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THE DOCTRINE OF PURGATORY AND ITS RELEVANCE IN AFRICA

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Abstract

This paper seeks to delineate the doctrine of purgatory from dogmatic perspective and show its relevance in Africa from pastoral perspective. The work presents the scriptural and traditional teaching of the Catholic Church on the dogma of purgatory and then explores the elements in which Christians can find the meaning of the doctrine especially in relating the Christian faith, to the practical and pastoral ways of understanding and facing with hope the reality of death in the African families and Small Christian communities.

Keywords: *Purgatory, Ecumenical Councils, Catholic Church*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The noun Purgatory comes from the Latin verb ‘*purgare*’¹ which means to purify or to cleanse. In the Tradition of the Church, Purgatory refers to “the process of purification, in the other world, that frees persons from every defect and makes it possible for them to enter into the fulfilment of heaven.”² The Church describes Purgatory as the final purification whereby, “all those 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.”³ In this sense, it is important to note that: “In traditional Catholic theology Purgatory does not provide a further opportunity for a fundamental turning to God; it is only for those who have already made their decision for God.”⁴ Hence, those who go to Purgatory cannot go to eternal damnation because they are already in the number of the elect. Pope Benedict XVI explicates the rationale under which the Church teaches about Purgatory this way.

Among the Christians who die in peace with God there can be people who are utterly pure, completely permeated by God, and thus fully open to their neighbours – people for whom communion with God even now gives direction to their entire being and whose journey towards God only brings to fulfilment what they are.⁵

This means that, even if such people had offended God, they completely repented and with these people there is nothing that hinders their atonement. However, in normal circumstances, complete repentance is almost impossible, especially when compared to the righteousness of God. “Thus, for the great majority of people, there remains in the depths of their being an ultimate interior openness to truth, to love God. At the same time, in the concrete choices of life there are some compromises with evil, that some filth covers their purity but their thirst for purity remains present in their soul.”⁶ In this context, the Catholic Church does not understand purgatory as a physical place but rather, as a spiritual state of the soul⁷ in which, one is purified

before entering heaven. It is a process which should be conceived less in terms of juridical expiation or punishment for sins than as maturation and spiritual growth.⁸

2.0 PURGATORY IN THE SACRED SCRIPTURES

Consequences and Reparation of Sin

The doctrine of purgatory presupposes the understanding that sin has two-fold consequences. This means that when we sin we incur both guilt and the obligation to make some reparation or satisfaction for our offense. In that perspective even when we receive the forgiveness of the guilt, we still remain with the debt of satisfaction or reparation. In the Holy Scripture we can deduce this in the second book of Samuel, when Prophet Nathan tells David that: Yahweh has forgiven your sin, you are not to die but since you have outraged Yahweh, by doing this sin, the child born to you will die. (2 S 12:13-15) In other words: “Atonement for David’s sin costs the child its life.”⁹ This means although David's sin has been forgiven still he has to suffer the loss of his child as a temporal consequence due to sin.

Moreover, in the Sacred Scriptures, we are shown that through acts of penance and mortification human beings can do partial reparation to God for sin. We see this in the second book of Samuel when David offers sacrifice to God and it turns away God’s wrath. (2 S 24) This means that, “David's action transfers his guilt to an altar where it is expiated through the offerings he presents.”¹⁰ Also in the first book of Kings, Ahab does penance by putting on sackcloth which at the end turns away God’s anger (1 Kgs 21).

Furthermore, the Holy Scripture teaches us that some sacrifices and acts of penance can be applied on behalf of others. The second book of Maccabees¹¹ (Cf. 2 M 12:42-46) attests to the fact that the Jews in this era who believed in the resurrection of the dead felt that it was perfectly proper to pray for the dead so that they may be loosed from sins after death (but before the resurrection).¹² And also, we see the same view in the book of Genesis when Abraham intercedes for Sodom. (Cf. Gn 18:16-33) This highlights the fact that, in Christian faith, praying for each other is something noble. In fact, this tradition is not limited to the pilgrim Church alone but continues even in the afterlife because of the communion we share as members of the Mystical Body of Christ. This kind of view was common in Judaism as well as in early Christianity – where it was very prevalent. This Biblical teaching gives the Church the basis for the long-standing tradition of offering prayers and sacrifices and especially the sacrifice of Mass for the dead. Today, this tradition is still practiced by both Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians. Therefore, the Christian prayers of the pilgrim church have an impact on the souls in Purgatory. The tradition of praying for the souls in Purgatory is firmly held by the Church. How the Christian prayers have an impact on the souls in Purgatory is a mystery. It is important to note that, the Church has authority to assert and teach about those who go to heaven, and through the process of canonization can publicly declare with certitude saints, all those who are believed to be in heaven. On the other hand, since the immensity of the mercy of God remains a mystery to finite human beings, the Church does not assert anything on the state of all those who could have gone to hell. Hence, the Church has never declared anyone to be in hell, instead, she leaves all those who could have gone to hell in the mercy of God.

