinthians reading. The stance taken is Christological from beginning to end. In this way, the foundation that is laid, as mentioned in 1 Corinthians, is the foundation of Jesus Christ. What is built, the actions of our being, is built upon this same foundation. The fire of testing, is likewise to be seen Christologically as the fire of judgement, which, again, is depicted as the action of Christ, testing the quality of every person's work i.e. ascertaining what is of value and what is redundant from the perspective of eternity. Finally, the purpose of the fire is transformative in the sense that it renders the soul clear of the dross of life and renders it more Christ-like. In other words, the aim and purpose of life, death and the after life, is to become more like Christ. The process is not conducted by anything other than Christ himself and the transformation of the soul is the work of Christ.

The imagery that may be employed to convey this work of Christ is only important to the extent that it engages people and heightens their awareness of the principles involved. As Boulding points out, there are other ways in which we can re-image this process of purification.

“Are we committed to even the image of fire? Despite its scriptural origin, it would seem not; the truth it conveys is that of purification and if this can be otherwise expressed, we are at liberty to do so” (Boulding 1995: 107).

However it is imaged, Ratzinger insists that Christ is the beginning, cause and destination of the process.

“... we hold that purgatory is understood in a properly Christian way when it is grasped Christologically, in terms of the Lord himself as the judging fire which transforms us and conforms us to his own glorified body.” (Ratzinger 1988: 229).

Having started within a Christological framework based upon interpreted biblical texts, Ratzinger goes on to point out that the texts are limited and there is only so much that can be drawn from them. To this end, he draws two observations:

1. He seeks to rationalise the limited nature of the texts. He states that the natal church was not concerned with the afterlife as it was more concerned about the imminent return of Christ. Accordingly, the New Testament does not dwell upon the subject of what happens after death, as this was not the focus for consideration by that early church. As a consequence, the New Testament is limited in what it can advise on this subject and the most that can be argued is that the Bible leaves open the possibility of such an afterlife with hints and suggestions.

“the New Testament left open the question of the ‘intermediate state’ between death and the general resurrection on the Last Day. That question remained an unfinished condition, since it

could only be clarified by the gradual unfolding of Christian anthropology and its relation to Christology. The doctrine of Purgatory is part of this process of clarification". (*Ibid* 219).

2. The second observation concerns this process of clarification. To this end, Ratzinger points to the traditions of the Church and particularly the work of the Councils and the writings of the Church Fathers. He notes that in the writings of Tertullian, as representative of the Western branch of the Church, and in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, as representative of the East, there was already, as early as the late 100's and early 200's, a consensus regarding the afterlife. The outlines of the doctrine of purgatory were already being drawn. These in themselves, did not arise *ex nihilo*, but from the traditions of the Hebrew Church in the prayer of the dead, as well as from non-Christian sources. Of significance, the dream of St Perpetua is ascribed to Tertullian as what was to become a long line of *exempla*. All of this is part of the process of clarification. Ratzinger follows the line of teaching that began with these two early theologians as far as purgatory is concerned. He notes the circumstances in which the framework of the doctrine developed and the striking similarities between the two branches of the Church, as well as the differences.

Ratzinger tacitly acknowledges that past imagery in depicting purgatory was unhelpful and indicated purgatory as being a place of pain to be feared and abhorred. Specifically, the process of purgation, in the worst depictions of it,

were both beyond the scope of what the doctrine sought to explain and were focussed upon causing the soul as much physical pain as possible. The doctrine, however, is limited in what it can describe, but the point of it is that it revolves around the transformation of the soul.

“Purgatory is not, as Tertullian thought, some kind of supra-worldly concentration camp where man (*sic*) is forced to undergo punishment in a more or less arbitrary fashion. Rather it is the inwardly necessary process of transformation in which a person becomes capable of Christ, capable of God and thus capable of unity with the whole communion of saints.” (*Ibid* 230).

Ratzinger disputes that this depiction of Purgatory is merely salvation by works by other means. He concurs that,

“what actually saves is the full assent of faith” (*Ibid* 231)

and that this represents the foundation, the beginning and the substance of the Christian faith. He further accepts that this assent of faith is also the work of God who enables humans to respond by God’s grace given and revealed. What happens after this, however, is that life continues and is subject to those actions, attitudes, words and omissions that are characteristic of all human life. This can have the effect of ‘building’ upon life some structures of great value, and others that are flotsam and jetsam. The basic status of life is established by the acceptance of God’s grace through faith, but this does not

absolve people from building upon that foundation. The nature of these buildings is part and parcel of the transformative process that souls undergo to become more Christ-like.

“Man (*sic*) is the recipient of the divine mercy, yet this does not exonerate him (*sic*) of the need to be transformed. Encounter with the Lord *is* this transformation. It is the fire that burns away our dross and reforms us to be vessels of eternal joy.” (*Ibid*).

Accordingly, Ratzinger does not see purgatory as the antithesis of grace, but as part of the sanctification of the human, a process that is possible beyond the grave. Furthermore, this depiction of purgatory in these terms would appear to make the reference to 1 Corinthians entirely appropriate to the discussion. In these terms, the distance between the Roman Catholic faith and that of its ‘daughter’ churches does not appear to be as far as may be imagined. Salvation comes through faith, sanctification comes through a constant building towards God. This process must involve the human and seek the human’s co-operation in repentance and reform. It is somewhat surprising to hear the call for reformation from this theologian, but it is apposite:

“the root of the Christian doctrine of Purgatory is the Christological grace of penance. Purgatory follows by an inner necessity from the idea of penance, the idea of the constant readiness for reform which marks the forgiven sinner.” (*Ibid*).

Finally, Ratzinger also argues in favour of retaining the idea of the praying for the dead as integral to the doctrine of purgatory. He argues that humans cannot regard themselves as being, to use his word, 'monads'. We exist in relationship to others and the manner in which we live vis-à-vis each other, impacts upon our lives, changes us and makes us who we are.

"We are ourselves only as being in others" (*Ibid* 232).

The manner in which we can affect the most the 'others' of our world, is by acts of sacrificial love. Such acts are not restricted up to the event of death, but continue well beyond. Thus the reference to Maccabees is entirely consistent, as is the practice of the Church through all times of praying for the dead.

"The doctrine of Purgatory states that for such love, the limit of death does not exist. The possibility of helping and giving does not cease to exist on the death of the Christian. Rather does it stretch out to encompass the entire communion of saints, on both sides of death's portals." (*Ibid* 233).

### **Arthur James Mason**

Mason is a Church of England (Anglican) theologian who places the tradition of the Church of England firmly in the middle path (as would seem to be the



Anglican way). He speaks against the mistaken morbidity of the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory as well as against the outright dismissiveness of the Protestant branch of the church to this subject.

Mason traces the history of the doctrine from the earliest practices of the Church in praying for the dead, the views of the earliest theologians of the Church from both the Western and Eastern branches and the high level of significance that the doctrine held within the Church in the later Middle Ages. He notes that the later practices associated with the doctrine, notably the sale of indulgences, came into substantial misuse and rightly incurred the condemnation of the Protestants. It is his analysis of the teachings of Aquinas which draws him to conclude that Aquinas was responsible for the introduction of the notion of punishment as the means by which sin is satisfied. Although Aquinas' notions in this regard were subtle, they were exaggerated to such an extreme that the Indulgence practice became its consequence and the protests the consequence of that.

Mason first turns to the references from the Bible that have been traditionally used in order to support the doctrine of purgatory. In doing so, he finds that they are lacking to a high degree. In particular, he finds that the two verses in Matthew lack substance to support the theory of purgatory. Both can have equally valid (and more credible) interpretations and there would appear to be no compelling reason to interpret them in such a way as to suggest the existence of purgatory, when other interpretations would do. Secondly, the method of interpretation that would be required to arrive at such a conclusion

as to the existence of purgatory would require these verses to be removed from their context and given a literalist meaning.

In turning to the 1 Corinthians reading, Mason is less than convinced. He argues that it is more reasonable, in the context of the passage as a whole, that the writer, Paul, is speaking about the testing fire of the day of judgement, rather than to an intermediary period after death and before judgement. Further, he points out that what is to be tested by the fire, again in the context of the passage, is not the specific nature of the life that the human lived and 'constructed' on the 'foundation' of faith in Christ, but the nature of the ministry work that was conducted by the leaders of the church. In other words, the way in which the church was organised, arranged, encouraged and 'built up', is what the leaders of the church will be obliged to account for to God on the day of judgement.

"it (is not) at all natural in the context to understand the 'wood, hay, stubble' as Origen, Austin and the patristic commentators do, of sins which the man (*sic*) has committed, but rather of the futile results of some men's (*sic*) ministerial labour upon the spiritual fabric of the church." (Mason 1901: 103).

Accordingly, it is Mason's conclusion that,

"The texts melt away when examined". (*Ibid* 104).

Curiously, Mason is able to find scriptural support for the idea of purgatory in a text not really commented upon or made use of by the earliest proponents of the doctrine, that of 1 Peter 3: 19 and 1 Peter 4: 5 and 6, respectively set out as follows:

“So he (Christ) went and preached to the spirits in prison – those who disobeyed God long ago when God waited patiently while Noah was building his boat.” (NLT: 2003).

“But just remember that they (your former friends) will have to face God, who will judge everyone, both the living and the dead. That is why the Good News was preached even to those who have died - so that although their bodies were punished with death, they could still live in the spirit as God does.” (NLT: 2004).

