



# Boston Catholic Journal

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## Purgatory



**Saint Catherine of Genoa**

### **TREATISE ON PURGATORY**

**H**ow by Comparing it to the Divine Fire which she Felt in Herself, this Soul Understood what Purgatory was like and how the Souls there were Tormented. <sup>1</sup>

#### **CHAPTER I**

**The state of the souls who are in Purgatory, how they are exempt from all self-love.**

This holy Soul <sup>2</sup> found herself, while still in the flesh, placed by the fiery love of God in Purgatory, which burnt her, cleansing whatever in her needed cleansing, to the end that when she passed from this life she might be presented to the sight of God, her dear Love. By means of this loving fire, she understood in her soul the state of the souls of the faithful who are placed in

Purgatory to purge them of all the rust and stains of sin of which they have not rid themselves in this life. And since this Soul, placed by the divine fire in this loving Purgatory, was united to that divine love and content with all that was wrought in her, she understood the state of the souls who are in Purgatory. And she said:

The souls who are in Purgatory cannot, as I understand, choose but be there, and this is by God's ordinance who therein has done justly. They cannot turn their thoughts back to themselves, nor can they say, "Such sins I have committed for which I deserve to be here ", nor, "I would that I had not committed them for then I would go now to Paradise", nor, "That one will leave sooner than I", nor, "I will leave sooner than he". They can have neither of themselves nor of others any memory, whether of good or evil, whence they would have greater pain than they suffer ordinarily. So happy are they to be within God's ordinance, and that He should do all which pleases Him, as it pleases Him that in their greatest pain they cannot think of themselves. They see only the working of the divine goodness, which leads man to itself mercifully, so that he no longer sees aught of the pain or good which may befall him. Nor would these souls be in pure charity if they could see that pain or good. They cannot see that they are in pain because of their sins; that sight they cannot hold in their minds because in it there would be an active imperfection, which cannot be where no actual sin can be.

Only once, as they pass from this life, do they see the cause of the Purgatory they endure; never again do they see it for in another sight of it there would be self. Being then in charity from which they cannot now depart by any actual fault, they can no longer will nor desire save with the pure will of pure charity. Being in that fire of Purgatory, they are SAINT CATHERINE OF GENOA within the divine ordinance, which is pure charity, and in nothing can they depart thence for they are deprived of the power to sin as of the power to merit.

## **CHAPTER II**

**What is the joy of the souls in Purgatory. A comparison to shew how they see God ever more and more. The difficulty of speaking of this state.**

I believe no happiness can be found worthy to be compared with that of a soul in Purgatory except that of the saints in Paradise; and day by day this happiness grows as God flows into these souls, more and more as the hindrance to His entrance is consumed. Sin's rust is the hindrance, and the fire burns the rust away so that more and more the soul opens itself up to the divine inflowing. A thing which is covered cannot respond to the sun's rays, not because of any defect in the sun, which is shining all the time, but because the cover is an obstacle; if the cover be burnt away, this thing is open to the sun; more and more as the cover is consumed does it respond to the rays of the sun.

It is in this way that rust, which is sin, covers souls, and in Purgatory is burnt away by fire; the more it is consumed, the more do the souls respond to God, the true sun. As the rust lessens and the soul is opened up to the divine ray, happiness grows; until the time be accomplished the one wanes and the other waxes. Pain however does not lessen but only the time for which pain is endured. As for will: never can the souls say these pains are pains, so contented are they with God's ordaining with which, in pure charity, their will is united.

But, on the other hand, they endure a pain so extreme that no tongue can be found to tell it, nor could the mind understand its least pang if God by special grace did not shew so much. Which least pang God of His grace shewed to this Soul, but with her tongue she cannot say what it is. This sight which the Lord revealed to me has never since left my mind and I will tell what I can of it. They will understand whose mind God deigns to open.

## CHAPTER III

### **Separation from God is the chief punishment of Purgatory. Wherein Purgatory differs from Hell.**

All the pains of Purgatory arise from original or actual sin. God created the soul pure, simple and clean of all stain of sin, with a certain beatific instinct towards Himself whence original sin, which the soul finds in itself, draws it away, and when actual is added to original sin the soul is drawn yet further away. The further it departs from its beatific instinct, the more malignant it becomes because it corresponds less to God.