The cited text in the second book of Maccabees notes that the tradition of praying for the dead which was prompted by the belief in the resurrection of the dead is fine and noble. This means, this tradition of praying for the dead in the Old Testament particularly in the cited second book

of Maccabees, can implicitly refer to the purification which the dead have to undergo for the venial sins and temporal punishments due to mortal sins which have been already forgiven. Thus, in other words, this refers to the purification from the damaging effects of sin. This means that one dies in a state of friendship with God that is without mortal sin, but somewhat short of the perfection required to be in God's presence.¹³

Therefore, the concept of purification after death, on which Catholic tradition builds her doctrine of Purgatory is a pre-Christian concept, whereby the living pray for the dead whom are thought to have died in a state of imperfection.

The Intermediacy of Purgatory

In the New Testament, the passage in the Gospels according to Matthew 12:31-32, Mark 3:29 and Luke 12:10, serves as one of the texts that implicitly allude to the doctrine of Purgatory. The quote states: "And so I tell you, every human sin and blasphemy will be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And anyone who says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but no one who speaks against the Holy Spirit will be forgiven either in this world or in the next." These words of the Lord, "leave open the possibility that sins are forgiven not only in this world but in the world to come."¹⁴ Therefore, the listed scriptural texts serve as a basis for the tenet of Purgatory in the sense that as Jesus talks of blasphemy against the Spirit as a very serious and grave sin that will not be forgiven, he also presupposes that there are other sins that are not only forgiven in this life but also in the next. Although Jesus' statement of the fact that one sin, which is the sin against the Holy Spirit, will not be forgiven either here or in the next life does not prove that other sins will not be forgiven; categorically Jesus distinguishes between the forgiveness of sins in this life and in the life to come.

In addition, traditionally the Church defends the existence of Purgatory on the basis of the parable in the Gospel according to Matthew where Jesus talks of the judge who would not release his prisoner until he pays the last penny. (Cf. Mt 5:26) "Through further interpretation of this parable, a time-limited condition of punishment in the other world began to be seen expressed in the time-limited punishment of the prison."¹⁵ This makes Purgatory a temporal and intermediate state of purification rather than an eternal state. Therefore, the doctrine of Purgatory, which means forgiveness of venial sins and temporal punishment due to sins after death, for the person who is already saved and certainly makes it to heaven in due course finds relevance.

Furthermore, the Holy Scripture teaches that the purification necessary for union with God comes by way of suffering. In the letter to the Romans Saint Paul says that: "The Spirit himself joins with our spirit to bear witness that we are children of God. And if we are children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ, provided that we share his suffering so as to share his glory." (Rm 8:16 – 17) In addition, in the first letter to Corinthians Paul says that: "I punish my body and bring it under control, to avoid any risk that, having acted as herald for others, I myself may be disqualified." (1 Co 9:27) Here, Paul does not just advocate for penitential practices but brings out the fact that our bodies are vehicles of commitments which are undertaken in view of the eternal destiny of the souls.¹⁶

Moreover, the same tone of purification is seen in the letter to the Hebrews and the book of Revelation which brings out that in heaven every tear is wiped away and there is no loss (Cf. Heb 12:29; Rv 21:4). Thus, all these scriptural hints allude to the reality of the purification

required in Purgatory so that the saints in Purgatory may finally have the new accessibility of God's holiness.¹⁷

The doctrine of Purgatory is often misunderstood to be a spiritual jail or some kind of hell with parole. It is important to bear in mind that the Catholic Church does not teach that everyone goes to purgatory but believes that there are people who are not bad enough to go to hell and at the same time not good enough to go directly to heaven.¹⁸ The Sacred Scriptures elaborate that: "The servant who knows what his master wants but has nothing ready and has done nothing in accord with those wishes, will be given a great many strokes for the lash. The one who did not know but has acted in such a way that he deserves a beating, will be given fewer strokes." (Lk 12:47-48a) This means, according to the Holy Scriptures, the Lord's judgment differentiates between those of a great many strokes, which could be understood as hell and those of fewer strokes, which could be referred to as those in Purgatory because those who go to heaven directly cannot be given any strokes.

