

DIocese OF LONDON.

Pastoral Letter

OF HIS LORDSHIP THE BISHOP OF LONDON, ON THE DOCTRINE OF PURGATORY AND ON PRAYING FOR THE DEAD.

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By the Grace of God, and the appointment of the Holy See, Bishop of London.

To the Clergy, Religious and Laity of the Diocese, Health and Benediction in the Lord.

DEARLY BELOVED BRETHREN:—

The approach of the month of November, with its "All Souls' Day," is for us an appropriate occasion for addressing you on the consoling and salutary doctrine of Purgatory and on the duties of piety and charity towards the faithful departed, that spring from it. The Church, in consecrating this month to special devotion for those who have died in Christ, seems to have formed an alliance with nature in order the better to attune our minds to solemn thoughts of death and to touch and move our hearts with the sacred memories of those who have gone before us. November is the grave-yard of the year. The withered, fallen leaves; the naked trees; the hush and silence of the woods; the dark, short melancholy days; the moaning winds, that seem like the dirge of nature over its departed glories and its present sad desolations—all these characteristics of our November strongly impress the mind with thoughts of decay and death. They remind us that, in the language of Scripture, "All flesh is grass and all the glory thereof as the flower of grass; the grass is withered and the flower is fallen."—Is. xl., 6. They tell us that, in the words of the Psalmist, "In the morning man shall grow up like grass, in the morning he shall flourish and pass away; in the evening he shall fall, grow dry and wither."—Psalms lxxxix., 6. The Holy Church takes up these voices and warnings of nature, and, blending them with her own, teaches her children that, at this season of the year, they should occupy themselves with salutary thoughts concerning death and the dead; that, mindful of the certainty of their own death one day, they should not forget those who have gone before them, but should, by prayers and almsdeeds, and especially by the oblation of the holy sacrifice of the Mass, seek to bring them aid and refreshment and to hasten their advent into that eternal rest and everlasting light and unending and perfect happiness which are enjoyed in the Kingdom of God. For there is a place of punishment in the next life, where some souls suffer for a time before they can go to Heaven, and these souls may be helped and relieved by prayers, almsdeeds and other good works.

For us Catholics there can be no doubt about the doctrine of Purgatory, for it is a defined article of our faith that there is a middle state in the next life, where some souls are detained for a time before they reach their immortal and happy destiny, but it is useful to show that this, like all the other doctrines of the Church, is in strict accord with right reason and in perfect harmony with the revealed word of God.

In treating this question we must, for the proper understanding of it, lay down certain preliminary propositions:

We will premise by stating that every sin is not mortal, and does not deserve eternal punishment, according to the laws of divine justice; but that there are less grievous sins which are, from their nature, venial, and do not destroy grace and charity; and it is to such the Scripture refers when it declares that the just man falls seven times. Hence, the just can truly use the words of the Lord's prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses." St. John declares that if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1st Epis. St. John, 1st chap.) Our Lord even assures us that "for every idle word we speak, we shall render an account on the day of judgment." (Matthew, chap. 12.) Would it not be monstrous, for instance, to assert that the telling of a joke, or the falling in gravity to the bottom of a well, or the shameful sin of adultery, and that it deserves a like punishment? Hence, St. Augustine says that, "for those daily, transient and venial offences, without which this life is not lived, the daily prayers of the faithful satisfy."

We must, in the second place, premise that, even when God pardons the truly penitent the eternal punishment due to mortal sin, He does not always forgive certain temporal chastisements which remain to be endured or expiated by the forgiven sinner.

Our first parents disobeyed the command which God gave them—they sinned. God pardoned their sin, but oh! how terrible were the temporal punishments inflicted on that sin! They were banished from Paradise and were condemned to death, and that sentence of death comprised all their posterity. By their sin there came into the world pestilences, famines, plagues, wars, sickness and death. Moses and Aaron, for having sinned at the water of contradiction by want of confidence, were never permitted to enter the promised land; and though Moses feasted his eyes upon its beauties, yet, as a temporal punishment of his sin, he was never allowed to set his foot upon its soil. David, than whom there was never a greater penitent, offended God. The prophet of the Lord was sent to him. He confessed his sin, exclaiming, "I have sinned against the Lord." The prophet

said to him, "the Lord also hath taken away thy sin; thou shalt not die; nevertheless, because thou hast given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, for this thing the child that is born thee shall surely die." There remains, therefore, a temporal punishment due even to forgiven sin.