There can be no good save by participation in God, who meets the needs of irrational creatures as He wills and has ordained, never failing them, and answers to a rational soul in the measure in which He finds it cleansed of sin's hindrance. When therefore a soul has come near to the pure and clear state in which it was created, its beatific instinct discovers itself and grows unceasingly, so impetuously and with such fierce charity (drawing it to its last end) that any hindrance seems to this soul a thing past bearing. The more it sees, the more extreme is its pain.

Because the souls in Purgatory are without the guilt of sin, there is no hindrance between them and God except their pain, which holds them back so that they cannot reach perfection. Clearly they see the grievousness of every least hindrance in their way, and see too that their instinct is hindered by a necessity of justice: thence is born a raging fire, like that of Hell save that guilt is lacking to it. Guilt it is which makes the will of the damned in Hell malignant, on whom God does not bestow His goodness and who remain therefore in desperate ill will, opposed to the will of God.

## CHAPTER IV

**Of the state of the souls in Hell and of the difference between them and those in Purgatory.**  
Reflections of this saint on those who are careless of their salvation.

Hence it is manifest that there is perversity of will, contrary to the will of God, where the guilt is known and ill will persists, and that the guilt of those who have passed with ill will from this life to Hell is not remitted, nor can be since they may no longer change the will with which they have passed out of this life, in which passage the soul is made stable in good or evil in accordance with its deliberate will. As it is written, "*Ubi te invenero*," that is in the hour of death, with the will to sin or dissatisfaction with sin or repentance for sin, "*Ibi te judicabo*." Of which judgment there is afterwards no remission, as I will shew:

After death free will can never return, for the will is fixed as it was at the moment of death. Because the souls in Hell were found at the moment of death to have in them the will to sin, they bear the guilt throughout eternity, suffering not indeed the pains they merit but such pains as they endure, and these without end. But the souls in Purgatory bear only pain, for their guilt was wiped away at the moment of their death when they were found to be ill content with their sins and repentant for their offences against divine goodness. Therefore their pain is finite and its time ever lessening, as has been said.

O misery beyond all other misery, the greater that human blindness takes it not into account!

The pain of the damned is not infinite in quantity because the dear goodness of God sheds the ray of His mercy even in Hell. For man dead in sin merits infinite pain for an infinite time, but God's mercy has allotted infinity to him only in time and has determined the quantity of his pain; in justice God could have given him more pain.

O how dangerous is sin committed in malice! Hardly does a man repent him thereof, and without repentance he will bear its guilt for as long as he perseveres, that is for as long as he wills a sin committed or wills to sin again.

## CHAPTER V

**Of the peace and the joy there are in Purgatory.**

The souls in Purgatory have wills accordant in all things with the will of God, who therefore sheds on them His goodness, and they, as far as their will goes, are happy and cleansed of all their sin. As for guilt, these cleansed souls are as they were when God created them, for God forgives their guilt immediately who have passed from this life ill content with their sins, having

confessed all they have committed and having the will to commit no more. Only the rust of sin is left them and from this they cleanse themselves by pain in the fire. Thus cleansed of all guilt and united in will to God, they see Him clearly in the degree in which He makes Himself known to them, and see too how much it imports to enjoy Him and that souls have been created for this end. Moreover, they are brought to so uniting a conformity with God, and are drawn to Him in such wise, His natural instinct towards souls working in them, that neither arguments nor figures nor examples can make the thing clear as the mind knows it to be in effect and as by inner feeling it is understood to be. I will, however, make one comparison which comes to my mind.