Mason states that these verses can only be interpreted as meaning that the ‘spirits in prison’ are either:

1. Representative of fallen angels. This he discounts for reason that the remainder of the verse would appear to be more in tune with other human souls who were extant at the time of Adam; or
2. Human beings who had died. It is this view that Mason favours and argues that it finds support from the passage as a whole.

In the first verse, Mason finds a statement to the effect that Christ was active during the period of his death to his resurrection. The specific content of this activity involved his speaking to spirits who were likewise dead, but not involved in any final judgement.

“He (Christ) went’ – there was something answering to movement – ‘and preached’ – there was an operative ministry – to those who were like in a disembodied position to His own – ‘to the spirits in prison’”.  
(*Ibid*).

As far as the second of these verses is concerned, Mason argues for the reasonableness of a state of being that operates between death and the judgement (or resurrection from the dead) as a place of confinement or delay. Further, it would seem that the cause of this confinement is related to the sins that the souls committed during their lives. That Christ is able to communicate with these souls is again not doubted and it would also seem that they are capable of responding positively to that communication.

“the intended effect of the glad tidings brought to them was ‘they should live according to God in the spirit’, which at least implies some change in the estate for the better.” (*Ibid* 106).

From this point, Mason extrapolates the theory that if this was the manner in which humans who died at the ‘time of Noah’ were to be treated, why should there be any other distinction made to those souls who died subsequently?

Here Mason would seem to be broadening the ambit of the concept of purgatory far wider than understood in the classical sense. The doctrine of purgatory was specifically intended to benefit those who had as their 'foundation' their faith in Christ as extended to them by the grace of God. The guilt of sin was remitted in its entirety, setting the human soul *en route* to its destination of heaven. The process of purgation was to atone for, and purify, the human soul from the punishment of sin i.e. the dross of life – those aspects of human living that were sinful, identified in the Roman Catholic doctrine as venial sin. Here, Mason is speaking of all those who have lived reasonable and good lives, but who have not warranted their salvation. He speaks in universalistic terms that, even after death, there may be the opportunity for such souls to have access to the salvific grace of God. In support of this thesis, he points out that the prospects of any human being dying in a pure state is remote and to deny progress to this soul would be contrary to the mercy and love of God.

“Every day there pass away from amongst us men (*sic*) whose career has been anything but satisfactory, even to the last, who have yet had their good points. ... It is a great consolation if we are allowed to think that such souls, through the mercy of God, may pass hereafter to a process that may refine and cleanse them.” (*Ibid* 106 – 107).

In this sense, Mason does not distinguish between people who die possessed of a faith in Christ, or those who don't. What he does do is identify biblical verses that would speak of the broad parameters of purgatory. These

parameters would be summarised as follows: a place that exists after death but before heaven; of a process that takes place there whereby souls can respond to the presence and plea of Christ; where there can be a process of purification; that the end result of this process is the soul enabled to be released from its confinement. The basis for Mason's confidence lies in his trust in a God who is the Creator of all things and who is wise, faithful and merciful towards God's creation. In addition to this Theocentric motivation, he also suggests that the time and the space given to humans to better themselves and fit themselves for the presence of God would seem to be both reasonable and appropriate.

“The souls themselves, on their departure from the body, receive enlightenment; and seeing for themselves now for the first time the shortcomings of the life that they have ended, and deeply pained by the sense of the horribleness of sin, they welcome the chastening with satisfaction, and would not, if they could, pass to their blissful consummation without it.” (*Ibid* 108).

Is Mason, then, to be placed in the camp of firm believers in purgatory? Not quite. At most, Mason is prepared to declare that it is a possibility. He points out that there is a crucial aspect to this discussion that is absent, and that is that the doctrine cannot be fully grounded in the Bible because there is insufficient evidence from the Bible that such a process or place exists. Notwithstanding his reference to the verses in 1 Peter, he acknowledges that

this is a scant foundation upon which to construct so lofty and so significant a doctrine.

“The Word of God does not declare to us in unmistakable terms that there are any purgatorial processes at all after this life.” (*Ibid* 110).

He points out that any such place must be clearly spelled out in the Bible and in terms that are compatible with the manner in which God relates to and communicates with people in the ordinary world i.e.:

“with the assurance of forgiveness, with the sense of Christ’s presence and companionship, with the fellowship of the saints, with the sure and certain hope of a blessed resurrection, - with rest, and peace, and light, and refreshment, and enjoyment.” (*Ibid*)

Whilst the modern conceptions of purgatory do conceive of all of these options, the point remains that they are, to Mason, speculative and not final. In his final analysis, the best that he can state is that:

“I take up the position of St Austin, and acknowledge that it is all a possibility, not a revealed truth.” (*Ibid*).

### **Brian Hebblethwaite**

Human life is characterised by development and progress. Moral perfection is not achievable in the space of one life, particularly when cut short or abused. Further, the characteristic of God as a being of infinite love is one that reasonably would not be expected to tolerate eternal separation from that which God has created. Hebblethwaite is concerned to point out that the doctrines of the Church ought to be consistent with one another. In considering subjects such as the after life, the doctrine of justification is also to operate with the doctrine of sanctification.

Hebblethwaite regards the doctrine of purgatory positively. His motivation for doing so derives, in part, from an anthropological standpoint. He displays an assumption that human life is sacred and has embedded within it a God-given potential to achieve all that God intends it to achieve.

His conclusions reveal a deep-felt moral repugnance that so much of human life is cut short, abused and never allowed the opportunity to develop, nor reach the potential for which it was created. He does not accept that such lives should be further abused by the 'either/or' of justification by faith alone. By this I mean that it has been a somewhat simplistic 'trend' within the Protestant Church to view humans as either:



1. Having faith in Christ, thus being saved and going to heaven upon their death; or
2. Have not received Christ by faith, are therefore outside of the grace of God and upon death will, at best, not go to heaven, or, at worse, will go to hell.

Hebblethwaite argues that such a view of the world is simplistic, ignores so much of the revealed nature of God and places so much of humanity and human life in a negative position. He concludes that human life ought to be allowed the opportunity to develop and, if this cannot happen before the grave, it is reasonable to believe it will happen afterwards.

“there must be more to the creative process than a series of single decisive life spans.” (Hebblethwaite 1984: 218).

Similarly, Hebblethwaite reacts against the concept of a God of love that would permit the eternal separation that the doctrine of hell traditionally portrays. He complains that:

“Such permanent evil makes no religious or moral sense. If creatures can rebel against the divine ground of their being to such an extent as to render themselves absolutely unredeemable then there seems no point in God keeping them in being forever...” (*Ibid*: 216).

In this regard, Hebblethwaite would prefer to regard the human soul as rather being obliterated and forgotten altogether, than to be suspended in a hellish environment for eternity. To this end, he regards the language of the Bible as imaginative and symbolic than real. Furthermore, Hebblethwaite expresses confidence in the love of God for God's creation to the extent that such love will not permit such separation. In support of this, he favours the arguments for Universalism, stating that such a concept gives credibility to the doctrine of purgatory. A concept of universalism, of all people coming to salvation in Christ, coupled with the doctrine of purgatory, provides opportunity for the human soul, whether before or after the grave, to come to terms with the love of God so that all will find peace in God.

In support of the idea of purgatory, Hebblethwaite expands upon his statements to develop a sound argument for universalism and against those arguments which counter it. He acknowledges that there is a powerful tension that operates throughout Christian history between:

1. On the one hand, the love of God towards creation that is so magnificent that it allows Jesus to die in order to redeem humanity. Such a love must be able to find a way into the life of even the most intractably opposed human so as to eventually turn that person into friendship with God; and
2. On the other hand, the free will that has been granted to humanity to choose whom or what they will follow, whether for good or evil.

In the weighing up of these two, seemingly incompatible tensions, Hebblethwaite finds himself falling on the side of the love of God being stronger to overcome the objections and rebellion of humanity towards God's love.

“To suppose that there comes a time when the love of God, who went to the lengths of the cross of Christ to win men's (*sic*) love in return, has to write off a created person as absolutely unredeemable is a hard supposition for a Christian to make.” (*Ibid* 216).

Universalism, coupled with the notion of purgatory, is seen by Hebblethwaite as the means whereby God's love can be expressed and overcome all obstacles to God's love over time, notwithstanding the recalcitrance and objections of humanity. He develops his arguments as follows:

1. Purgatory allows theology to take seriously the fact of human free will. It allows for a time and a space whereby God may be able to enter into 'conversation' with the human soul and draw it closer to God's self and away from its negation of God. It may be hard to conceive how those who have seemingly so successfully made themselves repugnant to humanity should find favour with God in this way. This may, however, betray more the notion of humanity wanting to write off those considered evil, than crediting God with the wish to do so. Time and again, we are confronted by the reality of those whom human society has discarded as worthless or beyond redemption, finding their way back to God and friendship with God.

Further, the cross is a symbol of God's exceptional creativity: that God should use the cruellest of devices of execution in order to effect reconciliation and friendship between God and humanity. If this is an expression of the manner in which God can reach out to humans, how much more able will God effect this through time and space.

“the whole point of postulating an extended purgatorial phase between death and the final consummation is to allow for God's love to work, by grace alone, upon free creatures and to win their free response. ... confronted unambiguously by the healing love of God in Christ, even the most perverse creature may be hoped to be incapable of holding out forever against the mind and heart of the Creator.” (*Ibid* 217).

