

Vatican II and the Year of Faith: Purgatory and the Second Vatican Council

This column has been treating the teaching of the Catechism and the Second Vatican Council for the Year of Faith. One goal of the column has been to show the relevance of the Council's teaching for contemporary Catholic life. Another goal has been to demonstrate that Vatican II did not fundamentally change the doctrine of the Catholic Church. Rather, the Council took that doctrine and presented it in new contexts, to develop it, and to draw out its deeper significance. One example of this is the Council's treatment of Purgatory.

Traditionally, Purgatory has been a very important part of Catholic faith and practice. The doctrine is deeply related to the ideas of sin, redemption, satisfaction, and moral purification. It is also an important part of the Church's liturgical and devotional tradition. The doctrine of Purgatory is grounded in Scripture, celebrated in Tradition, and was defined as dogma at the Councils of Florence and Trent. Vatican II affirmed all of this, but also treated Purgatory in relationship to the doctrine of the Church. The Council's emphasis was on the solidarity we share with all Christians, living or dead. In what follows, I want to review briefly the Biblical data on Purgatory, and then show how the doctrine was treated by the Second Vatican Council.

Purgatory in Scripture and Tradition:

The doctrine of Purgatory is grounded in an important Biblical concept: that there is a two-fold consequence to sin. Through sin we incur both guilt and the obligation to make some reparation or satisfaction for our offense. The forgiveness of the guilt does not remove that debt of satisfaction. This concept is taught clearly throughout the Old Testament, but nowhere more clearly than in 2 Samuel 12: 13-15. In this passage, the prophet Nathan tells David that his sin has been forgiven, but he must still suffer the temporal consequences due to sin. We find the same thing repeated in 2 Samuel 24.

These Biblical texts (and others) show that we can make at least a partial reparation to God for sin through acts of penance and mortification. In 2 Samuel 24, we learn that David's sacrifice turns away God's wrath. In 1 Kings 21, Ahab turns away God's wrath by donning sackcloth and doing penance. The same thing is true of the Ninevites, in Jonah 3.

Scripture also teaches that these acts of penance and sacrifice can be applied on behalf of others, even for the dead. (Genesis 18:32; 2 Maccabees 12:43-46) This Biblical teaching is the basis for the Church's long-standing practice of offering prayers and sacrifices for the dead, especially the sacrifice of the Mass. From the biblical practice of offering prayers and sacrifices for the dead, the Church has always inferred the existence of Purgatory.

Scripture also teaches that moral purification is necessary in order to dwell in the presence of God. This is another purpose of purgatory. Psalm 24:3 says, "Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart." Consider, as well, the experience of Isaiah the prophet - He dared not approach the presence of God until the angel purified his lips with a burning coal. (Isaiah 6)

Scripture teaches that this purification comes by way of suffering. St. Paul says, "we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory." (Romans 8:17) And, "I chastise my body, and bring it into subjection: lest perhaps, when I have preached to others, I myself should become a castaway. (1 Corinthians 9:27)

The necessity of satisfaction for sin, the need for moral purification, and the biblical practice of praying and offering for the dead are all reasons that the Church affirms the existence of Purgatory. But when the Second Vatican Council treated Purgatory, it drew out something more. The souls in Purgatory *are part of the Church* and, as such, are not distant from us:

Until the Lord shall come in His majesty, and all the angels with Him and death being destroyed, all things are subject to Him, some of His disciples are exiles on earth, some having died are purified, and others are in glory beholding "clearly God Himself triune and one, as He is"; but all in various ways and degrees are in communion in the same charity of God and neighbor and all sing the same hymn of glory to our God. For all who are in Christ, having His Spirit, form one Church and cleave together in Him. Therefore the union of the wayfarers with the brethren who have gone to sleep in the peace of Christ is not in the least weakened or interrupted, but on the contrary, according to the perpetual faith of the Church, is strengthened by communication of spiritual goods. (*Lumen Gentium*, VII:49)

Vatican II draws out something that has always been believed about Purgatory, but the Council makes it explicit. Purgatory is a necessary purification, but it is also a great comfort for those who have lost loved ones in the faith. The Council reminds us that we are not spiritually separated from our loved ones in Christ - that we can enjoy with them a real spiritual exchange of goods. We can benefit from their prayers, and they can benefit from ours.