## CHAPTER VI

### **A comparison to shew with what violence and what love the souls in Purgatory desire to enjoy God.**

If in all the world there were but one loaf of bread to feed the hunger of all creatures, and if they were satisfied by the sight of it alone, then since man, if he be healthy, has an instinct to eat, his hunger, if he neither ate nor sickened nor died, would grow unceasingly for his instinct to eat would not lessen. Knowing that there was only that loaf to satisfy him and that without it he must still be hungry, he would be in unbearable pain. All the more if he went near that loaf and could not see it, would his natural craving for it be strengthened; his instinct would fix his desire wholly on that loaf which held all that could content him; at this point, if he were sure he would never see the loaf again, he would be in Hell. Thus are the souls of the damned from whom any hope of ever seeing their bread, which is God, the true Savior, has been taken away. But the souls in Purgatory have the hope of seeing their bread and wholly satisfying themselves therewith. Therefore they suffer hunger and endure pain in that measure in which they will be able to satisfy themselves with the bread which is Jesus Christ, true God and Savior and our Love.

## CHAPTER VII

### **Of God's admirable wisdom in making Purgatory and Hell.**

As the clean and purified spirit can find rest only in God, having been created for this end, so there is no place save Hell for the soul in sin, for whose end Hell was ordained by God. When the soul as it leaves the body is in mortal sin, then, in the instant in which spirit and body are separated, the soul goes to the place ordained for it, unguided save by the nature of its sin. And if at that moment the soul were bound by no ordinance proceeding from God's justice, it would go to a yet greater hell than that in which it abides, for it would be outside His ordinance, in which divine mercy has part so that God gives the soul less pain than it deserves. The soul, finding no

other place to hand nor any holding less evil for it, casts itself by God's ordinance into Hell as into its proper place.

To return to our matter which is the Purgatory of the soul separated from the body when it is no longer clean as it was created. Seeing in itself the impediment which can be taken away only by means of Purgatory, it casts itself therein swiftly and willingly. Were there not the ordinance it thus obeys, one fit to rid it of its encumbrance, it would in that instant beget within itself a hell worse than Purgatory, for it would see that because of that impediment it could not draw near to God, its end. So much does God import that Purgatory in comparison counts not at all, for all that it is, as has been said, like Hell. But compared to God, it appears almost nothing.

## CHAPTER VIII

### **Of the necessity of Purgatory. How terrible it is.**

When I look at God, I see no gate to Paradise, and yet because God is all mercy he who wills enters there. God stands before us with open arms to receive us into His glory. But well I see the divine essence to be of such purity, greater far than can be imagined, that the soul in which there is even the least note of imperfection would rather cast itself into a thousand Hells than find itself thus stained in the presence of the Divine Majesty. Therefore the soul, understanding that Purgatory has been ordained to take away those stains, casts itself therein, and seems to itself to have found great mercy in that it can rid itself there of the impediment which is the stain of sin.

No tongue can tell nor explain, no mind understand, the grievousness of Purgatory. But I, though I see that there is in Purgatory as much pain as in Hell, yet see the soul which has the least stain of imperfection accepting Purgatory, as I have said, as though it were a mercy, and holding its pains of no account as compared with the least stain which hinders a soul in its love. I seem to see that the pain which souls in Purgatory endure because of whatever in them displeases God, that is what they have willfully done against His so great goodness, is greater than any other pain they feel in Purgatory. And this is because, being in grace, they see the truth and the grievousness of the hindrance which stays them from drawing near to God.

## CHAPTER IX

**How God and the souls in Purgatory look at each other.** The saint acknowledges that in speaking of these matters she cannot express herself.

All these things which I have surely in mind, in so much as in this life I have been able to understand them, are, as compared with what I have said, extreme in their greatness. Beside

them, all the sights and sounds and justice and truths of this world seem to me lies and nothingness. I am left confused because I cannot find words extreme enough for these things.

I perceive there to be so much conformity between God and the soul that when He sees it in the purity in which His Divine Majesty created it He gives it a burning love, which draws it to Himself, which is strong enough to destroy it, immortal though it be, and which causes it to be so transformed in God that it sees itself as though it were none other than God. Unceasingly He draws it to Himself and breathes fire into it, never letting it go until He has led it to the state whence it came forth, that is to the pure cleanliness in which it was created.

