


Tried by Fire

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Maronite Monks of Adoration

Most Holy Trinity Monastery ❖ Petersham MA 01366-9725

A detailed illustration of a multi-tiered stone castle with brown roofs and towers. The castle is engulfed in bright orange and yellow flames, particularly on the upper levels. A flag with a blue field and a white cross, featuring a gold letter 'P', flies from a pole on the right. Two angels with blue and white wings are shown: one at the bottom left holding a flaming torch, and another on the right side of the castle. The base of the castle is surrounded by a pool of red liquid, possibly representing blood or fire. The background is a soft, hazy sky with light clouds.

Peter teaches in his first letter: “Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you ...” (3:15). We Catholics are sometimes caught in the embarrassing situation of being unable to “make that defense” when “called to account” by others — especially non-Catholics — for certain teachings of our Faith. And we *should* be embarrassed. One such area of our faith that I’m sure at least some Catholics could not defend or explain in the faith of the Church is what we call “Purgatory.” Now it goes without saying that if there does not exist a state which equals what we mean by the term “Purgatory,” a week of prayer for the faithful departed is a waste of time.

The usual line of objection to Catholics is, “Where do you find the word ‘Purgatory’ in the Bible?” Of course the name is not the issue but what is signified by the name. You don’t find the words “Trinity” or “Incarnation” in the Bible either, but many Protestants profess both.

The NT speaks rather clearly of what we could call “Heaven” and “Hell,” but what can we find about an *intermediate state*? Because by “Purgatory” we mean “that temporary state of final purification where those who died in God’s grace, but who were still imperfect, are completely cleansed of all imperfection and made fit for the vision of God face-to-face.” Where in the NT, which is accepted by Protestants, can we find evidence of this intermediate state?

First of all, only the fully cleansed may enter the Heavenly Jerusalem. St. John, in *Revelation* 21:27, heard this: “Nothing unclean shall enter it.” If someone dies with some degree of uncleanness on his soul we can’t imagine him damned for a slight stain. But he must be first cleansed — somehow, somewhere — since “nothing unclean shall enter” the heavenly Jerusalem. So this is an important first point: **‘Nothing’, no one, enters the ‘heavenly Jerusalem’ with even the slightest uncleanness of sin on his soul.** But what did the early Christians believe...?

One day, some Pharisees accused Jesus of performing exorcisms by the devil's power. Then he warned them "I tell you: Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever says a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, *either in this age or in the age to come.*" This teaching of Christ implies (to say the least) that in the "age to come" certain kinds of offenses can be forgiven (i.e. atoned for by the guilty who are nonetheless Jesus' members). One former Protestant says this: "Without using the word 'Purgatory' Jesus was presenting teachings that seemed in harmony with the Catholic teaching on purgatory and were a bit difficult to interpret from an Evangelical perspective. While I was far from ready to accept that Jesus was referring to purgatory, I was finding myself hard-pressed to come to any other conclusion." This is a second important point: **There seems to be an 'age to come' in which offenses may be atoned.** But what did the early Christians believe . . . ?

In *I Corinthians 3:15*, St. Paul is speaking about the judgment of God upon the works of the ministers of the Gospel — clergy. But in *Romans 14*, he reminds us "... we shall all stand before the Judgment seat of God," so these words from *I Corinthians* apply to us as well. He writes: "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which has been laid, namely Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stone, wood, hay or stubble, each man's work will become manifest; for the Day of Judgment will make it known, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire."

St. Paul seems to be speaking of a two-fold fire here. First, the fire of God's judgment. By the light of this fire the quality of our Christian lives will be "made known." Every human being who has ever lived must pass through this fire. This light will show that we have built upon our Baptismal foundation with either noble material or not-so-noble.

Secondly, he seems to speak of this 'intermediate state' we've been seeking. He says that the light of the Judgment Fire will reveal that some have built with poor material. He says of such a one: "he will suffer loss." He's damned then, right? Then he says:

"he himself will be saved." But this sounds like heaven! But wait! St. Paul says he is enduring "loss"! "He himself will be saved, but only as through fire." This can't be hell then, since he will be saved. But it can't be heaven either, because before he is fully saved, he has to go through some afflicting fire. He must be referring to some intermediate state then, which is neither hell, nor heaven. This is the second Fire. And this brings us to this third important point: **We all must pass through the first Fire, but not all have to endure this second Fire, this 'intermediate state.'**

Let us remember these words from *Revelation*: "Nothing unclean shall enter" the heavenly Jerusalem. But what is in the heavenly City? What can be said about the heavenly Jerusalem? "It had the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel ... The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every jewel ... and the street of the city was pure gold." You may find gold, you may find silver, you may find precious stones but you won't find the city built of "wood, hay or stubble," will you? These latter constitute the impurities with which most humans leave this life, which do not merit hell, yet which must be burned away by the second Fire, the 'intermediate state' between Glory and Damnation. "Nothing unclean shall enter it."

So not surprisingly, right from the beginning our Christian ancestors in their daily piety prayed for those who were in this 'intermediate state' because it was part of the faith revealed by Jesus and taught by the apostles. The earliest Christians, and even some Jews long before the time of Jesus, felt this intense solidarity with the deceased. So we read of the Hebrew Judas Maccabeus: "He made atonement for the dead, that they would be delivered from their sin"(2 Mac 12:45). Many ancient Christian tombs call out for prayer. Consider this one, from a bishop's tomb: "I, Abercius, standing by, ordered this to be inscribed; truly I was in my 72nd year. May everyone who is in accord with this and who understands it, pray for Abercius." And this text comes to us from about 200 A.D. Christian writer Tertullian says what ought to be done by a Christian woman recently bereft: "She prays for his soul and asks refreshment for him in the meantime and fellowship with him in the first resurrection; and she offers her sacrifice on the anniversaries of his falling asleep..." (*On Monogamy*, ch.10)

And Origen of Alexandria, in the early third century, wrote: "For if on the foundation of Christ

you have built not only gold and silver and precious stones, but also wood and hay and stubble, what do you expect when the soul shall be separated from the body? Would you enter into heaven with your wood and hay and stubble and thus defile the Kingdom of God? This would not be just! Or, on account of these [combustible] hindrances, do you think you should remain outside [the heavenly Jerusalem] and receive no reward for your gold and silver and precious stones? Neither is this just! It remains, then, that you be committed to the fire which will burn the light materials; for our God, to those who can comprehend heavenly things, is called

a cleansing fire. But this fire consumes not the creature, but what the creature has himself built: wood, hay and stubble. It is manifest that the fire destroys the wood of our transgressions and then returns to us the reward of our good works.”

And St. Augustine in the fifth century, in his work *On the Psalms*: “In this life may You make me such that I have no need of the corrective fire, which is for those who are saved, but as if by fire.”

So we follow the teaching of Jesus our Lord and His apostles as we see has been done from the beginning, and we pray for all the souls in that ‘intermediate state’ which we now call “Purgatory.” ✠