In addition, basing on the Sacred Scriptures, the Catholic Church believes that the innocent people who are living this life with much sufferings from diseases, poverty, persecution or other calamities, could be living their purgatory now because some difficulties and sufferings in this life could provide an opportunity for self-awareness that makes one realize the need of God's mercy and compassion, which in turn leads one to spiritual purification. This kind of reasoning finds implicit scriptural support in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. (Cf. Lk 16:19-26) This is the same reasoning that Saint Augustine describes:

But temporary punishments are suffered by some in this life only, by others after death, by others both now and then; but all of them before that last and strictest judgment. But of those who suffer temporary punishments after death, all are not doomed to those everlasting pains which are to follow that judgment; for to some, as we have already said, what is not remitted in this world is remitted in the next, that is, they are not punished with the eternal punishment of the world to come.¹⁹

Therefore, the necessity of satisfaction for sin, the need for moral purification, the biblical practice of praying and offering sacrifices for the dead give the Church the basis for her belief in the existence of purgatory.

3.0 ECUMENICAL COUNCILS

Strictly speaking, an ecumenical council is the highest legislative and decision-making body in the Catholic Church, composed of the entire episcopate together with the Roman Pontiff.²⁰ With the exclusion of the Second Vatican Council, which was called for pastoral reasons, all the other 20 ecumenical councils were called for a doctrinal problem that challenged the Church at a time. The doctrine of Purgatory is a dogma²¹ of the Faith that has been defined by the First and Second Councils of Lyons in 1245 and 1274 respectively, redefined by the Council of Florence in 1439, the Council of Trent in 1563, reiterated by the First Vatican Council in 1869 – 1870 and finally explicated in a new perspective and context by the Second Vatican Council in 1962 – 1965.

Scriptural Basis for Purgatory

According to the Catholic Church, the First General Council of Lyon was the 13th ecumenical council. This council was convened and presided over by Pope Innocent IV, and took place in

three solemn sessions on June 28, July 5 and July 17, 1245.²² Among other issues, the council defined the doctrine of purgatory through the interpretation of the Gospel according to Matthew 12:31-33 that: “Finally, because the Truth in the Gospel affirms that if anyone speaks blasphemy against the Holy Spirit he will not be forgiven either in this age or the age to come. By this, it is understood that some sins are to be loosed in the present age and others in the future age.”²³

The Council also went on to elaborate the doctrine of Purgatory by interpreting Saint Paul’s letter to first Corinthians that: “The work of each one, whatever it may be, will be tested by fire and he whose work is burned up will suffer loss; though he himself will be saved but only as through fire.”²⁴ (1 Co 3:13, 15) Here, the apostle uses the figure of fire because, “in the Scriptures, fire is often the symbol of God and the Holy Spirit is compared to fire.”²⁵ Consequently, “Fire can be understood as the cleansing, purifying and sanctifying power of God’s holiness and mercy.”²⁶ This means that “purification in Purgatory is the gradual liberation from sinful inclinations.”²⁷ Therefore, “Purgatory is primarily a condition in which man is kept from the vision of God as a penalty for sins committed during lifetime, and he experiences this waiting as a pain surpassing any earthly suffering.”²⁸ For further elaboration of the doctrine, the Council appealed to Tradition²⁹ that:

Because it is said that the Greeks themselves, truly and without doubt, believe and affirm that the souls of those who die after receiving penance but without having performed it, or who die without mortal sin but with venial and slight sin, are purified after death and can be assisted by the suffrages of the Church: because they say that a certain and proper name was not indicated to them by their doctors for such a place of purgation; and because, according to the tradition and authority of the holy Fathers we call it “purgatory”; we wish that from henceforth it be called by this name among them. For indeed this temporary fire purifies sins, not however mortal or capital sins that were not previously remitted by penance, but small and minor sins that still weigh down after death even if during life they were forgiven.³⁰

The Second Council of Lyons was the fourteenth ecumenical council of the Catholic Church. On September 1, 1271, Pope Gregory X succeeded Pope Clement IV who died on November 29, 1268, then convoked the Second Ecumenical Council of Lyons on March 31, 1272 and opened it on May 7, 1274. It was an ecumenical council that lasted for 10 days from May 7 -17, 1274.³¹ The council reaffirmed the teaching of the First Council of Lyons on Purgatory by stating that:

If being truly repentant, the deceased who die in charity before having satisfied by worthy fruits of penance for their sins of commission and omission, their souls are cleansed after death by purgatorial and purifying penalties; and to alleviate such penalties the acts of intercession of the living faithful benefit them, namely the sacrifices of the Mass, prayers, alms and other works of piety that the faithful are wont to do for the other faithful according to the Church’s institutions.³²

Moreover, as has been pointed out, the doctrine of Purgatory in the Roman Catholic tradition has a history that can be dated back from the practice of praying for the dead even among the non-Christians, as mentioned in the second book of Maccabees 12:42-44. Consequently, some of the Church Fathers, such as Saint Augustine Hippo, who was one of the historical exegetes

interpreted some texts in the New Testament like the Gospel according to Matthew 12:31-33, in a way that clarifies the doctrine of Purgatory. Thus, he says:

For some of the dead, indeed, the prayer of the Church or of pious individuals is heard; but it is for those who, having been regenerated in Christ, did not spend their life so wickedly that they can be judged unworthy of such compassion, nor so well that they can be considered to have no need of it. As also, after the resurrection, there will be some of the dead to whom, after they have endured the pains proper to the spirits of the dead, mercy shall be accorded, and acquittal from the punishment of the eternal fire. For were there not some whose sins, though not remitted in this life, shall be remitted in that which is to come, it could not be truly said that they shall not be forgiven, neither in this world, neither in that which is to come.³³

The dogmatic reaffirmation of the doctrine of purgatory was done by the Council of Florence in 1439, stating that:

We define that if those who are truly penitent die in the love of God before having satisfied by worthy fruits of penance for their sins of commission and omission, their souls are cleansed after death by purgatorial punishments. In order that they be relieved from such punishments, the acts of the intercession of the living faithful benefit them, namely, the sacrifices of the Mass, prayers, alms, and other works of piety that the faithful are wont to do for the other faithful according to the Church's practice.³⁴

Affirmation of the Dogma of Purgatory

The Council of Trent which was opened by Pope Paul III on December 13, 1545, at Trent in northern Italy was 19th Ecumenical Council of the Roman Catholic Church. This Ecumenical Council, which took place between 1545 and 1563 was prompted by the Protestant Reformation. It is one of the longest Ecumenical Council which lasted for 18 years and the meetings took place in three parts, 1545 – 1548, 1551 – 1552 and 1562 – 1563.³⁵ Pope Paul III convoked, opened and presided over the sessions between 1545 and 1548, then Pope Julius III oversaw the sessions between 1551 and 1552, and Pope Pius IV oversaw the sessions between 1562 and 1563 and closed the Council on December 4, 1563. This Council is understood to be the embodiment of the Counter-Reformation.³⁶ It clarified every doctrinal statement that was contested by the Protestants. For instance, it defined, affirmed and declared infallibly the doctrine of Purgatory against the Protestants who claimed that after the reception of the grace of justification³⁷ the guilt of sin is remitted and the debt of eternal punishment is also blotted out to every repentant sinner to the extent that there is no debt of temporal punishment which remains to be discharged either in this world or in Purgatory before one enters heaven.³⁸ Hence, while Purgatory as a state of purification does not exist for the Protestants, it is rather defined as a dogma for the Catholics. In addition, other doctrinal statements that were issued and defined by the Council include the Mass as a true sacrifice, the sacrament of holy orders, matrimony, indulgences, and veneration of saints, images and relics.

On the other hand, it is important to note that the Protestant Reformation was also prompted by some of the abuses in the Church such as the selling of the indulgences which were not part of the official Catholic teaching. In this regard, the Council called for serious reform in the

understanding and practice of indulgence and condemned the reformers who held that indulgences are useless and the Church does not have any power to grant them. It is in this perspective, therefore, on December 3, 1563, the Council came out very strongly with a Decree on Purgatory against the Reformers. This ecumenical council stated that:

The Catholic Church, instructed by the Holy Spirit and in accordance with Sacred Scripture and the ancient tradition of the Fathers, has taught in the holy councils and most recently in this ecumenical council that there is a purgatory and that the souls detained there are helped by the acts of intercession of the faithful, and especially by the acceptable Sacrifice of the Altar. Therefore, this holy council commands the bishops to strive diligently that the sound doctrine of purgatory, handed down by the holy Fathers and the sacred councils, be believed by the faithful and that it be adhered to, taught, and preached everywhere.³⁹

This means that, in connection to Purgatory, the Council of Trent re-emphasized the truths that: there is Purgatory and secondly the souls of the deceased in Purgatory can be assisted by suffrages especially the Holy Sacrifice of Mass offered by the living faithful on earth. In other words, the Council declared infallibly that: “There is purification that takes place before one enters heaven, this purification involves some kind of pain or suffering and this purification can be assisted by the prayers and devotions of the living.”⁴⁰ Consequently, the Council came out strongly with canons in response to the Protestant Reformation. For instance, the first canon was against the Protestants who claimed that for any repentant sinner, after the grace of justification has been received, the guilt is remitted, and the debt of eternal punishment is blotted out. This means, the Protestants rejected the doctrine of Purgatory and claimed that there is no debt of temporal punishment that remains to be discharged either in this world or in the next life.⁴¹

The second canon was to oppose the Protestant doctrine of *sola fide*, which refers to Protestant’s emphasis on the justification by faith alone. This means, this doctrine of *sola fide* asserts that God’s pardon for guilty sinners is granted to and received through faith alone.⁴² In this way, this doctrine excludes all merit from works. Thus, the council asserted that any justified person does not sin by performing good works with a view to an eternal reward.⁴³ Therefore, in opposing the Protestant doctrine of *sola fide*, the Catholic Church intends to show that, it is not possible for a man, once justified to avoid all sins – even venial throughout his entire life without a special privilege of God.⁴⁴ Therefore, the Council of Trent affirmed and defined the doctrine of Purgatory as a dogma of the Church because it is an important part of the Church’s liturgical and devotional tradition which is grounded in Scripture and celebrated in Tradition.