When with its inner sight the soul sees itself drawn by God with such loving fire, then it is melted by the heat of the glowing love for God, its most dear Lord, which it feels overflowing it. And it sees by the divine light that God does not cease from drawing it, nor from leading it, lovingly and with much care and unfailing foresight, to its full perfection, doing this of His pure love. But the soul, being hindered by sin, cannot go whither God draws it; it cannot follow the uniting look with which He would draw it to Himself. Again the soul perceives the grievousness of being held back from seeing the divine light; the soul's instinct too, being drawn by that uniting look, craves to be unhindered. I say that it is the sight of these things which begets in the souls the pain they feel in Purgatory. Not that they make account of their pain; most great though it be, they deem it a far less evil than to find themselves going against the will of God, whom they clearly see to be on fire with extreme and pure love for them.

Strongly and unceasingly this love draws the soul with that uniting look, as though it had nought else than this to do. Could the soul who understood find a worse Purgatory in which to rid itself sooner of all the hindrance in its way, it would swiftly fling itself therein, driven by the conforming love between itself and God.

## CHAPTER X

**How God uses Purgatory to make the soul wholly pure.** The soul acquires in Purgatory a purity so great that were it well for it still to stay there after it had been purged of sin, it would no longer suffer.

I see, too, certain rays and shafts of light which go out from that divine love towards the soul and are penetrating and strong enough to seem as though they must destroy not only the body but the soul too, were that possible. Two works are wrought by these rays, the first purification and the second destruction.

Look at gold: the more you melt it, the better it becomes; you could melt it until you had destroyed in it every imperfection. Thus does fire work on material things. The soul cannot be destroyed in so far as it is in God, but in so far as it is in itself it can be destroyed; the more it is

purified, the more is self destroyed within it, until at last it is pure in God.

When gold has been purified up to twenty-four carats, it can no longer be consumed by any fire; not gold itself but only dross can be burnt away. Thus the divine fire works in the soul: God holds the soul in the fire until its every imperfection is burnt away and it is brought to perfection, as it were to the purity of twenty-four carats, each soul however according to its own degree. When the soul has been purified it stays wholly in God, having nothing of self in it; its being is in God who has led this cleansed soul to Himself; it can suffer no more for nothing is left in it to be burnt away; were it held in the fire when it has thus been cleansed, it would feel no pain. Rather the fire of divine love would be to it like eternal life and in no way contrary to it.

## CHAPTER XI

**Of the desire of souls in Purgatory to be wholly cleansed of the stains of their sins.** The wisdom of God who suddenly hides their faults from these souls.

The soul was created as well conditioned as it is capable of being for reaching perfection if it live as God has ordained and do not foul itself with any stain of sin. But having fouled itself by original sin, it loses its gifts and graces and lies dead, nor can it rise again save by God's means. And when God, by baptism, has raised it from the dead, it is still prone to evil, inclining and being led to actual sin unless it resist. And thus it dies again.

Then God by another special grace raises it again, yet it stays so sullied and so turned to self that all the divine workings of which we have spoken are needed to recall it to its first state in which God created it; without them it could never get back thither. And when the soul finds itself on the road back to its first state, its need to be transformed in God kindles in it a fire so great that this is its Purgatory. Not that it can look upon this as Purgatory, but its instinct to God, aflame and thwarted, makes Purgatory.

A last act of love is done by God without help from man. So many hidden imperfections are in the soul that, did it see them, it would live in despair. But in the state of which we have spoken they are all burnt away, and only when they have gone does God shew them to the soul, so that it may see that divine working which kindles the fire of love in which its imperfections have been burnt away.

## CHAPTER XII

### **How suffering in Purgatory is coupled with joy.**

Know that what man deems perfection in himself is in God's sight faulty, for all the things a man does which he sees or feels or means or wills or remembers to have a perfect seeming are wholly fouled and sullied unless he acknowledge them to be from God. If a work is to be perfect it must be wrought in us but not chiefly by us, for God's works must be done in Him and not wrought chiefly by man.

Such works are those last wrought in us by God of His pure and clean love, by Him alone without merit of ours, and so penetrating are they and such fire do they kindle in the soul, that the body which wraps it seems to be consumed as in a furnace never to be quenched until death. It is true that love for God which fills the soul to overflowing, gives it, so I see it, a happiness beyond what can be told, but this happiness takes not one pang from the pain of the souls in Purgatory. Rather the love of these souls, finding itself hindered, causes their pain; and the more perfect is the love of which God has made them capable, the greater is their pain. So that the souls in Purgatory enjoy the greatest happiness and endure the greatest pain; the one does not hinder the other.