We should also understand that no sin, according to God's ordinary providence, can or will be forgiven without satisfying, as to all the punishment due to it, the laws of divine justice.

Now, it can happen, and it too often happens, that the just depart from this life still stained with venial sins, or bound by the debt of the temporal punishment yet due for mortal sins forgiven, as to their guilt, and the eternal punishment due to them.

Men die suddenly in many ways—some by heart disease, others by apoplexy; some are found dead in their beds; others are killed by accident on trains or steamboats—and thus have not time to repent of venial sins, and die stained with their guilt. It is certain that the number of souls who thus die in venial sin, or who have not discharged the temporal punishment due mortal sin forgiven, is very great. No sin shall go unpunished; unless it be punished by the sinner himself, by penance, it must be punished by God, who is offended. Divine mercy does not violate the rights of eternal justice, but respects and conserves them. Hence, whilst it forgives the guilt of sin and the eternal punishment due to it, it does not absolve from the debt of temporary punishment to be undergone in order to satisfy justice. Now, as nothing defiled can ever enter the kingdom of Heaven, and no debt of punishment due to sin can co-exist with eternal beatitude, it necessarily follows that, before the imperfect can enter Heaven, they must be purged from the stains of venial sins and from the debt of temporal punishment due to forgiven grievous sins. But, since this does not always take place in this life, it must necessarily take place in the next, and hence the necessity of Purgatory, or a place of punishment in the other life, where some souls suffer for a time before they can go to Heaven.

We now come to the Scriptural proofs of this doctrine. In the Second Book of Maccabees (xii., 46) it is related that the heroic and pious Judas Maccabeus sent 1,200 drachmas of silver to Jerusalem for sacrifices to be offered for his soldiers slain in battle, and the inspired writer, commenting on this fact, says: "It is therefore a holy and a wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from their sins." Now, it would be perfectly useless to pray for the dead if they were in Heaven, and worse than useless to pray for them were they condemned to eternal torments. There must be, therefore, in the belief of the inspired writer of this book of Scripture, an intermediate place, where, in the next life, some souls are detained, and who may be loosed from their sins by pious prayers and suffrages. I am aware that non-Catholics contend that this Second Book of Maccabees is not canonical Scripture, but the very same authority from which we hold the whole Canon of Scripture, namely, the authority of the Catholic Church, holds this also to be canonical and inspired Scripture. But, admitting, for argument's sake, that it is not canonical, it must be admitted, at all events, to be perfectly true and reliable history. It, therefore, proves that, amongst the Jews—the people of God—in those days the belief prevailed that some of the departed dead could be relieved and loosed from their sins, and the penalties of their sins, by prayer and sacrifices; and this could not be the case if, besides the Heaven of the saved, and the hell of the damned, there did not exist an intermediate place of expiation for some souls ere they could reach their immortal and final destiny in Heaven. Our Lord, who came to teach the truth and to point out the errors and corruptions that had crept into Jewish belief and practice, would have condemned this doctrine were it not true, but, so far from doing so, he confirms it. It is of this prison, according to the Holy Fathers, our Lord speaks when he says (Luke xii., 5, 9): "Thou shalt not depart thence till thou hast paid the last farthing." In the parable of Dives and Lazarus, our Lord tells us that the latter, after his death, was carried to the bosom of Abraham. Now, what place was this? It could not have been Heaven, for no one could enter Heaven before the death of Christ; nor could it have been hell, for then the prayer of Dives to Lazarus would have been without meaning or purpose. It must, therefore, have been that middle place in which the souls of the just of the old law were detained until after the death and resurrection of Christ. (xvi., 22.)

Again, in First Epistle of Peter (iii., 19), we read: "Christ died for our sins, being put to death in the flesh, but alive in the spirit, in which, also, coming, he preached to those spirits that were in prison." Now, what was this prison? It was not surely the hell of the damned, but that hell or prison of which the Apostles' Creed speaks, in which were detained the souls of God's servants who died before Christ, and to whom the Saviour came to announce the glad tidings of their liberation and of their eternal salvation. It is of those spirits the scripture speaks when it says of Christ that, ascending on high, He led captivity captive (Chap. 4, v. 8), that is, He freed from the captivity of their prison the

patriarchs, prophets, and just of the old law, and led them in triumphant entry into heaven on the day of the ascension.