2. Although there are no proof texts that declare the notion of purgatory biblical, there is no need to regard the notion as being incompatible with the trends of the Bible as a whole. The biblical evidence, at the very least, must point to a God of love who is seeking to redeem all of humanity through the work of Jesus Christ. If this is only to be realised in the ordinary life span of every human being, then the task is lost even before it has begun. If this task can, in addition, be accomplished beyond the grave, this would be a better expression of God's love than the locating of the doctrine within a number of texts.
3. In addition, there are many references in the Bible which point towards a universalist interpretation. Although it can be argued that this requires an

assent in faith, given the possibilities that arise from purgatory, this assent can reasonably be expected to be given over time.

The dichotomy of justification by grace alone and the doctrine of purgatory are not necessarily incompatible, nor should they be regarded as being so. With these thoughts in mind, Hebblethwaite introduces the word 'Pareschatology' as a word that relates to Eschatology, but which specifically covers all theological expressions that pertain to what happens after death and prior to the final judgement. Purgatory would be, in his opinion, a feature within this. Hebblethwaite's arguments in favour of Universalism find their clear expression in his discussion about purgatory. It is the place where all may eventually find themselves in friendship with God. He argues that purgatory is thus a credible and realistic doctrine in these terms:

“In the light of the revealed nature of God, considerations of theodicy and of moral and religious plausibility encourage us to envisage further opportunities beyond the grave, for men and women denied such opportunities on earth, to respond to God's love and realise their potential as creatures destined for eternity.” (*Ibid*: 218)

To render this doctrine more acceptable to the modern Church, Hebblethwaite provides three arguments for its acceptability:

1. The doctrine does away with the issues concerning the Intermediate State between the death and resurrection. It presupposes such a State to be

one of continued development and progress of the soul towards perfection and heaven. As stated above, such a concept is able to resolve many outstanding problems that are related to theodicy and the free will of humanity.

2. Far from conflicting with the doctrine of justification by faith alone, it can be rendered compatible with it by stressing the process of sanctification. Realism precludes thinking that moral perfection is the automatic result of salvation. Human progress in faith towards God is not instantaneous but is a process of development and growth. Likewise, it can be reasoned to be the case after death as well.

“It is quite compatible with conviction that salvation is God’s work alone to hold that it takes effect gradually through experience and growth in spirituality both this side of the grave and beyond it” (*Ibid*: 219).

3. Such a doctrine goes a long way towards developing a basis for mutual understanding between Christianity and the other world religions without resorting to the ‘either/or’ of justification by faith alone prior to death. It allows for God’s justness and righteousness to come to others without resorting to contrived concepts such as ‘anonymous Christians’.

In adopting this concept of Purgatory, Hebblethwaite is seeking to explain a continuous process of human development ever closer to God. He sees this process as operative at all times, in all places and within all cultures. Further it

operates at stages before and after the grave and it's purpose is to ensure that all of humanity will acknowledge God and seek to be one with God.

### **John Macquarrie**

Macquarrie renders purgatory as something that is no less than 'indispensable' to eschatology. Like Hebblethwaite, he stresses that the doctrine of sanctification is consistent with purgatory. He is sensitive to the word 'purgatory' containing a cultural baggage which people find hard to overcome. Conscious of this, he recommends using other names or titles to depict the same truth. He argues that the Protestant objections to the doctrine derive from an historic wrong (abuse of indulgences) which is no longer relevant and is no longer a basis for continued rejection of the doctrine. Simply put, Macquarrie embraces the concept of purgatory and pours scorn on theologians who do not.

"It is hard to understand why Protestant theologians have such a violent prejudice against this conception, for it seems to me to be indispensable to any reasonable understanding of Christian Eschatology". (Macquarrie 1979: 367).

The strength of Macquarrie's argument lies in his rebuttal of the static extremes of 'either/or' after death in favour of a dynamic conception of a movement towards God, coupled with a strong Universalistic tendency. He considers the traditional perspective of heaven and hell as static and

unyielding, to be unhelpful in any meaningful discussion about the after life. Such perspective reinforces the idea that, once a human has made an election for God in faith, this is a sanctified state rendering the human heaven-bound. Implicitly, Macquarrie affirms the idea that heaven is the reward for those who have put their faith in Christ alone, is an unjust scenario, especially in the case of those denied the opportunity to make such a choice, let alone those who are given the opportunity, but who reject it.

Macquarrie presumes that God's omniscience and omnipresence are such that God's work of reconciliation cannot be restricted in the ordinary sense of location and time.

“if we reject the idea that God's reconciling work is restricted to the people living at this particular moment, and believe that his reconciliation can reach anywhere, ..., then we are committed to the belief in an intermediate state, whether or not we call it ‘purgatory’”.

*(Ibid).*

In rejecting the traditional scheme of ‘heaven or hell’, Macquarrie similarly rejects the traditional concepts associated with purgatory. It is not, in his opinion, a place for the brutal expiation of sins, but rather a process in the work of the purification of the human being and of that human's sanctification. He rejects ‘traditional’ concepts of purgatory in favour of a process of sanctification, of development, of progress of the human soul to be fitted for life with God.



Macquarrie argues that the Protestant objections to the doctrine of purgatory have derived, in part, from its abhorrence of indulgences, which is no longer relevant. An historical wrong that no longer exists is no basis for the rejection of a present truth. Further, that Protestant objections to the doctrine of purgatory are based on the traditional conceptions of the doctrine, which is no longer the case.

One of the aspects that Macquarrie reinforces is that purgatory is naturally associated with a place of suffering. He does not revert to the hellish, punitive nature of suffering depicted in the earlier formulations of the doctrine which he rejects as the glorification of pain for pain's sake. Rather, he avers that purgatory is a process of self-mortification in order that the soul may be more enabled to advance into the kingdom of God. This is a painful process of letting go of self, and taking on more of the characteristics of God.

“The kind of ‘suffering’ envisaged in purgatory is not an external penalty that has to be paid, but is our suffering with Christ, our being crucified with him as we are conformed to him, the painful surrender of the ego-centred self that the God-centred self of love may take its place.” (*Ibid* 368).

Macquarrie does not reinforce the traditional view of purgatory, but, as stated above, he reformulates the traditional concept. He believes that in doing so, it is manifestly more presentable to both divisions of the Christian Church. He

envisages purgatory as part of a great continuum that stretches through all eternity. Heaven and hell, in such a perspective, are the extremes at the ends of this continuum and purgatory is afforded the large space in between. The intention is to describe a movement of souls along this continuum underpinned by a universalist ideal that all will eventually attain to the higher level of heaven. This is a neat notion and it makes purgatory out to be a broad venue indeed. It leaves much unexplained, however. In particular, it gives a great deal of space to the arguments for universalism and it also implicitly suggests that purgatory can be a place of regression, as well as advance.

### **Gerhard Sauter**

Human existence is destined towards God, in community with Christ and in community with all who are in Christ. In the light of this idea, it is clear that Sauter's views are Ecclesiological. Justification begins the process of transformation which is an ongoing process of sanctification to render the human 'fit' for the kingdom of heaven. Sauter locates purgatory as a theological solution to the issues surrounding the Intermediate State. This State is not regarded by him as a place for the working off of human debt to God, but a continuing in relationship with Christ and a moving towards maturation.

Sauter's thesis in respect of the doctrines of Eschatology recognises what he considers to be two crucial areas of reality:

1. The concept of the personal continuation of existence in the afterlife is all too egotistical and must be radically tempered. In entering into faith in Christ, the individual must acknowledge that death to self has come about.

Sauter refers to Galatians 2:20:

“I myself no longer live, but Christ lives in me. So I live my life in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (NLT: 1859).

This affirms that, in the human acceptance of Christ, the human has put an end to his or her life and that it is now Christ that reigns in the human’s life. The effect of this ought to be to cause humans to view the world in an utterly new and radical way. For instance, Sauter argues that new life in Christ means that:

“Life and death become metaphors and no longer have a natural function in human beings’ sense of direction in time. The way in which human beings locate themselves has changed. It is now possible for them to live intensively and to experience time while hoping to be accepted by God and held by God’s promises.” (Sauter 1999: 222).

A consequence of this world view is to regard human existence as existence that is destined towards heaven, in community with Christ, and in community with all those who are in Christ.

2. Justification by faith in Christ is only the beginning of a process that is transformative of the human ego. It is an ongoing process that equates to sanctification. It is a process that overcomes all obstacles to Christ in the human's life. It is a process that renders the human 'fit' for the kingdom of God. Sauter couches this belief in the language of creation and its fulfilment:

“God's desire is to make perfect what was begun with the work of creation”. (*Ibid*: 215).

Neither of these points is intended to render the human an automaton in the process, but to invite the human's participation. These points recognise human desire to have confidence and hope in the destiny that God has for humanity. Concomitantly, Sauter is deeply critical of the traditional formulations of Eschatological doctrines, finding that they fail to “address this deep root of Christian expectation” (*Ibid*: 5). There is a tendency amongst many theologians to just express events and details, rather than meet the real needs that are expressed by humans in terms of destiny.

In the light of this highly summarised statement of Sauter's theology on this subject, what role does he perceive purgatory to play? If the life of faith is a life where one grows towards God, then death is not a final event, but the closing of a chapter and the beginning of another in which the human can find fulfilment and be fully redeemed.

“In serving as a balance to the achievements of life, death moves men and women to God and brings them into the perfection of a relationship with God. Redemption is seen as a process of integration.” (*Ibid*: 200).

He tends positively to the belief of development after the grave as recognition of the completion of God’s creation.