## CHAPTER XIII

### **The souls in Purgatory are no longer in a state to acquire merit. How these souls look on the charity exercised for them in the world.**

If the souls in Purgatory could purge themselves by contrition, they would pay all their debt in one instant such blazing vehemence would their contrition have in the clear light shed for them on the grievousness of being hindered from reaching their end and the love of God.

Know surely that not the least farthing of payment is remitted to those souls, for thus has it been determined by God's justice. So much for what God does as for what the souls do, they can no longer choose for themselves, nor can they see or will, save as God wills, for thus has it been determined for them.

And if any alms be done them by those who are in the world to lessen the time of their pain, they cannot turn with affection to contemplate the deed, saving as it is weighed in the most just scales of the divine will. They leave all in God's hands who pays Himself as His infinite goodness pleases. If they could turn to contemplate the alms except as it is within the divine will, there would be self in what they did and they would lose sight of God's will, which would make a Hell

for them. Therefore they await immovably all that God gives them, whether pleasure and happiness or pain, and never more can they turn their eyes back to themselves.

## **CHAPTER XIV**

### **Of the submission of the souls in Purgatory to God's will.**

So intimate with God are the souls in Purgatory and so changed to His will, that in all things they are content with His most holy ordinance. And if a soul were brought to see God when it had still a trifle of which to purge itself, a great injury would be done it. For since pure love and supreme justice could not brook that stained soul, and to bear with its presence would not befit God, it would suffer a torment worse than ten purgatories. To see God when full satisfaction had not yet been made Him, even if the time of purgation lacked but the twinkling of an eye, would be unbearable to that soul. It would sooner go to a thousand hells, to rid itself of the little rust still clinging to it, than stand in the divine presence when it was not yet wholly cleansed.

## **CHAPTER XV**

### **Reproaches which the souls in Purgatory make to people in the world.**

And so that blessed <sup>3</sup> soul, seeing the aforesaid things by the divine light, said: "I would fain send up a cry so loud that it would put fear in all men on the earth. I would say to them: 'Wretches, why do you let yourselves be thus blinded by the world, you whose need is so great and grievous, as you will know at the moment of death, and who make no provision for it whatsoever?'

"You have all taken shelter beneath hope in God's mercy, which is, you say, very great, but you see not that this great goodness of God will judge you for having gone against the will of so good a Lord. His goodness should constrain you to do all His will, not give you hope in ill-doing, for His justice cannot fail but in one way or another must needs be fully satisfied.

"Cease to hug yourselves, saying: 'I will confess my sins and then receive plenary indulgence, and at that moment I shall be purged of all my sins and thus shall be saved.' Think of the confession and the contrition needed for that plenary indulgence, so hardly come by that, if you knew, you would tremble in great fear, more sure you would never win it than that you ever could."

## CHAPTER XVI

**This Soul shews again how the sufferings of the souls in Purgatory are no hindrance at all to their peace and their joy.**

I see the souls suffer the pains of Purgatory having before their eyes two works of God. First, they see themselves suffering pain willingly, and as they consider their own deserts and acknowledge how they have grieved God, it seems to them that He has shewn them great mercy, for if His goodness had not tempered justice with mercy, making satisfaction with the precious blood of Jesus Christ, one sin would deserve a thousand perpetual hells. And therefore the souls suffer pain willingly, and would not lighten it by one pang, knowing that they most fully deserve it and that it has been well ordained, and they no more complain of God, as far as their will goes, than if they were in eternal life.

The second work they see is the happiness they feel as they contemplate God's ordinance and the love and mercy with which He works on the soul.

In one instant God imprints these two sights on their minds, and because they are in grace they are aware of these sights and understand them as they are, in the measure of their capacity. Thus a great happiness is granted them which never fails; rather it grows as they draw nearer God. These souls see these sights neither in nor of themselves but in God, on whom they are far more intent than on the pains they suffer, and of whom they make far greater account, beyond all comparison, than of their pains. For every glimpse which can be had of God exceeds any pain or joy a man can feel. Albeit, however, it exceeds the pain and joy of these souls, it lessens them by not a tittle.