Our blessed Lord and teacher tells us in Matthew, (chap. xii, 32). "That he that shall speak against the Holy Ghost the sin shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world nor in the world to come." These words manifestly imply that sins may be forgiven in the world to come, and, therefore, there must be a middle place wherein this forgiveness could be meted out, as it could not take place in either heaven or hell, and this is the meaning which the Holy Fathers, with a striking unanimity, attach to this text.

The last scriptural authority to which we shall call attention in proof of a middle place, or purgatory in the next life, is taken from St. Paul's 1st epistle to the Corinthians, (iii, 13-15,) where the apostle says: "The day of the Lord shall be revealed by fire, and the fire shall try every man's work, of what sort it is. If any man's works abide, he shall receive a reward. If any man's works be burnt, he shall suffer loss, but he himself shall be saved yet so as by fire." Here the apostle draws a distinction between perfect works done in charity, which stand the test of fire, and bring rewards to their authors, and imperfect works and venial sins, which are burnt by purgatorial fires, whilst their authors are saved by those purgatorial fires.

The general council of Florence, held in 1438, and in which the Greek and Latin churches were united, teaches that these words are to be understood of the fires of Purgatory, and so do all the Greek and Latin Fathers, and the constant tradition of the church. In fact, the unbroken tradition of the Catholic Church, and of all the Christian ages down to the sixteenth century, testifies that a belief in a middle state of purgatorial expiation in the next life was a doctrine of Christian faith firmly, constantly and universally held and acted upon. The east and west, the north and south—in other words, the universal Church of Christ, from the earliest ages downwards, held and taught the doctrine of purgatory and the farther and co-relative doctrine that the souls therein detained could be assisted, relieved and freed by prayers, almsdeeds, and by the unbloody sacrifice of the altar. Hence, the Council of Trent, basing its teaching on the word of God and the unanimous tradition of the Christian ages, defined and decreed that "there is a Purgatory, and that the souls therein detained are helped by the suffrages of the faithful, but chiefly by the acceptable sacrifice of the altar." And this brings us to the consoling doctrine that those prisoners of hope may be helped, relieved and freed from their purgatorial prison by our prayers, almsdeeds and other good works, but chiefly by the holy sacrifice of the mass. No doctrine of our holy religion has more undeniable proofs of its antiquity than this of the duty of praying for the dead in Christ, and the benefits they derive from this holy practice. No proof of the existence of a middle state could be more convincing than this of the unerring tradition and practice of the Church. Of what use, without the existence of a middle state, could be prayers for the dead? They could be of no use to the just in heaven, for as St. Augustine says, "he who prays for a martyr does injury to the martyr;" of none to the damned, for out of hell there is no redemption. Tertullian, who lived in the age next to that of the apostles, speaking of a pious widow, says: "She prays for the soul of her husband, and begs refreshment for him." St. Cyprian, in the following age, is, in several pages of his writings, a witness to this belief and practice of the Church in his day. As far back as the fourth century, St. Cyril testifies that it was the custom to pray for those who had departed this life, believing it to be a great assistance to those souls for whom prayers are offered while the holy and tremendous sacrifice is going on." St. Chrysostom, who flourished within three hundred years of the age of the apostles, writes as follows: "It was not without good reason ordained by the apostles that mention should be made of the dead in the tremendous mysteries, because they knew well that these would receive great benefit from it."

All the other great Christian writers and teachers of antiquity, down to St. Ambrose, St. Jerome and St. Augustine, prove that the doctrine and practice of the Church in this important regard were the same then as now, and, therefore, that they are of apostolic authority, and warrant, according to the maxim of St. Augustine, "that which the universal Church holds, which has been always retained, and not instituted by councils, is justly believed to have been not otherwise transmitted than by apostolic authority." (de Bapt. contra. don.) St. Augustine, who flourished in the fifth century, is most explicit on this subject. In one of his sermons (serm. cxxxii.) he says: "Funeral pomp and a gorgeous mausoleum, without being of the least service to the dead, may, indeed, offer some kind of consolation to the living. But that which cannot be doubted is that the prayers of the Church, the holy sacrifice, alms, bring them relief, and obtain for them a more merciful treatment than they deserved. The whole Church, instructed by the traditions of the Fathers, takes care that at the part of the sacrifice in which the dead are mentioned, a prayer and an oblation are made for all those who have departed

this life in the communion of the body of Jesus Christ."