Sauter locates purgatory as a theological solution to the issues surrounding the ‘Intermediate State’. It is also a rebuttal of the trend that argues that the resurrection of the dead takes place upon death. He argues that purgatory is not a ‘working off’ of the ‘debt’ caused by sin, as this would amount to a form of salvation by the ‘works’ of the individual to earn God’s grace. In this sense, Sauter is talking the traditional language of Protestantism in its traditional rejection of purgatory. Sauter, however, seeks to phrase this confrontational dialogue between the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches in such a way as to render the doctrine of purgatory one that converges with both perspectives. In regard to the Protestant aspect of the dialogue, he accepts the doctrine of justification by faith in that it conforms to the fundamental point argued above i.e. our continuation as human beings is dependent upon Christ:

“Our life, being in Christ, ‘survives’ in the light of Christ’s advocacy: we are promised the presence of Christ in our own time and space. For this reason, Christ is our hope”. (*Ibid*: 201).

If taken to its extreme, however, this doctrine would imply that the human is overwhelmed and loses all individuality. It ignores the point that salvation is not an instantaneous event, but part of a process of maturation.

Sauter looks to concepts that are common to both denominations. In doing so he locates:

“Key words and phrases such as 'integration', 'perfection', 'fullness', and 'totality of meaning' (which) indicate a process of unification and maturation.” (*Ibid*).

From this approach, Sauter is able to breath new life into the meaning of the 1 Corinthians verses. Although admitting that Paul is addressing Christian teachers here, he does not accept this to be exclusively so and there is an element in this teaching that is of universal value. The structure of our lives is based upon Jesus Christ and this structure is tested by a fire that purifies us in the sense of bringing out all that is of great quality in the eyes of God. It is not the point to be punitive in respect of the works of dross, but it is to enliven and vivify the works of beauty.

“The trial by fire tests what is of lasting quality, and in the process may reverse our ideas of what may constitute quality. Yet we do not perish because of work that does not withstand the test, even if we are, so to speak, singed by the flames. What is essential is that God’s Spirit, ‘which dwells in [us]’ 1 Cor. 3:16) is not destroyed.” (*Ibid*).

This again points to Sauter's fundamental point, that life is a process of development both before and after the grave; a taking up of the human soul gradually into the kingdom of God.

### **Jürgen Moltmann**

The creation of humans by God establishes a relationship of permanence with God that only God may revoke. Humans therefore have every reason to trust that God will persevere in that relationship, even through death. The theme here is again maturation and development.

Moltmann is responsible for much of the re-invigoration of Hope as a core belief of the Christian faith. His works, 'Theology of Hope' (1967) and 'The Crucified God' (1974) are key works that have re-established Eschatology as a fundamental aspect of systematic theology. Eschatology impacts upon the way theologians regard other systematic doctrines. Eschatology also impacts upon the way that humans perceive themselves as creatures who hope, and, in so doing, re-create their present circumstances around the promises that are placed before them. In 'The Ends of the World and the Ends of God', (Polkinghorne 2000) it is a mature Moltmann that contributes to the continuing eschatological 'storms', particularly his fearless asking of hard questions, and his courage in spreading his net far to catch possible answers.

Moltmann's thoughts on the doctrine of purgatory are predicated upon his firm belief that humans are created in the image of God; more than that, because they are so created, they are in a permanent relationship to God. Because this relationship is of a permanent quality, it is also an enduring relationship in the sense that there is no power greater than God that is capable of destroying that relationship. It is a relationship that only God can terminate.

“God puts himself in relationship to these created beings in such a way that they become his mirror and reflection, and the response to him. If God is God, his relation to his human image cannot be destroyed. ... as long as God holds fast to this relationship to human beings, to be made in the image of God remains the inalienable and indestructible destiny of human beings. If this were not so, the powers of time and death would be mightier than God.” (Polkinghorne 2000: 245).

The revelation of God's commitment to his creation means that humans are the very image of God. Because of this, humans have every reason to believe that God's love and commitment to humanity is such that God will not allow humanity to perish or to waste away. Thus, humans have every reason to trust God for their future destiny and to hope in the promise of God that this relationship will not be terminated, not even by death. Death, then, instead of being the end of all things, has been transformed into a portal through which the human passes and continues in relationship to God. It is a perseverance by God in the relationship that God has initiated.



“People remain God’s conversation partner, even if they do not listen. Even death cannot alter that. ... death is the boundary of our lives but not the boundary of God’s relationship to us. In that relationship, our death is rather a gateway or connecting door, a transformation on our side.” (*Ibid*: 246).

The summary of this is that humanity is in relationship to God and that it is the destiny of humans that they are to be with God. Having said this, Moltmann does not treat this as an automatic given, but as a process of maturation and a development towards God. He defers to the concept of on-going purification, based on the promise that the pure in heart shall see God.

Anthropologically, Moltmann argues that human life before death is largely unable to achieve this goal. On the one hand, he points out that so much of life is curtailed, cut short or ruined so that it is impossible to believe that such lives would have had any opportunity to identify God’s love and so respond to it. Moltmann also points out that, even in those lives that have not been so prejudiced, can it truly be argued and sustained that such lives reach their full potential and completion in the short space of time that life offers? Furthermore, if death is the end of all things, then the only viable conclusion is the absurdity of life. Here Moltmann begins to develop a theme that runs through his discussion on this subject, and that is the theme of justice. He observes that all humans possess the ability to reach their full potential. In the context of abruptly shortened, stunted or abused life, there ought reasonably to be a process whereby such lives can still be made whole even after death.

“For me, God’s judgement means the final putting to rights of the injustice that has been done and suffered, and the final raising up of those who have been bowed down.” (*Ibid* 252).

In answer, Moltmann favours a doctrine of purgatory that embraces the concept of human development and maturation. Moltmann regards purgatory as part of the human process of growing closer to God and closer to the image of Christ.

“God will also complete the work that he has begun with a human life. If God is God, then not even violent death will stop him from doing so. So I believe that God’s history with our lives will go on after our deaths, until that completion has been reached in which a soul finds rest.” (*Ibid*).

Whilst this argument describes purgatory, Moltmann prefers the expression, ‘the intermediate state’. He prefers this expression because it allows for the ‘space’ between death and the destiny, conceived as heaven, whereby all the wrongs of life can be remedied and the human soul finds fulfilment. This is a largely anthropomorphic perspective, but it adds a further dimension to the subject of purgatory. Not only is it the ‘place’ whereby sins are purged and strained away, but it is also the realisation of the soul’s potential – a kind of actualisation of its complete worth. This purification then, in Moltmann’s eyes,

is not merely the expunging of sinful dross, but the refining of the soul to its greatest value. All this is borne in mind in the context of justice:

“I conceive of that ‘intermediate state’ as a wide space for living, in which the life that was spoiled and cut short here can develop freely. I imagine it as the time of a new life, in which God’s history with a human being can come to its flowering and consummation.” (*Ibid*).

Howsoever nominated, the impression that is gained is of a state beyond death in which God's ‘partnership’ with each human continues and achieves its potential.

As a further expression of this ‘Intermediate State’, Moltmann draws deeply on the image of ‘community’. He specifies that this is not a concept that applies only to the living, but one that expresses continuation of relationship between the living and the dead. He argues that the Bible points to Christ as being the Lord of both the living and the dead:

“Christ died and rose again for this very purpose, so that he might be Lord of those who are alive and of those who have died.” Romans 14:9. (NLT: 1793).

He argues that the same degrees of relationship that living humans have with Christ, are the same as those experienced by the dead.

“If, in their worship, Christians celebrate the presence of Christ, ..., then they are worshipping in communion with the dead, too.” (*Ibid* 254).

He bemoans the culture of narcissism that neglects the dead. On the other hand, he applauds those cultures in which the respect for the dead is upheld. He observes that, in a culture where the dead are regarded as part of the ‘living’ community, prayer for those that have gone before is naturally achieved.

Moltmann responds to the customary Protestant criticism of the doctrine of purgatory by arguing that much of this opposition arose from the abuse of indulgences. He points out, however, that Protestant antipathy to the doctrine was not opposed to the concept of:

1. Humans continuing to exist with God after death; nor
2. Humanity, present and past, existing in communion with one another.

As far as these concepts are concerned, the Protestant cause had, and still has, no argument with them.

If these concepts are accepted by the Protestant Communion then the doctrine of justification by faith alone ought to be mollified. This can be done by the adjustment of the doctrine insofar as it applies to a choice made during the course of one, individual life. Moltmann argues, that to attribute all that

human life can achieve to the rendering of this one decision (however important that it may be), would be an injustice to the love of God and the power of God to put all things to right.

### **Summary**

There is a wide spectrum of theologians who are generally accept the idea of purgatory. It is well to observe that this broad agreement is over an issue that is fundamental to human existence, is located within Eschatology as the summation of all theology, and yet still finds theological views converging on this point. This is remarkable, and it would seem to indicate that whilst theological differences are real, there is also a broad range of theological agreement.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **THE CONTRIBUTION (THE ARGUMENTS 'FOR')**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter represents a summary (not a full analysis) of the arguments that may be offered for the (and here, perhaps, is the time to make use of this expression) 'belief' in a purgatory-like existence. It is a 'taster' of the positive avenues for exploration that the idea of purgatory has to offer.

Purgatory has much to commend itself to Eschatology, and to human hope. In its modern application, it is able to provide a cogent and reasonable concept that is able to accommodate many 'thorny' issues of theology to arrive at an acceptable conclusion. Some of the more obvious positive features of purgatory are set out hereunder. They are in no particular order of significance.