Purgatory in the Tripartite⁴⁵ Church

The First Vatican Council is known as the twentieth ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church. It was a council that was provoked by some of the contemporary ideas related to the rise of liberalism, rationalism, and materialism. Thus, Pope Pius IX convoked this council on 29 June 1868, opened it on December 8, 1869, and closed it on October 20, 1870.⁴⁶ This ecumenical council did not delineate the doctrine of Purgatory at length but reiterated the profession of this doctrine as taught by the previous councils that Purgatory exists and that the souls detained there are helped by the suffrages of the faithful. Likewise, the council firmly professed that the Sacrifice of Mass which is offered to God is a true, proper and propitiatory sacrifice for the living and the dead.

The Second Vatican Council, which took place between October 11, 1962, to December 8, 1965, and nearly 100 years after the First Vatican Council, did not change the dogma of the Catholic Church on Purgatory but rather developed it and presented it in new context and perspective so as to bring out its deeper understanding, significance and relevance. In that way, the Council succeeded in highlighting the place of the souls in Purgatory as members of the Tripartite Church who are not far from us. As a result, the Second Vatican Council treated the doctrine of Purgatory in relationship to the Church, whereby the Council re-emphasized the solidarity we share with all believers in Christ both the living and dead. Thus, the Council says:

Until the Lord shall come in His majesty, and all the angels with Him and death being destroyed, all things are subject to Him, some of His disciples are exiles on earth, some having died are purified, and others are in glory beholding clearly God Himself triune and one as He is; but all in various ways and degrees are in communion in the same charity of God and neighbour and all sing the same hymn of glory to our God. For all who are in Christ, having His Spirit, form one Church and cleave together in Him. Therefore, the union of wayfarers with the brethren who have gone to sleep in the peace of Christ is not in the least weakened or interrupted, but on the contrary, according to the perpetual faith of the Church, is strengthened by communication of spiritual goods.⁴⁷

Therefore, the Second Vatican Council clarifies the aspect that has always been believed by the Church about how the souls in Purgatory are members of the Mystical Body of Christ. This means that the Catholic Church continues to re-emphasize the doctrine of Purgatory because she believes in an interval in a person's destiny between death and his corporeal fulfilment as a whole, thus it is difficult to deny the existence of Purgatory as a process of personal maturation during this particular interval.⁴⁸

Moreover, the Church teaches that those who live exceptionally holy lives on earth may bypass Purgatory and go directly to heaven. The Second Vatican Council brings this out that:

The Church has always believed that the apostles and Christ's martyrs who had given the supreme witness of faith and charity by the shedding of their blood are closely joined, together with the Blessed Virgin Mary and the holy angels. To these were soon added also those who had more closely imitated Christ's virginity and poverty, and finally, others whom the outstanding practice of the Christian virtues and the divine charisms recommended to the pious devotion and imitation of the faithful.⁴⁹

For the Second Vatican Council, the relevance and significance of the doctrine of Purgatory are found in the understanding of the Church as the communion of Saints. In that perspective, the Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church asserts that: "This Sacred Council accepts with great devotion this venerable faith of our ancestors regarding this vital fellowship with our brethren who are in heavenly glory or who, having died, are still being purified."⁵⁰ This is the understanding of the Church today that: "Some of the disciples of Christ are pilgrims on earth, others have died and are being purified, while still others are in glory, contemplating in full light God himself triune and one, exactly as he is."⁵¹ Therefore, like the previous ecumenical councils, the Second Vatican Council did not change the doctrine of Purgatory and its related elements,

but brought out its positive aspect of the communion of saints which the Church continues to teach even today that: “Because of the communion of saints, the faithful who are still pilgrims on earth are able to help the souls in Purgatory by offering prayers in suffrage for them, especially the Eucharistic sacrifice. They also help them by almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance.”⁵² This means that the Church still believes in Purgatory and its related elements which are Temporal punishment and Indulgences in a positive perspective whereby the approach is not to dwell on sin and punishment but on the abundance of God's merciful love and healing grace.

