

Orthoscopy II

The Rest of the Journey

Introduction

Don't Be an Ostrich

It is a popular myth that ostriches stick their heads in the sand to hide from danger; as if not seeing the danger makes it not existent. Sometimes our heads are in the sand to pretend that a known danger doesn't exist, but more often we find our heads in the sand because we are unaware of the existence of a danger.

Not yet knowing about electricity, a young child may stick a metallic toy into an electric outlet. He will be surprised; he will receive quite a shock. His ignorance of the existence of electricity and its powerful effects will not shield him from the reality that electricity does indeed exist, and that it can have quite painful consequences.

Likewise, ignorance of the existence of purgatory will not shield one from the reality that it does indeed exist. Those who do not know or believe in purgatory may be in for a quite a surprise and shock when their journeys on earth come to an end. It, too, may have painful consequences.

Sand Blocks Our Vision

This book grows out of the struggles I encountered as I wrote my previous book, *Orthoscopy: Clear vision to see what we ought to do*. (Note: This is a stand-alone book; it is not necessary to read *Orthoscopy* prior to *Orthoscopy II*.) In the first book, I presented suggestions concerning how one could more clearly see the correct path through life. We need to see clearly so that we arrive at the desired Point B at the end of the journey. And that Point B was proposed to be heaven. A desire to be in heaven for eternity can provide a great focus for guiding our lives, for making good moral choices, for being willing to do what we ought to do rather than just what we want to do. But while my Catholic faith tradition gives me comfort and confidence that I will have a good chance of being in heaven some day if I try to stay on the straight path, it doesn't assure me or assume that I will be ready to enter heaven immediately upon my death. I may need some cleaning up before I can complete my journey, and that, in a nutshell, is the concept of purgatory.

I struggled as I wrote *Orthoscopy* because I was concerned that many take a minimalist approach to arriving at the desired Point B. Some do as little as possible; very few do all they should. Point B can get out of focus and our target can become a large blur rather than a sharp point of light. As we journey we shine a flashlight at the map when we should use a laser beam. With *Orthoscopy*, I wanted to appeal to people of all denominations, and so did not delve into the concept of purgatory which might alienate many of my potential readers. But it is this concept which is necessary for sharpening our focus on heaven. If we accept that our journey to heaven does not necessarily end when we die, we will be willing to make even tougher moral choices and make even greater sacrifices so that we can get as close to heaven as possible while still on our earthly journey. We will want *the rest of the journey*, the portion after we die, to be as short as possible. We will strive for spiritual perfection rather than accepting mediocrity.

Without an understanding of the concept of purgatory at their disposal, I knew many of my readers could not achieve the full benefits of having the clear vision I was trying to provide. Having 20/20 vision does one no good if the object of our attention is itself blurry and out of focus. A photograph taken out of focus cannot be brought back into focus by a good pair of glasses. This book intends to provide assistance at rectifying the second requirement for seeing clearly, a clearer image to focus on.

Intent

This is a book addressed primarily to non-Catholics who have not been exposed to the concept of purgatory, or who have misunderstandings regarding the concept, or who are simply struggling to accept the concept because it is foreign to the faith tradition in which they have been raised. It is also addressed to many of my fellow Catholics who, though exposed to Church teaching about purgatory, also struggle to understand and accept that teaching.

I feel an obligation, motivated by love for my fellow man, to attempt to make people aware of my belief in the existence of purgatory. I do not feel a corresponding obligation, however, to convince people that they should share my belief. That is up to each individual to grapple with for themselves. If I do not teach about purgatory, then shame on me. If you do not believe in purgatory, then shame on you.

The good news is that a lack of belief in purgatory will not prevent anyone from getting to heaven; it just might make the journey a little longer and more painful. It is not, therefore, as urgent of a teaching as those that relate to critical moral issues that may present obstacles to getting to heaven at all. Purgatory is a topic of discussion for those that are already leading a life that will lead them to eternity in heaven.

St. Catherine of Genoa, who is purported to have seen a vision of purgatory, said, “Would that I could utter so strong a cry that it would strike all men with terror, and say to them: O wretched beings! why are you so blinded by this world that you make, as you will find at the hour of death, no provision for the great necessity that will then come upon you?”

Another Book on Purgatory?

Until I started this project, I had not considered how many books, booklets, and articles have been written on the subject of purgatory. I went to the Amazon book Web Site and entered *Catholic Purgatory* in the search bar. There were 230 results. These books are written by theologians, scripture scholars, philosophers, and saints and mystics. I am none of the above. I can draw, however, upon their insights to create my own simple synthesis which satisfies my own needs and purposes. Hopefully some will find that it addresses their particular needs and disposition as well. Maybe, after you read this book, you will be inspired to read some of the more scholarly works to expand your knowledge and understanding of the subject.

Another aspect of many of the existing books is that they come at the subject of purgatory from an apologetics approach; that is they try to defend the Church’s teaching. As I have already stated, this is not my purpose. I will present the Church’s teaching; the rest is up to you. I do not feel compelled to try to debate or argue anyone into sharing my beliefs on the subject of purgatory.