#### **The Anthropological View**

Certainly from the perspective of the Roman Catholic Church, the doctrine of purgatory is one that has a long line of precedence, which cannot be denied. As a doctrine of the Roman Catholic Faith, it has maintained its position and its core features have remained unchanged since the 12<sup>th</sup> Century.

Admittedly, there were extreme notions that became associated with the doctrine, as well as hugely questionable practices. Nevertheless, its content survives and is part of the Roman Catholic belief today.

The content of the doctrine expresses several points:

1. The death of a human is followed by a form of judgement and those who are the recipients of God's grace are those who are heaven-bound.
2. For such heaven-bound souls to be able to enjoy heaven, however, all trace of sin in their lives must be resolved and removed.
3. It is possible for such sin to be worked out and resolved through the process of purgation.
4. The prayers that are offered by the survivors for the dead are effective for their continued progress through purgatory.

“... the outcome of this petition (is that) the Church expects an alteration in the state of the dead... The effect of such a ‘passing’ from one condition to the other is what the Roman Catholic Church understands by ‘purification’”. (Lanne 1992: 15).

My reading of the Bible and my experience of life instructs me that the greatest problem that humans face is that of sin: how this is acquired, what its effects are in the present life, and what the consequences of this may be in the after life. Humans are in need of salvation if their sin is to be ameliorated and resolved within their lives so that they may lead effective and “whole” lives. In addition, such salvation enables them to be ‘suitable’ to benefit from the afterlife that God offers to humanity through Jesus Christ. Most denominations agree that sin is the great human burden and that its great resolution is in the atoning, sacrificial death of Christ.

From this starting point, other questions may be asked: Does the acceptance by the human of this atonement by faith eternally and immediately render the human suitable for heaven? Or is this propitiation part of the process of setting the human upon the road to faith and perfection? There are severe theological objections to that single, precisely formulated statement of faith to be the key that unlocks the door of heaven and admits all. It is more reasonable to argue that such step of faith is one of many such steps of faith that admit one into a positive process of change that continues to render the human capable of the perfection of heaven.

A defining characteristic of humans is their openness to the future. Humans are not motivated by some vague desire or need that they want or hanker after, rather they are able to conceive precisely of a future and are equipped to make such future/s a present reality. Human life is not static in the sense of



being directed to the maintenance of present day needs, but is dynamic and always reaching out beyond itself.

"Human life is constant progress into unforeseeable openness" (Sauter 1999: 129).

Furthermore, humans are not content with the present. They set before themselves better futures and they seek to attain these futures. Humans are developmentally minded and progressive. These are unique qualities that set humanity apart from the rest of creation.

If it is accepted, as Moltmann argues, that humans are made in the image of God, it is reasonable to argue that this progressive characteristic of humanity bears a reflection of the divine imprint. If this is similarly accepted as true, it is reasonable to argue that God desires the continued development and progress of humanity to reflect that image of God as intended.

Medieval life was described as being nasty, brutish and short, and this epitaph is no less relevant in the world today for much of humanity. Directly or indirectly, the above writers all stress human development towards perfection, the process of sanctification that begins with Christ and ends with heaven. All speak of human life gradually moving towards purification and God. Hebblethwaite's appeal that,

“there must be more to the creative process than a series of single decisive life spans.” (Hebblethwaite 1984: 218)

is entirely relevant. If this present life is all that humans can expect, and if, in this single life span, the process of sanctification is intended to begin and be completed, this places an intolerable burden on humanity. Such a concept is hardly equitable. To use Moltmann’s expression, it does not equate with any sense of reasonable ‘justice’.

If, on the other hand, human development towards authenticity, or holiness, or perfection, or sanctification, is regarded as a process beginning with Christ and ending with God, but is not irrevocably terminated at the tomb, then the doctrine of purgatory, as the intermediate life in progress towards God, becomes a powerful and liberating image. It is powerful because, if it is accepted in faith, it opens new perspectives for humans in terms of life and death and the continued work of God in human life. It is liberating because it permits humans to be released from an intolerable burden of guilt, doubt and effort. It permits a life of confidence in the power of God at work in human lives in a way that is continuous, and will result in full human potential being reached.

A corollary of human ‘development’ is the divine work of grace in human life. Inasmuch as grace develops gradually and is brought to ‘harvest’ at the right time, there is no reason to suppose that the continuation of the work of grace in the human soul is terminated at death. On the contrary, it is more

reasonable to suppose that God's grace continues to operate after death, and even that this process is accelerated.

“since grace operates gradually in the sanctification of the redeemed, here on earth, it is reasonable to suppose a time of gradual purgation hereafter before the final consummation of heaven is reached.” (*Ibid* 155).

The theologians referred to above, are prepared to accept that opportunities are given to humans before and after the grave to repent and allow God to bring about maturity of the soul. The objective of this is for humans to realise all of the potential that God has placed within them. This belief is reasonably based upon the nature of human life as being developmental and progressive, and upon the revelation of a loving God, intending to fulfil God's wishes for humanity. Further, if one takes seriously the omnipotence, omnipresence and omniscience of God, it is also reasonable to believe that death and time are not greater than their Creator and that God's concern for humanity is all-embracing throughout time and space.

This current refinement of the traditional doctrine of purgatory moves the emphasis of this doctrine away from the human having to make good the wrongs done in life, to one where the human is given further opportunities to receive the grace of God. It emphasises God's wish to move the human nearer to God's presence and it accentuates the vastness of God.

### **The Theodical View**

Another positive feature of the present conceptualising of purgatory, is that it provides a fresh view on the problem of theodicy. The unjustness of life is exacerbated by the evil that humans commit against one another and the seemingly arbitrary disasters that befall humans. These, together, have been the cause of the fading of much human faith in God. If life is a single opportunity within which to make a choice for God, then life appears unjust, the choice is open to only a few and a terrible burden of the responsibility of evangelism and mission is placed upon those who have made such a choice.

Few humans are able to hear of the possibilities that are opened to them by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Further, very few of those are able to appreciate its message so as to be able to make an informed decision about it. Many die young, many have their lives cut short by death or illness or calamity; many have their lives blighted by inhumanity. Such a view of reality argues against the need for every human to make one single, precise decision regarding faith in Christ if they are to benefit from a positive after life. Many will not hear; many are incapable of hearing; many will never be given the opportunity to choose.

The experience of life for the vast majority of humanity is one of suffering and struggle. For God to deny people the opportunity to hear and respond to the Gospel is a contradiction of God being revealed as the Father of love and the source of all love. It is inconceivable that God should permit created life to be

omitted from God's grace by reason of human evil, natural evil, or even the shortness of life. Related to this is the fact that even if such choices are made, at what point can they be argued to be adequate and all the evil done resolved sufficient to render the human ready for heaven? Again, purgatory offers a solution to these issues. It is an opportunity for those who have not heard to hear, to respond and to be healed and fitted for heaven.

If there are opportunities beyond the grave to accept the grace of God, and if the influence of God goes on throughout life and beyond death, then the tragedy of perpetrated sin, the sin of neglect and the randomness of evil and nature, can begin to be ameliorated and rationalised. This is further enhanced if Moltmann's arguments in favour of continued community are taken up. In this way, the separation in life from those loved, howsoever that separation takes place, does not terminate relationships and community.

This is not to say that Christians should simply shrug their shoulders in response to the need to evangelise or to be unconcerned about the imperatives of mission. Nor does it mean that humans should simply ignore all matters of conscience and ethics as irrelevant if there are to be other opportunities for repentance. Such an attitude would be an appalling denial of the work of God in human life and would expose a complete misunderstanding of God's love and Christ's sacrifice. The response to such an attitude falls outside the scope of this thesis, which seeks to deal with the veracity of the doctrine in the first instance.

### **The Universalist View**

The doctrine of purgatory also gives viability to the ideas of Universalism. Again, the limited amount of space and scope herein precludes examination of this in depth. There is a strong theme of Universalism that runs through the Bible. This theme concludes that God's love will be able to penetrate and break through into the most stubborn of hearts and overcome the most appalling of circumstances, so that all will be able to have community with God through Christ.

If this is to be accepted as reasonable and true, it is hard to conceive of such an event taking place this side of the grave. The conditions of life and the hard attitudes of many, would seem to make it an impossibility that these can be overcome if present life was all that provided the opportunity to do so. If, on the other hand, a concept of purgatory is introduced and rationalised into this situation, it is possible to conceive of God's love reaching to all circumstances and situations.

This view argues that everyone will be 'saved' and go to heaven. It is based on the philosophy that a God of love would be a caricature of love if God allowed a place where God's love could not reach, or where God's creation would be lost to God for eternity. This view also gives substance to certain biblical texts that speak about a form of universal salvation. Through the vastness of eternity, God's love ought still to be able to reach into the hardest

of hearts; that there should be an end to regret, guilt and unforgiveness and a joining together in Communion with God.

### **The View Of Tradition**

Tradition operates within every denomination to some extent. Its value is that it reasonably identifies and articulates a belief, usually dating back to the earliest times of the Church. Such beliefs are, in the fullness of time, stated in the form of doctrines or in the form of church practices. Such beliefs, however, are not necessarily recorded in any great detail, or systematically, in the Bible. Tradition tends to be reasonable and well considered. It tends to have developed, or mutated, over a lengthy period of time. Further, it tends to explain aspects of the Christian faith that are of great significance, but which do not have a plethora of biblical texts to cover all of the aspects that this doctrine demands.

In this regard, the explanation of the role of tradition as expounded by Newman is useful here. More particularly, in relation to the doctrine of purgatory, it is observed that this is a doctrine (plus a system of practice) that falls well within the category of a Church tradition. It is further pointed out that this tradition is venerable, reasonable and explains in some part the lacking of scriptural support.