Finally, it must be understood that, although Purgatory has been the most misunderstood doctrine, it still remains a very important part of the Catholic faith. This means that:

The magisterium pondered the events that accompany death, and in particular described final purification or Purgatory as the person's ultimate encounter with the love of Christ that overcomes the imperfection of sin. The intercession on behalf of the dead is understood as a participation in the saving mission of Christ. The resurrection of the individual bodies and vision of God is understood as entering into full communion with the three divine Persons.⁵³

That is why, the Church has always linked this doctrine to the understanding of sin, redemption, moral purification and satisfaction or reparation. The Church in her sacred councils had to define the doctrine of Purgatory as a dogma of faith after realizing that the doctrine is implicitly grounded in the Sacred Scriptures and has been celebrated as Church's liturgical and devotional tradition. Therefore, as Catholics, we have to proudly pray for the souls in Purgatory. Firstly, because the pain in Purgatory is real and, secondly because those in Purgatory are our relatives either blood relatives or brothers and sisters in the Mystical Body of Christ. Moreover, by the fact that all of us are still pilgrims here on earth, we need to know that, probably, we too, may pass through Purgatory on our way to heaven. Finally, beside the fact that, praying for the souls in Purgatory is not a difficult task but a practice that all of us can do; we also need to know that, it will bring us unexplainable joy one day to meet our brothers and sisters in Christ in heaven and to know that we helped them with our humble prayers.

4.0 RELEVANCE OF THE DOCTRINE OF PURGATORY IN AFRICA

Among Christian communities in pastoral setting, the practice of praying and offering Masses for the dead is a common phenomenon. In one way or another such a practice suggests the existence of purgatory because there is no meaning to pray for the dead in hell or in heaven, as the fate of both groups has already been determined. Although purgatory is a doctrine that has gone into silence among Christian believers but there are elements that are related elements that make purgatory a relevant phenomenon in the lives of Christians today.

Solidarity of Believers as Solidarity of Africans for true reconciliation

In the Catholic tradition, the second day of November is commemorated as All Souls Day and the entire month of November is dedicated to charity for praying for the suffering holy souls in purgatory. This means that, according to Catholic teaching, the poor souls in purgatory are those who have died in grace yet failed in earthly life to make satisfactory reparation for all of their sins. This understanding highlights the belief that, in Purgatory, those who have died in grace but have not fully atoned for the *temporal punishments* resulting from their sins, go to finish their atonement before entering heaven. The Catholic Church gets authority to pray for the Souls in

purgatory because of Christ who exists before all things, and in him all things hold together and He is the Head of the Body, that is the Church (cf. Col 1:17-18). This means that, just as, in their earthly life, all believers are united in the one Mystical Body of Christ, the same thing continues after death that those in the state of purification continue to experience the same ecclesial solidarity which works through prayer, prayers for suffrage and love for their other brothers and sisters in the faith. On this, the Catechism of the Catholic Church quotes the Second Vatican Council: “The union of the wayfarers with the brethren who sleep in the peace of Christ is in no way interrupted, but on the contrary, according to the constant faith of the Church, this union is reinforced by an exchange of spiritual goods.”⁵⁴ On the same note, Nyamiti explicates that: “Like the saints in heaven, the suffering saints share in common with us membership in the communion of saints and Christ’s Mystical Body, kinship in Adam and, through the grace of adoption, divine filiation.”⁵⁵

The teaching of the Church, according to the Council of Trent, is that the prayers of the pilgrim Church and especially the Holy Sacrifice of Mass reduce the suffering and shorten the time of the purification for the poor souls in purgatory. According to the Catholic Church this teaching is scriptural because it is the only way to demonstrate our love for our departed family members and friends.⁵⁶ It is explained by the Sacred Scriptures in 2 Maccabees 12:46, that: “Thus Judas made atonement for the dead, that they might be absolved from their sin.” This practice also agrees with the commandment of our Lord who taught us to love and pray, not only for those we love, but even for our enemies (Matthew 5:44). Hence, it is also appropriate to pray for our departed enemies and all those who hurt us during their life on earth. In this regard therefore, the Catholic Church believes and understands purgatory as an expression of God’s love and God’s desire to cleanse our souls of all that might keep us from experiencing the fullness of joy in heaven. For that reason, the Catholic Church emphasizes that: “The Eucharistic sacrifice is also offered for the faithful departed who have died in Christ but are not yet wholly purified, so that they may be able to enter into the light and peace of Christ.”⁵⁷