Scope

If you had never heard of the concept of a motel, I could provide you with a definition that would give you knowledge of what a motel is. I might say that a motel is a place where you can stop and rest for the night when you are traveling on a journey by car. But this definition does not tell you what a motel is like. It could be simply a place where you can park and safely sleep in your car. It could be a large building with rows of cots to accommodate travelers. Maybe it has private rooms with beds. Maybe you can get something to eat or maybe there are facilities you can use to cook. You may wonder if entertainment and recreational opportunities are provided.

In the same manner, we can consider that there are two parts to our knowledge of purgatory: knowledge of what it is, and knowledge of what it is like. The primary focus of this book is toward providing information on the first part; this knowledge is much more defined and known than the second part. I know that this will not be completely satisfying, but the second part is much more speculative. While I will offer some possibilities, I do not propose to explain to you what purgatory is like because I do not know, with any certainty, myself.

A while back, a Catholic friend of mine asked me if I believed in purgatory. I was a little taken back by his question; I had never given it much thought. I answered affirmatively claiming to have no problem with accepting the Church's teaching on the subject. As a cradle Catholic who has grown up with the concept of purgatory all of my life, I have never had a problem with believing in its existence, although my understanding of purgatory has changed over time. And although purgatory always made perfect sense to me, I still found myself stumbling to put my beliefs into words. Along my faith journey from Catholic elementary school to my current role as an ordained deacon today, I have never had any reason to doubt the existence of purgatory. My understanding of purgatory, however, had developed and matured.

I decided that I needed to check the official Catholic teaching as set down in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, to make sure that I hadn't developed an understanding that was contradictory. I was comforted to find that I had not gone astray, but I also realized that the Church gives a very wide opportunity for interpretation.

Structure

This book is broken up into three parts. These three parts correspond to the three repetitive steps which characterize our faith journeys. These steps are:

1. Faith: what we believe?
2. Understanding; why we believe it?
3. Action: how does it affect how we live and worship?

These three steps combine to make a leap on our journey. As we live and worship, we are exposed to new information about what we should believe. We test that information to see if it is consistent with what we know about the world around us. This is faith seeking understanding, and that understanding allows us to own the faith more fully. Confident in that faith information, we then can have the courage to act accordingly. And the cycle starts all over again.

For some of you this book is the introduction to the concept of purgatory; you are on the first step of climbing over the boulder which may be acting as an obstacle on your journey. Others, especially my fellow Catholics, are struggling with the second step. And still many other are much like me, simply wondering how the existence of purgatory affects the temporal and spiritual aspects of your life.

The three parts of this book are:

- I. *What is Purgatory?* In this part of the book I will discuss concepts of heaven and hell and how they relate to an understanding of purgatory. I will present what can be said with certainty about what purgatory is, and what it is not. I will also offer a few concepts about what purgatory *may* be examining some of the personal revelation received by noted mystics and contemplatives of the Church.
- II. *Why Purgatory?* This section will deal with the reasons and justifications for why belief in purgatory makes sense. There will be many arguments provided; it only takes one to work for you. In their book, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli present twenty arguments for the existence of God that run from philosophically complex to sublimely simple. I refer their list to many who are struggling with believing in God, knowing that the Spirit can make them receptive to accepting at least one of the arguments. In the same way, you do not have to accept all the arguments for the existence of purgatory. One will do quite nicely.
- III. *How Does It Affect Me?* The last section of the book will address how we should act and pray differently once we believe in the existence of purgatory. I will touch on the very Catholic ideas of fasting and penance and address the sensitive subject of indulgences; they all are related to mitigating suffering in purgatory for ourselves and for our loved ones.

Depending where you are on your faith journey, you might want to jump directly to Part II or Part III. But now, at the risk of creating total confusion, I am going to cut to the chase. I am going to present to you the section of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that deal directly with purgatory. If it is too much for you now, simply skip it; I will break it down into smaller, more digestible portions throughout the book. Some, however, inspired by the Holy Spirit, may see the words of the catechism with such clarity, that they will skip directly to Part III.

Purgatory Defined

Here is the section of the Catechism of the Catholic Church which states the Church's teaching on purgatory. I have removed the postscripts that refer to the various references used by the Church; the references will be brought back in later in the book when we deal with the specific portions of the teaching.

“All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.

“The Church gives the name *Purgatory* to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned. The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence and Trent. The tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire:

‘As for certain lesser faults, we must believe that, before the Final Judgment, there is a purifying fire. He who is truth says that whoever utters blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will be pardoned neither in this age nor in the age to come. From this sentence we understand that certain offenses can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come.’

“This teaching is also based on the practice of prayer for the dead, already mentioned in Sacred Scripture: ‘Therefore [Judas Maccabeus] made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin.’ From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God. The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead:

‘Let us help and commemorate them. If Job's sons were purified by their father's sacrifice, why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them.’”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1030-32