The role of Tradition in the church is a powerful element in the formulation of doctrine. Tradition represents a form of practice or way of conducting theology

that is not immediately apparent from the Bible, but which is understood to be part of the practice of the Church from earliest times and is maintained within the Church. It is also understood not to be in contradiction to the Bible.

“The Roman Catholic Church has chiefly stressed Tradition. The original deposit of faith, entrusted to the Church, has been passed on and unfolded through the successors of the Apostles; and above all, through the successors of St. Peter, the Popes, who are regarded as the infallible exponents of the faith.” (Macquarrie 1977: 380).

Newman proposed a theory of development to explain the development of doctrine arising from Tradition and to answer criticism of this approach to theology. This is, in part, relevant to understanding the role that Tradition plays in the formation of doctrine in the Church.

“Time is necessary for the full comprehension and perfection of great ideas; and that the highest and most wonderful truths, though communicated to the world once for all by inspired teachers could not be comprehended all at once by the recipients, but, as received and transmitted by minds not inspired and through media which were human, have required only the longer time and deeper thought for their full elucidation.” (Newman 1888: 90).

All denominations, to some extent, resort to Tradition as a means of explaining what it is that they believe. It is not uncommon to accept a tradition



into the practice of a denomination that has little in the way of biblical exposition to commend it. If all doctrine were to be based solely on it being readily and fully explained in the Bible, this would leave the Christian faith denuded of fundamental doctrines and it would impoverish the Christian faith.

“God’s revelation does not have to be envisaged as dropping from the sky or as an explicit message whispered into the ears of the prophets. God’s truth can be revealed to us in the way a certain history develops.” (Olivier 1991: 60).

In what ways, then, does Tradition serve to assist in the establishment of a doctrine of purgatory:

1. Purgatory has little to support it as far as the biblical ‘evidence’ is concerned. There is no direct biblical support and the most that can be said is that certain interpretations are possible.
2. Nevertheless, there are good and cogent reasons why the Bible does not address this issue in that it was under no compulsion to do so being concerned with other matters of faith.
3. The idea of purgatory is not inconsistent with the general purport of the Bible and in many ways is complimentary to it.

4. The idea of purgatory has a long history with the Church going back to the early centuries after Christ.

5. It is reasonable.

### **The Biblical View**

The Bible has been made use of in order to defend the doctrine of purgatory. It is pointed out, however, that this use followed a particular manner of interpretation that took the texts out of their context and often rendered them into an apocalyptic reading, which the text, as a whole, did not support. Modern Roman Catholic theologians also do not support the texts that their predecessors followed so closely. The most that can be said in this regard, is that the biblical texts do not exclude the possibility of purgatory.

For all of the positive attributes of Tradition in the formulation of doctrine, non-Roman Catholic Christian denominations will not readily accept such a doctrine based on the flimsiest of biblical references. They will demand an answer as to why there is no clear definition of purgatory in the Bible. Unless this is satisfactorily resolved, it will remain a stumbling block within Protestant teaching and condemn it to providing private consolation, but not to public recognition.

Whilst the:

1. Role that tradition plays in the formation of a doctrine;
2. Early acceptance of this doctrine into the Church;
3. Hints of this doctrine that may be in the Bible;
4. Potent and rich themes of sanctification, continued development and purification that this doctrine supplies; and
5. Tool that this doctrine offers to pastoral care;

all work in favour of the doctrine, there is still a need to demonstrate a biblical foundation and a reconciliation with the theme of justification by faith. In part of an answer to this criticism, a number of directions of thought are proposed:

Firstly, giving a name to a doctrine that does not appear in the Bible is not proof of the failure of a doctrine. Further, the absence of sufficient volume (or quantity of references in the Bible) in respect of a doctrine, does not render the doctrine meaningless. It is pertinent to re-emphasise that the writers of the biblical accounts in the New Testament were little concerned about this subject. Their focus was on other things. Notwithstanding this, it is possible to locate a number of biblical images and concepts that lend themselves to the idea of purgatory:

1. The resurrection of Christ. As an historical fact, this event is extraordinary and causes one to see life and death from an entirely new perspective. This resurrection was not merely the re-animation of life and the restoration to what once was, but it was the re-creation of something new and vital. Whilst the resurrected Christ retained a familiarity that those who witnessed His new life could recognise, there was, moreover, a uniqueness in this new life that caused amazement. For example, there was the way that some of the laws of physics no longer seemed to apply to Christ all the time. The resurrected Christ is an example of the power of God to overcome all obstacles in the way to human fulfilment. Further, the resurrected Christ is the anticipation and evidence of what God can do.
2. Romans 8:38 and 39 speaks of the love of God as extending to all times and situations, inclusive of life and death, the present and the future.

“And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can’t and life can’t. The angels can’t and the demons can’t. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell can’t keep God’s love away. Whether we are high above the sky or in the deepest ocean, nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NLT: 1783).

This is not mere hyperbole on Paul's part. His words are carefully chosen and give rise to meaningful insight. In particular, Paul expresses his belief that the love of God is so vast that it extends beyond the frontier of death.

3. There is the purification process referred to in I Corinthians 3:10–15, the *textus classicus* of the doctrine of purgatory. This text, as well as the others referred to in Chapter Three, do allow for the possibility of purgatory. Certainly, there is no excluding of the possibility in the sense that certain universal truths may be argued to exist in these verses.
4. The interpretation that has been applied by Mason to the texts of 1 Peter 3: 19 and 1 Peter 4: 5 and 6, the relevance of which has been set out above.
5. The analogy given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 to the seed that is planted being radically changed into the plant that emerges. Paul here is specifically writing about the resurrected life. His description gives credibility to the concept of alteration, change and maturation that the doctrine of purgatory intends to depict.
6. There are the words attributed to Jesus in Mark 9:49: "For everyone will be purified with fire." (NLT: 1506). This reference is part of a section of teaching by Jesus in which he warns his listeners against temptation. He does so in the context of the after life and warns that it is "better to enter heaven with only one hand than to go into the unquenchable fires of hell

with two hands". (Mark 9:43). It is clear that Jesus is speaking about the after life and that the decisions made before that event will have significant consequences. It is verse 49 that is significant though, in that Jesus states that everyone will be tested by the fire and that its purpose is that of purifying in the sense of making clean.

These, then, are some of the references that open the perspective wider than a rigid reading of the Bible will give in the context of a static concept of heaven and hell. It is by no means exhaustive, but seeks to point out that there are fertile references and sources that can be explored in order to justify a reasonable faith in the hereafter and, in particular, purgatory.

Secondly, there is the argument that there are many images used in the New Testament that pertain to the hereafter, which images are fertile places to further consider the concept of purgatory, or at the least, its incorporation.

In summary, New Testament studies serve to remind that the New Testament was written at a time of expectation of the imminent *parousia*. As such, there was no need to reflect deeply upon the afterlife. The New Testament was never intended to operate as a textbook for theology. Considerations of the afterlife were not an issue for the New Testament Church, the eyes of which were focussed upon other issues. The foundational concern of the New Testament was the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the manner in which this opened new perspectives on life and how this was to be worked out. This was

all done in the context of the New Testament Church's conviction that the *parousia* was imminent.

When it became apparent to the Church that the *parousia* was no longer close, but was to be located much further into the future, the Church had to adjust its thinking and anticipation. In this process, it is likely that thought began to be focussed upon issues such as the nature of the after life. Whether the Church did this or not, however, is beside the point. The point is that these considerations fell outside the anticipation of the New Testament Church.

It is possible to reasonably argue that there are positive references in the Bible that point to certain concepts that validly make up the doctrine of purgatory. Notwithstanding this, there still remains not only the absence of direct references to the doctrine, but many direct references that point away from it altogether. This is particularly the case in references to a place of fire and torment, references made by Jesus. How are these to be accounted for and addressed?

## **The View Of the Doctrines of Justification and Sanctification**

‘Justification’ is defined as:

“Of a sinner, to be brought into the right relationship with God through the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” (Deist 1984: 135).

The doctrine of Justification describes the process whereby God gives to humans a free pardon from sin and an entering into a right relationship with God. This process is one that is achieved through Jesus Christ. His death upon the cross is understood as the means by which human sin is atoned for and the exigencies of God’s justice are met. Jesus’ death upon the cross is also understood as the means by which humans are able to receive from God, through faith, this atonement.

“Luther’s doctrine of ‘justification by faith’ does not mean that what God demands of us is faith, as if this were something that we had to do or achieve, and which God then rewards. It means rather that both faith and justification are the work of God, a free gift to sinners.” (Gonzalez 1985: 19).

The doctrine of justification describes the human as being placed into a ‘right’ relationship with God. This, however, is understood to represent the beginning



of the relationship which must now develop. This development is accounted for, in part, through the doctrine of sanctification. 'Sanctification' is defined as:

“Becoming more and more like Christ, living a life increasingly free of sin and evil.” (Deist 1985: 226).

This is the process of becoming holy; a deliberate and meditated choosing to desist from practices, attitudes and behaviours that do not conform to the understood values of God, and to embrace and conform to those practices, attitudes and behaviours that do. In relation to justification, it is a continuation of what God has initiated, and it is done with reliance on the Holy Spirit to guide and to assist.