Therefore, the key elements in the question of the solidarity of the believers as highlighted by the doctrine of Purgatory are *love* and *forgiveness*. That is, the love of God for human beings and the love among the members of the Body of Christ which is grounded on the belief that God’s forgiveness is immense for the open hands to receive it. Love and forgiveness are also important elements for healing and reconciliation process in many countries in Africa which for decades have been affected by civil wars, political crisis, tribal clashes and all sorts of fighting. Therefore, Purgatory as a doctrine founded on the mercy and forgiveness of God, and practically relevant because of the love of God and of the members in the communion of saints; explicates the meaning of love and forgiveness. These are a solution to the conflicts in the African continent. This is an argument which is validated in the story of Angelina Atyam in northern Uganda whose daughter and many other children were abducted by the Lord’s Resistance Army on October 10, 1996.⁵⁸ As Angelina and the parents of the abducted children came together in solidarity to pray and discern the way forward, they realized that it was first necessary to get rid of the bitterness and anger within themselves. They had to accept the consequences of their sin, forgive themselves for their irresponsibility and not doing enough to protect their children.⁵⁹ This means that, although the reparation in Purgatory is painful, the souls in Purgatory are neither bitter within themselves nor angry with anyone and for that we can call them the saints in Purgatory. Amidst their sufferings the souls in Purgatory feel the love and forgiveness of God and they are not even jealous of the saints in heaven who are not in a painful situation like theirs.

This is an example that makes Purgatory relevant in Africa especially for those groups where bitterness and anger are still a stumbling block towards true peace and reconciliation in their countries. “It is in this kind of maturity that Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya, similarly described the effect of his imprisonment at Lokitaung Prison in Kapenguria, West Pokot District, by the British colonial administration in a 1968 book titled *Suffering without Bitterness*.”⁶⁰

In addition, the saints in Purgatory are those who have accepted the responsibility of the consequences of their sins, so as to embrace God’s mercy and forgiveness and do reparation for their sins. In this way, they are a role model for Africa, that as we aspire for peace in many countries and strive to eliminate wars, conflicts, poverty, corruption and other evils, we must first take responsibility and accountability of all that our predecessors and all of us did to bring us to the current situation.

Purgatorial Purification and the African Ritual of Purification

The doctrine of purgatory brings out the essence of the purification that is required for communion with God. This is because any sinful act is committed at the ontic level of freedom where there is a fundamental option that produces habitual permanent orientation. This means any sin that a person commits makes that individual more and more attached to it. This is like a smoker who makes a resolution to quit smoking but as he quits smoking, he continues to live in suffering because his body system continues to demand the cigarettes that he was used to. So, all the time one refrains from smoking is like living in purgatory. Thus, physical integrity is necessary to enter into perfect communion with God. For that case, the term purgatory does not indicate a place, but a condition of existence, where Christ removes the remnants of imperfection.⁶¹ Therefore, with regard to the essence of the doctrine of purgatory, it is important to note that the sins we commit, orient and attach us to the tendencies to sin which remain even after repentance. Since God is absolutely pure, there is no possibility that we can be united with Him until all these tendencies to sin are washed away in purgatory.

In many societies in Africa, belonging in the community is a very vital aspect. The different rites of passage delineate the importance of belonging in the community through different groups. At the end of all the rites of passage, there is an incorporation phase as a stage which is accompanied by feasting. This is when an individual is integrated in the society as a mature person.⁶² Therefore, for many African societies, exclusion from the community is a serious and painful experience that results from individual’s contumacious conduct such as serious disobedience to parents or elders of the community. For instance, among the Maasai community, curses work as one of the ways to exclude someone from the family and the community as a result of the rare crimes such as calumny, detraction, theft, rape and murder.⁶³ A cursed person is excluded from the family and the community at large. He goes through difficult period of exclusion from the community such as free association with the other community members. Misfortunes, illnesses and eventually death are meant to follow him. “The removal of curses involves an elaborate process with gestures which suggest blessings in reverse and sometimes using analogous binding actions to render the curse insignificantly ineffectual.”⁶⁴ The removal of a curse happens when an individual becomes remorseful and apologetic. “For the Maasai people, the most powerful instrument required for the removal of certain curses is the ritual slaughtering of animals.”⁶⁵

A cursed person undergoes a painful experience of exclusion from the community. Such a person could be living in the family or community but the rest of the members do not freely involve him all in the community events. This experience could be compared to the experience of the saints in purgatory. For those who would love reunion with the community have to go through a remorseful process of purification and to seek forgiveness and reconciliation with the community. Analogously, purgatorial experience can be compared to the African experience of a cursed person of exclusion from the community and later reunion with the community after repentance.

Saints in Purgatory as Exemplars of Patience in Africa

The saints in purgatory present to us an exemplary mode of passionate and irreversible love of God. Purgatory is a God-given state whereby poor sinners recover the splendour of Christ in their souls, which they could not achieve after a lifetime of imperfection but good-willed attempts. For that case, their suffering is found in their longing for an unending union with God in heaven. Thus, although in purgatory there is suffering, there is also joy and hope because to those in this state of purification, they know that, after their purification they will certainly attain perfect communion with God, and to those on earth get encouraged to continue working hard every day to achieve the perfect communion with God at the end of time. This means that, purgatory is for us a demonstration of a perfect patience, in the sense that the saints in purgatory continue to wait patiently with great hope for that union with God. Charles Nyamiti clarifies this that: “The saints in purgatory are excellent models of patience and resignation in their immense sufferings which, in perfect submission to the divine will, they accept joyfully as necessary means of their purification for the intimate and perfect union with God.”⁶⁶ The immense sufferings of the saints in Purgatory as pointed by Charles Nyamiti, are founded on their longing to be in perfect communion with God, which they have to wait patiently without losing hope.