## CHAPTER XVII

**She concludes by applying all she has said of the souls in Purgatory to what she feels, and has proved in her own soul.**

This form of purgation, which I see in the souls in Purgatory, I feel in my own mind. In the last two years I have felt it most; every day I feel and see it more clearly. I see my soul within this body as in a purgatory, formed as is the true Purgatory and like it, but so measured that the body can bear with it and not die little by little it grows until the body die.

I see my spirit estranged from all things, even things spiritual, which can feed it, such as gaiety, delight and consolation, and without the power so to enjoy anything, spiritual or temporal, by will or mind or memory, as to let me say one thing contents me more than another.

Inwardly I find myself as it were besieged. All things by which spiritual or bodily life is refreshed have, little by little, been taken from my inner self, which knows, now they are gone,

that they fed and comforted. But so hateful and abhorrent are these things, as they are known to the spirit, that they all go never to return. This is because of the spirit's instinct to rid itself of whatever hinders its perfection; so ruthless is it that to fulfill its purpose it would all but cast itself into Hell. Therefore it ever deprives the inner man of all on which it can feed, besieging it so cunningly that it lets not the least atom of imperfection pass unseen and unabhorrred.

As for my outer man, it too, since the spirit does not respond to it, is so besieged that it finds nothing to refresh it on the earth if it follow its human instinct. No comfort is left it save God, who works all this by love and very mercifully in satisfaction of His justice. To perceive this gives my outer man great peace and happiness, but happiness which neither lessens my pain nor weakens the siege. Yet no pain could ever be inflicted on me so great that I would wish to depart from the divine ordinance. I neither leave my prison nor seek to go forth from it: let God do what is needed! My happiness is that God be satisfied, nor could I suffer a worse pain than that of going outside God's ordinance, so just I see Him to be and so very merciful.

All these things of which I have spoken are what I see and, as it were, touch, but I cannot find fit words to say as much as I would of them. Nor can I say rightly what I have told of the work done in me, which I have felt spiritually. I have told it however.

The prison in which I seem to myself to be is the world, my chains the body, and it is my soul enlightened by grace which knows the grievousness of being held down or kept back and thus hindered from pursuing its end. This gives my soul great pain for it is very tender. By God's grace it receives a certain dignity which makes it like unto God; nay, rather He lets it share His goodness so that it becomes one with Him. And since it is impossible that God suffer pain, this immunity too befalls the souls who draw near Him; the nearer they come to Him, the more they partake of what is His.

Therefore to be hindered on its way, as it is, causes the soul unbearable pain. The pain and the hindrance wrest it from its first natural state, which by grace is revealed to it, and finding itself deprived of what it is able to receive, it suffers a pain more or less great according to the measure of its esteem for God. The more the soul knows God, the more it esteems Him and the more sinless it becomes, so that the hindrance in its way grows yet more terrible to it, above all because the soul which is unhindered and wholly recollected in God knows Him as He truly is.

As the man who would let himself be killed rather than offend God feels death and its pain, but is given by the light of God a zeal which causes him to rate divine honor above bodily death, so the soul who knows God's ordinance rates it above all possible inner and outer torments, terrible though they may be, for this is a work of God who surpasses all that can be felt or imagined. Moreover God when He occupies a soul, in however small a degree, keeps it wholly busied over His Majesty so that nothing else counts for it. Thus it loses all which is its own, and can of itself neither see nor speak nor know loss or pain. But, as I have already said clearly, it knows all in one instant when it leaves this life.

Finally and in conclusion, let us understand that God who is best and greatest causes all that is of man to be lost, and that Purgatory cleanses it away.

## **END OF THE TREATISE ON PURGATORY**

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### **FOOTNOTES**

1 The chapter headings are unlikely to have been written by Saint Catherine, who would hardly refer to herself as a saint as do the headings to Chapter IV and IX.

2 At least the word "holy" and perhaps all this introductory paragraph were probably added by whoever wrote the chapter headings

3 This epithet, and perhaps all this sentence down to "said", have probably been added by an editor



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