A most touching incident is related by this same great saint, which gives us a glimpse into the life and practice of the Church in his day. When his saintly mother Monica was dying she said to him: "Lay this body anywhere; be not concerned about that; only I beg of you that whosoever you be, you make remembrance of me at the Lord's altar," and the saint goes on to tell how he fulfilled this request, and how, after her death, the "Holy Sacrifice of our Ransom" was offered for her, and how fervently he continued to pray for her soul. The constant and unbroken tradition of praying for the dead, prevailing at all times and in all countries, is, we repeat, one of the strongest, even if less direct than other proofs, of the truth of the doctrine of the Church as to the existence of a place of purgation and probation in the next life. This practice of praying for the dead presupposes also the doctrine of the communion of saints.

The Church Catholic is a living organism—it is the body of Christ. It exists in Heaven in a triumphant state, on earth in a militant state, and in Purgatory in a suffering state. "As in one body," says St. Paul in the Epistle to the Romans, "there are many members, but all the members have not the same office, so we being many, are one body in Christ, and each one members one of another." The communion of saints is a great fact attested by the revealed word of God, and embodied as an article of faith in the Apostles' Creed. The Church is a vast society of the children of Christ, embracing the saints in Heaven, the suffering souls in Purgatory, and its members still detained in the flesh. There is a bond of union, of sympathy, and of charity, binding all these children of the Church in one great family of God. Death cannot separate these souls, nor raise up an impassible barrier dividing them; for Christ, who is our peace, hath broken down all the walls of partition which sin and death had interposed between God's children, and hath made both one; that is, hath embraced and united the saints in Heaven, his children on earth, and his suffering prisoners in Purgatory, into one body, which is His Church. And, as in the human body, all the members are interdependent and minister to each other's wants, and feel for each other's sufferings, and contribute to the well-being of the whole body, so, in the Church of God, which is the body of Christ, the various members thereof, by the divine appointment, and according to their position and the measure of their capacity, minister to each other's spiritual needs, interchange kindly and merciful offices, are bound together by the bonds of active charity and friendship, which defy the powers of death and the ruin and wreckage of the grave. We here on earth invoke the prayers of the saints—they intercede for us with God—and by prayers, almsdeeds and other good works we bring relief and comfort, and we hasten the day of their freedom and happiness for the prisoners of God in Purgatory. This is the communion of saints in the fullest sense of the word. It presents the whole world of souls who are at friendship with God, whether they still remain in the flesh or are already divested of their bodies, and are reigning in Heaven or suffering, with unspeakable longings for home, in Purgatory; bound together in the golden bonds of sympathy, friendship and love—bonds which death itself cannot rend asunder; for love is stronger than death—*fortis est ut mors delectio*. In the Catholic system the love of friendship and of charity is not killed or extinguished by death. It survives its awful ravages—it smiles above the wreck of mortality, like the blessed light of hope upon a death-bed—like the rainbow of promise over the retiring waters of the deluge. Soul lives in blissful communion with soul—friend here with departed friend—and nor death nor the grave can part them. This is and ever has been the belief and practice of the Church, and hence we find in every Christian age, from the catacombs to this nineteenth century, prayers and sacrifice offered up by the living for the souls of the faithful departed. We find this belief and practice recorded on the damp walls of the catacombs—on mural tablets in churches—on the tombs that affection or pride has raised to the memory of the departed. We find them enshrined in the immortal pages of the Fathers—embodied in the liturgies of the eastern and western Churches, and in the plaintive music and wailing dirges of the Church—in the "Dies Ire," and "Liberas," they have come echoing, sounding down the ages, soothing and healing broken hearts, drying the tears of those made widows and orphans by death—and, in accents of tenderest pity and compassion, pleading at the mercy-seat of God for the rest and peace and happiness of the departed ones. Oh, far more heart-reaching than Jeremiah's song of sorrow amid the ruins of his beloved city—far more touching and overpowering than the lamentations of Rachel for the lost children of Rama—are the sorrow-laden dirges of the Church when pleading to God for comfort and strength and patience for the living bereaved ones, and forgiveness and mercy for the departed dead. All the sighs and sorrows of broken hearts—all the crushing afflictions and griefs of widows and orphans—all the heart anguish and agony of bereaved mothers—all the tears

and hopes of the living for the dead—are taken up and given voices in the liturgy of the Church, and, in union with the pleadings of the precious blood, ascend to Heaven, and in accents more tearful, more piteous, and more touching than ever also pleaded for the remission of guilt or the alleviation of sorrow, cry out to God for comfort for the sorrows of the living, and for mercy and pardon for the departed.

