

Praying for those who sleep in Christ

(Adapted from a text by “Catholic Answers”)

The Roots of this practice

All Christians agree that we won't be sinning in heaven. Sin and final glorification are utterly incompatible. Therefore, between the sinfulness of this life and the glories of heaven, we must be made pure. Between death and glory there is a purification.

Thus, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: "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 Latin Church gives the name purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned" (CCC 1030–1). The Byzantine Churches give the name “Final Theosis” to this process and look at it as a series of tests or trials which take place in the first forty days after death.

Many early Christians considered the concept of an after-death purification from sin to be alluded to in New Testament passages such as 1 Corinthians 3:11–15, Matthew 5:25–26, 12:31–32, and 2 Timothy 1:18.

The belief in final purification has been part of the true faith since before the time of Christ. The Jews already believed it before the coming of the Messiah, as revealed in the Old Testament (2 Macc. 12:41–45) as well as in other pre-Christian Jewish works, such as one which records that Adam will be in mourning "until the day of dispensing punishment in the last years, when I will turn his sorrow into joy" (*The Life of Adam and Eve* 46–7). Orthodox Jews to this day believe in the final purification, and for eleven months after the death of a loved one, they pray a prayer called the *Mourner's Kaddish* for their loved one's purification.

Jews, Catholics, and the Eastern Orthodox have always historically proclaimed the reality of the final purification. It was not until the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century that anyone denied this doctrine. As the quotes below from the early Church Fathers show, final purification (or final theosis) has been a part of the Christian faith from the very beginning.

Some imagine that the Latin Church has an elaborate dogma of purgatory, but there are only three essential components of the doctrine: (1) that a purification after death exists, (2) that it involves some kind of suffering, and (3) that the purification can be assisted by the prayers and offerings by the living to God. Other ideas, such that purgatory is a particular "place" in the afterlife or that it takes time to accomplish, are speculations rather than doctrines.

The Acts of Paul and Thecla

"And after the exhibition, Tryphaena again received her [Thecla]. For her daughter Falconilla had died, and said to her in a dream: ‘Mother, you shall have this stranger Thecla in my place, in order that she may pray concerning me, and that I may be transferred to the place of the righteous’" (*Acts of Paul and Thecla* [A.D. 160]).

Abercius

"The citizen of a prominent city, I erected this while I lived, that I might have a resting place for my body. Abercius is my name, a disciple of the chaste Shepherd who feeds his sheep on the mountains and in the fields, who has great eyes surveying everywhere, who taught me the faithful writings of life. Standing by, I, Abercius, ordered this to be inscribed: Truly, I was in my seventy-second year. May everyone who is in accord with this and who understands it pray for Abercius" (*Epitaph of Abercius* [A.D. 190]).

The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity

"[T]hat very night, this was shown to me in a vision: I [Perpetua] saw Dinocrates going out from a gloomy place, where also there were several others, and he was parched and very thirsty, with a filthy countenance and pallid color, and the wound on his face which he had when he died. This Dinocrates had been my brother after the flesh, seven years of age, who died miserably with disease. . . . For him I had made my prayer, and between him and me there was a large interval, so that neither of us could approach to the other . . . and [I] knew that my brother was in suffering. But I trusted that my prayer would bring help to his suffering; and I prayed for him every day until we passed over into the prison of the camp, for we were to fight in the camp-show. Then . . . I made my prayer for my brother day and night, groaning and weeping that he might be granted to me. Then, on the day on which we remained in fetters, this was shown to me: I saw that the place which I had formerly observed to be in gloom was now bright; and Dinocrates, with a clean body well clad, was finding refreshment. . . . [And] he went away from the water to play joyously, after the manner of children, and I awoke. Then I understood that he was translated from the place of punishment" (*The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity* 2:3–4 [A.D. 202]).

Tertullian

"[T]hat allegory of the Lord [Matt. 5:25–26] . . . is extremely clear and simple in its meaning . . . [beware lest as] a transgressor of your agreement, before God the Judge . . . and lest this Judge deliver you over to the angel who is to execute the sentence, and he commit you to the prison of hell, out of which there will be no dismissal until the smallest even of your delinquencies be paid off in the period before the resurrection. What can be a more fitting sense than this? What a truer interpretation?" (*The Soul* 35 [A.D. 210]).

"We offer sacrifices for the dead on their birthday anniversaries [the date of death—birth into eternal life]" (*The Crown* 3:3 [A.D. 211]).

"A woman, after the death of her husband . . . prays for his soul and asks that he may, while waiting, find rest; and that he may share in the first resurrection. And each year, on the anniversary of his death, she offers the sacrifice" (*Monogamy* 10:1–2 [A.D. 216]).

Cyprian of Carthage

"The strength of the truly believing remains unshaken; and with those who fear and love God with their whole heart, their integrity continues steady and strong. For to adulterers even a time of repentance is granted by us, and peace [i.e., reconciliation] is given. Yet virginity is not

therefore deficient in the Church, nor does the glorious design of continence languish through the sins of others. The Church, crowned with so many virgins, flourishes; and chastity and modesty preserve the tenor of their glory. Nor is the vigor of continence broken down because repentance and pardon are facilitated to the adulterer. It is one thing to stand for pardon, another thing to attain to glory; it is one thing, when cast into prison, not to go out thence until one has paid the uttermost farthing; another thing at once to receive the wages of faith and courage. It is one thing, tortured by long suffering for sins, to be cleansed and long purged by fire; another to have purged all sins by suffering. It is one thing, in fine, to be in suspense till the sentence of God at the day of judgment; another to be at once crowned by the Lord" (*Letters* 51[55]:20 [A.D. 253]).