In respect to purgatory, both doctrines find agreement up to a point: justification sets the sinner on the path to right relationship with God, and sanctification maintains the progress towards God. There are, however, several points at which difficulties arise and which have caused serious dispute between churches. In particular, the Protestants argued that the concepts of justification and sanctification were at odds with the doctrine of purgatory for the following reasons:

1. The Bible was regarded as the sole source of life and doctrine for the faith of humans. If there was no support for a doctrine to be found in the Bible, the doctrine no longer had any veracity and ought to be abolished. This was the strict application of the *sola scriptura* rule.

2. The earthly practice that resulted from the doctrine of purgatory involved the sale of indulgences, whilst the other worldly effect was that the soul 'worked off' or 'paid for' the sins committed and unresolved during life. To the Reformers, these amounted to an attempt to achieve heaven by means of human effort, or justification by works. This contradicted the Reformer's understanding of the Bible and the essence of justification by faith.
  
3. The other point at which dispute arose concerned what happens at the point of death. The logical extension of the Reformer's theology was that the notion of purgatory was intolerable and unsupported. Accordingly, there could be no consideration of any type of process beyond death. The conclusion was that, at the point of death, the human that had received of God's grace was justified AND sanctified and the consequence of death was entry into heaven.

As far as the first area of dispute listed above is concerned, it is accepted that there is a dearth of direct reference in the Bible to the place called 'purgatory'. This is not to say, however, that the idea of purgatory cannot be located in the Bible. This issue has already been covered above and will not be repeated here, other than to quote Walls:

The fact that purgatory is not expressly present in Scripture is not enough to settle the issue, however. The deeper issue is whether it is a

reasonable inference from important truths that are clearly found there. If theology involves a degree of disciplined speculation and logical inference, then the doctrine of purgatory cannot simply be dismissed on the grounds that Scripture does not explicitly articulate it.” (Walls 2002: 27).

The other two arguments against purgatory referred to above, will be dealt with concurrently and a systematic approach is required. It is agreed across the theological spectrum that heaven is a place of holiness or perfection. It is the place where God is. The Bible, tradition and common sense all dictate that there is nothing impure or unholy in or about God. It is logical to assume, then, that for any soul to enter into heaven requires that soul be free of all impurity or sin. It is generally agreed that humans, at the time of death, do not possess such a degree of moral perfection. (I say, ‘generally agreed’, as the Roman Catholic Church does have categories of martyrs and those who have led pure lives AND received of Holy Unction, who are understood to be admitted directly to heaven. As such categories are on the small side, they are not considered here for the purposes of this point). Accordingly, in order to effect this transition from moral imperfection to a state of moral perfection by reason of death, requires that either, this transition is brought about instantaneously, or, there exists a purgatory-like process whereby the moral transition is effected over time.

The traditional Protestant view, as set out above, argues that sanctification is rendered complete at the time of death and this is an act of God, an extension

of God's grace. In support of this argument, it is suggested that, the soul, being taken from death into the timelessness of God, becomes fully aware of its deficiencies and is able, within that same timelessness, to be rendered morally perfect.

There are, however, reasonable and better arguments to the contrary:

1. Starting with the doctrine of justification, it is false to regard this as an instantaneous event that immediately renders the human 'right' with God. A more realistic view is that this work of God in a human's life is rarely the effect of a blinding flash of inspiration or revelation. Rather, it is a process that has operated throughout the human's life to the point at which such acceptance of the need to be justified takes place. It is manifested in a series of thought processes, choices and decisions, before the 'final' choice or decision is made.
2. The doctrine of sanctification makes it clear that the process of becoming holy is also one that takes time and is neither instantaneous nor is it achieved without the active participation of the human.
3. In the light of these two points, it is reasonable that sanctification is the overall process of the human moving towards God and that justification is part of this overall process. The process towards justification ordinarily comprises of a number of choices. Justification is one of these choices in a series of overall decisions. Accordingly, justification ought not to be

regarded as separate or distinct from the role of sanctification in human faith. This is not to deny the importance of justification by faith, in that it does involve a form of decision made by the human to be identified with God. It does mean, however, that such decision is one that comes after a series of decisions and which ought to be followed by a series of further decisions that bring the human closer to God.

4. Purgatory, then, is to be regarded as the post death opportunity for the human soul to continue the process of sanctification. In this sense, purgatory is not a denial of the doctrine of justification by faith insofar as the doctrine is better considered as part of sanctification.

“...the traditional (Protestant) view was that justification involves actually making us righteous, and this is what finally restores us to a loving relationship with God. It was a Protestant innovation to separate justification from sanctification and to construe the former primarily in legal and forensic terms. But since justification so understood does not make us actually righteous, it is simply irrelevant as an objection to purgatory.” (*Ibid* 29).

5. Sanctification is a process that is best regarded as involving both time and the ability to choose. As far as time is concerned, time is linear and humans are temporal beings. Whilst change does take place to humans, this takes time. In the sense of sanctification before death, this takes time: time to recognise actions and attitudes that are un-Godly; time to realise

the value and merit in actions and attitudes that are God-like; time to experiment and decide; time to effect the change; time for the changes to become experienced and ingrained. There is no good reason to argue that such experience of sanctification should be any different post death.

“... not only is man (*sic*) essentially temporal, his (*sic*) capacity for moral perfection is likewise. No clear sense thus attaches to the claim that a human being could become instantaneously virtuous, morally perfect, and so, if God is to respect our nature as essentially temporal beings, he must have allowed for an intermediate state of purgatory to exist.” (Brown 1985: 450).

6. So much for the argument of time. There is also the argument of the ability to choose. The free will of humanity is one of God's gifts of creation to humans. To suppose that, at the time of death, God should remove this from humans altogether, would appear to be contrary. Further, it is this free will to choose that makes the process of sanctification worthwhile. It involves the human in active participation and growth towards God. In addition, that fact that such choices are willingly made is part and parcel of the actualisation of choice as well as human character. If God were to take an essentially imperfect human and, instantaneously render that human morally perfect without any participation or even involvement on the part of that human, it would raise significant questions about human experience, temporality and the nature of God.

“... any person, whether human or divine, would simply have failed to give the absolute value to the other person that is his (*sic*) due as a person, unless whatever he (*sic*) persuades him (*sic*) to do or accept arises from that individual's own moral self-understanding and perception.” (*Ibid* 453).

Accordingly, it would appear that the ideas surrounding justification and sanctification are not necessarily in conflict with one another and, in many ways, can be regarded as complimentary. It would appear reasonable to argue that justification, whilst significant, is not divorced from the process of sanctification that begins before justification and continues after it. Furthermore, death, rather than it being the completion of sanctification, becomes part of the ongoing process of moral purifying.

### **The Pastoral View**

All humans, whether they properly articulate it or not, demand an answer to the enigma that is death. All humans speculate about the 'location' of those that have gone before and the fate of loved ones that have passed from 'life'. All question the meaning of death and what can be expected. None are satisfied with the argument that human life is absorbed into the 'great matrix' or swallowed up into the 'memory of God', as some have argued. Nor does Process Theology come to the rescue in any significant way in the consideration of this question. Process Theology argues that all humans are in a process of change that culminates with our reality being encompassed as

a memory within the reality of God. Whilst the idea of process and change is valuable as far as the doctrine of purgatory is concerned, there is even less support for Process Theology in terms of tradition or biblical reference. Further, on an emotional basis, it would appear to be entirely without merit. Such is the nature of human development that this approach to theology really amounts to a polite form of extinction.

“This idea about an objective immortality in God’s eternity is still not in itself a consoling idea. ... God’s memory is not a video of our lives, recoded from heaven and played back to all eternity. It is a merciful, healing remembrance that puts things to rights”. (Polkinghorne 2000: 245).

The doctrine of justification by faith, in its ‘either/or’ application, is miserable and brutal. It offers scant comfort. At the funerals or memorial services of those who have died, the application of such doctrine invariably produces a sense of triumphalism in those that have made such a profession of faith. For those who have not, it results in Church leaders acting as if the deceased were not a part of the ritual, it adds to the grief of mourners and it adds to guilt. There is need to offer realistic comfort without compromising faith or doctrine. Purgatory is able to assist to bring realistic comfort. It professes the belief that God’s grace in a human life is not the consequence of a single decision, but of a series of decisions. It recognises that God’s power is greater than death and that God seeks the redemption of all. It recognises that hope goes on and that, through Christ, all will be made one with God.



Whilst this is rendered easily into words of comfort in the privacy of a cleric's office, the task is to translate this from theory and privacy, to wide and practical application in the faith community. As I was once advised by an older and wiser Minister, it makes for good theology, but poor preaching.

“... purgatory has been far more of a devotional practice in Christian tradition than a matter of dogmatic definition. ... the theological setting is clearly that of Aquinas, that of man's (*sic*) return to God who is love, with purgatory as basically the place for those who are loving, but whose love still needs to be purified.” (Marmion 1994: 138).

The challenge is to translate the idea of purgatory into common usage in a way that does not undermine notions about justification by faith and other strongly held beliefs. The further challenge is to render purgatory as good preaching, acceptable, faith inspiring and hope giving.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **CONCLUSION (SUMMATION)**

The traditional Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory as formulated by the Council of Trent, was simply expressed but covered significant issues of life and death and the goings on in each. In its simplicity, it stated that those who died in a state of grace but with sins that had not been resolved or expiated, went to a place called purgatory where the consequences of their sins were purged out over time. This process was understood to involve pain in the light of the biblical image of fire, but it was a process that could be reduced in time by the faithful prayers of the living for those in purgatory. The end result of this process was the emergence of the soul from purgatory, now readied to be with God in heaven. To a large extent, this doctrine has remained intact as part of the body of beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church.