The Egyptians embalmed the bodies of their dead, and thus preserved them incorrupt for centuries. The Church embalms the memories of her departed children, and makes them immortal in her offices and liturgies, and she never fails and never ceases to offer supplications and oblations for them to God. Even though the mother should forget the child of her womb, the wife her husband, and though men should cease to remember the friends of their youth and manhood, yet will the Church never forget the children she bore to Christ. She treasures up their memory in her mighty heart, and, even though centuries may pass away—even though the marble monuments raised to their memory should have passed into ruins, she will ever pray and plead for them to God, and she will never surrender her hold on them and her abiding and loving interest in them, until that day when she herself will look her last on a perishing world, and will be taken up into Heaven—to be there the New Jerusalem—where God will wipe away all tears—where death shall be no more, nor mourning nor weeping shall not be any more.

O, Dearest brethren, let us not fail to pray for the dead. Death has merely parted them from us as to their bodily presence, but he has not severed their immortal souls from communion with us, nor from the graces and mercies of Christ. "The souls of the faithful departed," says St. Augustine, "are not separated from the Church, which is the Kingdom of Christ, for otherwise there would not be a commemoration made of them at the Altar of God in the communion of the body of Christ." The souls in Purgatory are in the Kingdom of Christ's infinite mercy and compassion, as well as of His justice. Pray for them as Martha prayed for her dead brother, and obtained his return to life. Bring them in faith and hopefulness before the mercy seat of our Lord, even as the widow of Naim carried her dead son to Him, and he will have compassion on them, and will say: "I say to you arise." And the dead will hear the voice of Christ releasing them from prison and from pain, and they will arise to the company of the just, to the citizenship of Heaven, to the home of God, where, in the words of holy writ, "they shall be before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and He that sitteth on the throne shall dwell over them, and they shall not hunger nor thirst any more, neither shall the sun fall on them, nor any heat, for the lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall rule them, and shall lead them to the fountains of the waters of life, and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes." (Apoc. viii., 15, 6, 7, 16.)

Among the suffering souls there may be some whom we are especially bound to aid. There may be some who have shared the joys of our past life, and some who have shared our sorrows. There may be some whom we have injured by our example, harshness or indulgence, and to whom, perhaps, we have even been the immediate cause or occasion of the sins for which they are suffering. There are some, mayhap, whose death occurred under such circumstances that we have reason to fear that their sufferings are peculiarly terrible, and that their absence from God will endure long. Possibly, too, these suffering souls have during life been very near and dear to us. They may be our relatives, our brothers or sisters, our children, our fathers or our mothers. God loves them and desires their speedy admission to heavenly happiness; yet He makes this depend on the amount of love we may manifest for them. He will not admit them to eternal glory, until our fervent prayers open to them the heavenly gates. That our works of charity, whereby we relieve the poor on earth, performed for Christ, and raised in value by His merits, cancel many sins, is attested in Holy Scripture; for "alms delivereth from death, and the same is that which purgeth away sins and maketh to find mercy and life everlasting." (Tobias xii., 9.) If then so great a reward is promised to those who relieve the suffering on earth, will not the reward be proportionally greater, if by our good works we relieve from much more intense suffering the souls in Purgatory?

1st. In conclusion, then, we most strongly recommend to our Catholic people a special devotion for the relief of the souls in Purgatory. Let their prayers and good works, and especially the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass be frequently offered to God for this purpose.

2nd. For this end we exhort our people to recite the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin, with their families, for the repose of the souls of the faithful departed. We may well imagine that those souls appeal to us constantly for the help that we can so readily afford to them. We may imagine them addressing us in the words of holy Job (xix. 21.) "Have pity on me, have pity on me, you at least my friends, because the hand of the Lord hath touched me."

3rd. We desire that the Church bell be

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