Lactantius

"But also, when God will judge the just, it is likewise in fire that he will try them. At that time, they whose sins are uppermost, either because of their gravity or their number, will be drawn together by the fire and will be burned. Those, however, who have been imbued with full justice and maturity of virtue, will not feel that fire; for they have something of God in them which will repel and turn back the strength of the flame" (*Divine Institutes* 7:21:6 [A.D. 307]).

Cyril of Jerusalem

"Then we make mention also of those who have already fallen asleep: first, the patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs, that through their prayers and supplications God would receive our petition; next, we make mention also of the holy fathers and bishops who have already fallen asleep, and, to put it simply, of all among us who have already fallen asleep, for we believe that it will be of very great benefit to the souls of those for whom the petition is carried up, while this holy and most solemn sacrifice is laid out" (*Catechetical Lectures* 23:5:9 [A.D. 350]).

Gregory of Nyssa

"If a man distinguish in himself what is peculiarly human from that which is irrational, and if he be on the watch for a life of greater urbanity for himself, in this present life he will purify himself of any evil contracted, overcoming the irrational by reason. If he has inclined to the irrational pressure of the passions, using for the passions the cooperating hide of things irrational, he may afterward in a quite different manner be very much interested in what is better, when, after his departure out of the body, he gains knowledge of the difference between virtue and vice and finds that he is not able to partake of divinity until he has been purged of the filthy contagion in his soul by the purifying fire" (*Sermon on the Dead* [A.D. 382]).

Apostolic Constitutions

"Let the third day of the departed be celebrated with psalms, lessons, and prayers -on account of Him who arose within the space of three days. And let the ninth day be celebrated in remembrance of the living and the departed. Do this also on the fortieth day, according to the ancient pattern. For the people lamented Moses in this manner. Also the anniversary day should be kept in memory of him. And let alms be given to the poor out of his goods, for a memorial to him. Now, we say these things concerning the godly. As for the ungodly person -if you gave the whole world to the poor, you would not benefit him at all. For to whom the Deity was an enemy

while he was alive, it is certain it will be the same way when he is departed.” [Compiled, A.D. 390]

John Chrysostom

"Let us help and commemorate them. If Job's sons were purified by their father's sacrifice [Job 1:5], 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" (*Homilies on First Corinthians* 41:5 [A.D. 392]).

"Weep for those who die in their wealth and who with all their wealth prepared no consolation for their own souls, who had the power to wash away their sins and did not will to do it. Let us weep for them, let us assist them to the extent of our ability, let us think of some assistance for them, small as it may be, yet let us somehow assist them. But how, and in what way? By praying for them and by entreating others to pray for them, by constantly giving alms to the poor on their behalf. Not in vain was it decreed by the apostles that in the awesome mysteries remembrance should be made of the departed. They knew that here there was much gain for them, much benefit. When the entire people stands with hands uplifted, a priestly assembly, and that awesome sacrificial Victim is laid out, how, when we are calling upon God, should we not succeed in their defense? But this is done for those who have departed in the faith, while even the catechumens are not reckoned as worthy of this consolation, but are deprived of every means of assistance except one. And what is that? We may give alms to the poor on their behalf" (*Homilies on Philipians* 3:9–10 [A.D. 402]).

Augustine

"There is an ecclesiastical discipline, as the faithful know, when the names of the martyrs are read aloud in that place at the altar of God, where prayer is not offered for them. Prayer, however, is offered for other dead who are remembered. It is wrong to pray for a martyr, to whose prayers we ought ourselves be commended" (*Sermons* 159:1 [A.D. 411]).

"But by the prayers of the holy Church, and by the salvific sacrifice, and by the alms which are given for their spirits, there is no doubt that the dead are aided, that the Lord might deal more mercifully with them than their sins would deserve. The whole Church observes this practice which was handed down by the Fathers: that it prays for those who have died in the communion of the Body and Blood of Christ, when they are commemorated in their own place in the sacrifice itself; and the sacrifice is offered also in memory of them, on their behalf. If, then, works of mercy are celebrated for the sake of those who are being remembered, who would hesitate to recommend them, on whose behalf prayers to God are not offered in vain? It is not at all to be doubted that such prayers are of profit to the dead; but for such of them as lived before their death in a way that makes it possible for these things to be useful to them after death" (*ibid.*, 172:2).

"Temporal punishments are suffered by some in this life only, by some after death, by some both here and hereafter, but all of them before that last and strictest judgment. But not all who suffer

temporal punishments after death will come to eternal punishments, which are to follow after that judgment" (*The City of God* 21:13 [A.D. 419]).

"That there should be some fire even after this life is not incredible, and it can be inquired into and either be discovered or left hidden whether some of the faithful may be saved, some more slowly and some more quickly in the greater or lesser degree in which they loved the good things that perish, through a certain purgatorial fire" (*Handbook on Faith, Hope, and Charity* 18:69 [A.D. 421]).

"The time which interposes between the death of a man and the final resurrection holds souls in hidden retreats, accordingly as each is deserving of rest or of hardship, in view of what it merited when it was living in the flesh. Nor can it be denied that the souls of the dead find relief through the piety of their friends and relatives who are still alive, when the Sacrifice of the Mediator [Mass] is offered for them, or when alms are given in the Church. But these things are of profit to those who, when they were alive, merited that they might afterward be able to be helped by these things. There is a certain manner of living, neither so good that there is no need of these helps after death, nor yet so wicked that these helps are of no avail after death" (*ibid.*, 29:109).