The modern conceptualising of purgatory varies from this in a number of significant respects. Firstly, the bigger picture is that of sanctification – the process whereby humans are drawn closer to the things of God and away from the things of sin. A process that is recognised as being one of maturation and readiness that operates throughout life. Purgatory fits into this picture as a process that continues sanctification beyond death and into the after life. Secondly, whilst the Roman Catholic doctrine restricted entry into purgatory to those who had chosen to be followers of Christ and who had committed no

mortal sin, the contemporary formulation is far more inclusive. As we have seen, many theologians resort to talk of universalism to argue that all of humanity will undergo sanctification, whether in this world or the next.

It would seem that there is ample room for the accommodation of both views and that there are already more points of agreement than there are of disagreement. On the one hand, it would seem unjust that in the one act of forgiveness (as per the strict application of Justification by Faith) the soul is rendered adequate, holy and morally pure; similarly, it would seem unjust that a lifetime of sanctification should account for little in the event that all who die shall undergo instant sanctification and moral maturity. Inasmuch as salvation is not instantaneous, but rather a process which culminates in our saying, "Yes" to Christ, so sanctification is a process of our constantly learning to say "Yes". Purgatory becomes a useful device to assist in the argument that sanctification is a life-long and an after life-long process. Purgatory remains the 'place' whereby sin is purged and purifying completed through time, penitence and acceptance. The goal remains the soul's 'wholeness', a goal which cannot reasonably be expected to be achieved during the course of one ordinary lifetime.

Already there is evidence that a broad consensus is emerging. The one indicator of this is the use of the image of purgatory as a place of pain. The medieval concept of a realm of heinous torture and oppression has been despatched as an accretion and false. On the other hand, the concept of pain has persisted in various positive forms. These include:

1. The pain of the delay that the soul experiences, aware that it is near to its destination of heaven, and yet, by reason of its own actions or omissions, is now obliged to endure a time of waiting;
2. The pain of continuing the process of sanctification and maturity – a process that involves the ‘dying to self’ and the taking on the likeness of Christ. A process of letting go of ego in order to better grasp the community of God; and
3. There is the pain of agreeing with the rightness of God and renouncing the wrongness of self.

Perhaps these ‘pains’ can all be best summed up in the words of CS Lewis as quoted by Walls:

“Our souls *demand* purgatory, don’t they? Would it not break the heart of God if God said to us, ‘It is true, my son, that your breath smells and your rags drip with mud and slime, but we are charitable here and no-one will upbraid you with these things, nor draw away from you. Enter into the joy.’? Should we not reply, ‘With submission, sir, and if there is no objection, I’d rather be cleansed first.’? ‘It may hurt, you know.’ – ‘Even so, sir.’” (Walls 2002: 30).

A further indicator of the growing consensus to purgatory, is the use of gentler and helpful images that serve to describe the place and the process that is involved therein. We have already come across words such as 'hospital' and 'maturing' which assist in describing healing and growth. To these, we may just as well add words such as 'journey' or 'growing' to describe the process of progression, change and accomplishment. At the end of the day, however, a more definitive expression or noun is needed. 'Purgatory', given its chequered history, probably will not do in the long term – it is a word that comes with too much cultural baggage. In the event that such a word or expression is agreed upon, it will serve to sharpen theological discussion in respect of an issue that is hugely pertinent to people today. Phrases such as 'the Intermediate Place', 'Heaven's Waiting Room' and the like, whilst helpfully descriptive, lack the quality of engagement with the modern mind.

In the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow hangs a painting by Salvador Dali known as the Christ of St John of the Cross. It is in a poor location hanging on one wall in the corner where two corridors meet. It depends which corridor you walk down as to the impact that the painting has upon the observer. If you approach the painting from the corridor where the painting hangs, you will only see it when you are directly below it. It is a big canvass, and you will pick out the small details very clearly, being so close to it. Each part of the painting becomes a little cameo, interesting enough, but inadequate to hold your attention. If you approach the painting from the other corridor, however, you will approach the painting directly. From the perspective of that distance, you will see the entire picture; all the details merge into the whole – and it is most

beautiful. Similarly with purgatory – it depends on how one approaches the subject. To regard each piece of evidence as set out herein individually and examine each one forensically, it is likely to result in each one being set aside as inadequate; but when all the evidence is gathered together as a whole and the entire picture examined, then the overall effect becomes compelling. The deficiencies that exist in the biblical references, the role of tradition and the perspectives of history and contemporary theologians are all reasonably overcome when all the evidence is weighed as a whole. It is the accumulation of the evidence, taken as a whole, that produces a fuller and better picture.

A measure of the 'success' or vitality of a doctrine, is that it is one that can be translated from something that is academically titillating, to one that is comfortably preached and used in pastoral situations. Clearly, purgatory is not there yet. Nevertheless, there are many fruitful avenues to follow in this regard. There are many good reasons to dress the doctrine in modern clothes.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

ATWELL, R. R. 1987. From Augustine to Gregory the Great: An Evaluation of the Doctrine of Purgatory. The Journal of Ecclesiastical History volume 38, pages 173 – 186.

BADHAM, P. and L. 1982. Immortality or Extinction? St David's University College: Lampeter, Wales.

BARTMANN, B. 1936. Purgatory: A Book of Christian Comfort. Burns Oates & Washbourne Limited: London.

BIGHAM, T. 1958. Redemption Through Punishment. Journal of Pastoral Care, Volume 12, pages 149 – 158.

BOULDING, C. 1995. Purgatory: What do Catholics Believe? Epworth Review 22 No. 2, pages 101 – 109.

BOWKER, J. 1991. The Meanings of Death. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

BROWN, D. 1985. No Heaven Without Purgatory. Religious Studies Journal 21, pages 447 – 456.

DEIST, F. 1984. A Concise Dictionary of Theological and Related Terms. Hatfield, Pretoria: J.L. Van Schaik (Pty) Ltd.

DRINKWATER, F. H. 1953. The 'Baptism Invisible' and its Extent. Downside Review, Volume 71, pages 25 – 42.

EDWARDS, G. R. 1985. Purgatory: 'Birth' or Evolution? Journal of Ecclesiastical History 36 Number 4, Pages 634 – 646.

EVERY, G. 1976. Toll Gates on the Air Way. Eastern Churches Review. Volumes 7 – 8, pages 139 – 151.

FENN, R. K. 1993. Sin: The Taint of Time. Theology Today Volume 50, pages 265 – 278.

GONZALEZ, J. L. 1985. The Story of Christianity. HarperSanFrancisco.

HEBBLETHWAITE, B. 1984. The Christian Hope. Basingstoke, Hants, UK. Marshall Morgan & Scott.

KELLY, J. N. D. 1978. Early Christian Doctrines. HarperCollins Publishers. New York.

KREEFT, P. 1973. Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Heaven ... But Never Dreamed of Asking. Ignatius Press: San Francisco.



LANNE, E. 1992. The Teaching of the Catholic Church on Purgatory. One In Christ Volume 28, pages 13 – 30.

LE GOFF, J. 1990. The Birth of Purgatory. Scolar Press: England.

MACQUARRIE, J. 1977. Principles of Christian Theology. SCM Press: London.

MANUAL OF LAW AND PROCEDURE OF THE UNITING PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA.

MARMION, J. P. 1994. Purgatory Revisited. The Downside Review. Volume 112, pages 121 – 141.

MASON, A. J. 1901. Purgatory: the State of the Faithful Departed. Longmans, Green and Company: London.

McDANNELL, C. and LANG, B. 1988. Heaven: A History. Yale University Press: New Haven and London.

McGRATH, A. E. 1994. Christian Theology. Blackwell Publishers Inc.: Massachusetts, USA.

McPARTLAN, P. 1998. Go Forth, Christian Soul. One In Christ. Volume 34, pages 247 – 257.

MOLTMANN, J. 1967. Theology of Hope. London. SCM Press.

MOLTMANN, J. 1974. The Crucified God. Harper & Row: New York....

NEWMAN, J.H. 1888. An Essay on the Development of Doctrine. London: Longmans.

OLIVIER, D. F. 1991. Systematic Theology: Study Guide for THB301-X. (Eschatology). Muckleneuk, Pretoria. UNISA.

OMBRES, R. 1981. The Doctrine of Purgatory According to St Thomas Aquinas. Downside Review Volume 99, pages 279 – 287.

PHAN, P. C. 1994. Contemporary Context and Issues in Eschatology. Theological Studies. Volume 55, pages 507 – 536.

PILLAY, G. J. & HOFMEYER, J. W. 1991. Perspectives on Church History. De Jager – HAUM Publishers: Pretoria.

POLKINGHORNE, J. & WELKER, M. 2000. The End of the World and the Ends of God. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Trinity Press International.

RATZINGER, J. 1988. Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life. The Catholic University of America Press: Washington, D.C.

REUTHER, R. R. 1993. Sexism and God – Talk. Beacon Press: Boston, Massachusetts.

SAUTER, G. 1999. What Dare We Hope? Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Trinity Press International.

SCHULTZE, Q. J. 1993. Civil Sin: Evil and Purgation in the Media. Theology Today Volume 50 pages 229 – 242.

SCOTT, W. 2000 (First published 1814). Ivanhoe. Penguin Books Limited: London, England.

STRONG, J. (Undated). Strong's Comprehensive Concordance of the Bible. Iowa Falls, Iowa. World Bible Publishers Inc.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary. 1976. Oxford University Press: Walton Street, Oxford.

WALLS, J. L. 2002. Purgatory for Everyone. First Things Number 122, pages 26 – 30.