

## **Purgatory is the pain of entering heaven**

### **In Exile**

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Several weeks ago I wrote a column in which I mentioned purgatory (WCR, Nov. 12). Here's what I said: "Purgatory is not a geography, a place distinct from heaven, but is the pain that comes from being in heaven, without having fully let go of earth. Love, even as we know it in this life, already teaches us that."

Several newspapers received critical letters, suggesting that this is not in line with Catholic dogma. A couple of these asked me to do a column to try to clarify the issue. I'm grateful for this critique. So let me try to explain:

What is purgatory? This is a specifically Roman Catholic belief which holds that while heaven and hell, as Scripture attests, are the only two permanent states after death there is a third state or condition, called "purgatory," within which one is purified so as to be readied for heaven. Purgatory is understood to be a transition state, a state of intense sufferings, nearly as painful as hell itself, but, unlike hell, not permanent and the pains suffered are purifying and not embittering.

What is central to the doctrine is that purgatory, as the word itself suggests, is a place of purgation and purification, not of punitive pain. As the new Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it, purgatory is a purifying fire, . . . entirely different from the punishment of the damned." Finally purgatory is commonly assumed, though not dogmatically defined, to be a place apart from heaven, a place you go to in order to get ready for heaven.

That's the conception. What's to be said for it?

Purgatory does exist, not because you can prove it from Scripture, but because it is simply impossible to formulate a science of love and community without it. Likewise it is impossible to speak of the paschal mystery without some concept of purgatory. However these statements imply a certain understanding of what constitutes purgatory.

Purgatory is not a physical location, but a stage of loving. It's the initial pain of entering into community in a pure and selfless way. Mystics have classically defined it as the pain of letting go of a lesser love and life in order to accept a deeper love and life.

In the paradigm of Jesus' life and teaching, purgatory is the pain and purification of the paschal mystery. It is what Jesus, as a man, endured during his agony in Gethsemane and his struggle during his passion and death.

What's interesting in Jesus' case is that there was no personal sin from which he needed purification. Yet, he suffered purgative pain anyway. This helps clarify two things: Purgatory is not a place, a geography separate from heaven; nor is it necessarily even a purification from sin. It is the pain of entering heaven, of, as Jesus says, having the grain of wheat fall in the ground and die so as to come to a new fruitfulness.

Let me risk an example: Several years ago, I was counseling a young man who was experiencing an intense pain that was new to him. He had fallen in love with a wonderful young woman and was preparing to marry her. Prior to meeting her, he had lived irresponsibly, been sexually promiscuous, and had been comfortably smug and insensitive in that state.

The woman he had fallen in love with was aware of his past but was not throwing this into his face. The opposite.

She was loving and forgiving him unconditionally. But there was the rub. Being in love with this wonderfully good, generous and moral person made him aware of himself in a fuller way.

Her love was a prism through which he began to see his own immaturity (which is what unconditional love always does). Her love was a light that gave him new eyesight and what he saw inside of himself caused him a lot of pain. To his credit, he sought help – confession, spiritual direction, psychological counseling.

Her loving him, purely and unconditionally, caused him the deepest pains he had ever endured. It was his first taste of purgatory. But note: it was love, embrace, warmth and unconditional forgiveness that triggered that pain and the subsequent purification.

Purgatory always works that way. When we die, unless we have so totally hardened our hearts so as to reject the embrace of unconditional love itself, God embraces us – fully, affectionately, passionately and unconditionally. To the extent that we are not yet fully saints or have not yet fully let go of those attachments that are now incompatible with us being in this new embrace, we will, like the young man whose story I just shared, experience intense, purgative pain.

Purgatory is the redemptive pain that follows falling in love, the pain of paschal purification. It is not a locale distinct from heaven, but the pain of entering heaven itself and, there, having to let go of all that prevents us from being there. In the ecstasy of embrace comes the agony of purification.