The virtue of patience which is demonstrated in a special way by the saints in purgatory, makes purgatory relevant in Africa because in the African context patience is not something foreign but a life reality. For instance, for an African to reach adulthood, a lot of patience is required. It is not age that determines one’s adulthood but several rites of passage which move him /her from one stage to another. Even if one has advanced in age, he may never be considered adult if he has not gone through all the rites of passage progressively from infancy to adulthood. Therefore, an African in the traditional African context, must have the virtue of patience to wait for the appropriate time when particular rituals are performed for his incorporation into a particular stage of life in the community.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Conclusively, it has to be understood that, although purgatory has been the most misunderstood doctrine, it still remains a very important part of the Catholic faith. This means that:

The magisterium pondered the events that accompany death, and in particular described final purification or purgatory as the person’s ultimate encounter with the love of Christ that overcomes the imperfection of sin. The intercession on behalf of the dead is understood as a participation in the saving mission of Christ. The resurrection of the individual bodies and vision of God is understood as entering into full communion with the three divine Persons.⁶⁷

That is why, the Church has always linked this doctrine to the understanding of sin, redemption, moral purification and satisfaction or reparation. The Church in her sacred councils had to define the doctrine of purgatory as a dogma of faith after realizing that the doctrine is implicitly grounded in the Sacred Scriptures and has been celebrated as Church's liturgical and devotional tradition.

Therefore, as Catholics, we have to proudly pray for the souls in purgatory. Firstly, because the pain in purgatory is real and, secondly, because those in purgatory are our relatives either blood relatives or brothers and sisters in the Mystical Body of Christ. Moreover, by the fact that all of us are still pilgrims here on earth, we need to know that, probably, we too, may pass through purgatory on our way to heaven. Finally, beside the fact that, praying for the souls in purgatory is not a difficult task but a practice that all of us can do; we also need to know that, it will bring us unexplainable joy one day to meet our brothers and sisters in Christ in heaven and to know that we helped them with our humble prayers.

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<http://catholicism.org/can-the-souls-in-purgatory-pray-for-us.html>, accessed July 19, 2018.

Endnotes

¹ Cf. Pürgō, pürgäre, in: John F. Collins, *A Primer of Ecclesiastical Latin*, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1985), 430.

² Wolfgang Beinert & Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Handbook of Catholic Theology*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995), 561, s.v. Purgatory by Josef Finkenzeller,

³ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church, (CCC)* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1995), no. 1030

⁴ Alan Richardson & John Bowden, (eds.) *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1983), 333, s.v. Life after Death by John Hick,

⁵ Benedict XVI, *Saved in Hope, Spe Salvi*, (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2011), no.45.

⁶ *Ibid.*, no.46.

⁷ In this context, the concept of the soul refers to the human person. That is, as a person and subject he is a transcendent being who is able to discover that there is a mysterious infinity that opens up and permeates his daily activities today, and is able to accept his own, unique, eternal salvation, that goes hand in hand with responsibility and judgment. Cf. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith, An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1978), 26.

⁸ Cf. Peter C. Phan, *Responses to 101 Questions on Death and Eternal Life*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 70.

⁹ Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer & Roland E. Murphy, (Eds.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, Student Edition*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990), 157, s.v. 1-2 Samuel by Antony F. Campbell, S.J. & James W. Flanagan,

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹¹ This text is objected to by the Protestants for two reasons. One is that the Book is not an inspired one according to their canon. Secondly, the men whom Judas Maccabeus prayed for had committed a mortal sin that destined them to hell according to Catholic teaching. It is important to note therefore that, even if the book is not in the list of the Protestant canon of the inspired books, it still gives us the historical fact that the Jews believed in praying and making atonement for the dead before the coming of Christ. Thus, since the Jewish faith is the faith that Jesus and his apostles were brought up in and this is the faith that gives the context through which the New Testament comes in. The second objection is not correct because we are told that the fallen soldiers in the text were carrying small amulets which makes it some sort of superstitious act of believing in some power of these amulets. Hence their sin could be a venial sin and may not fit the category of mortal sin because we are not told that they worshipped these idols.

¹² Cf. Wolfgang Beinert & Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Handbook of Catholic Theology*, 561, s.v. Purgatory by Josef Finkenzeller.

¹³ Cf. CCC no. 1030.

¹⁴ Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, Dublin: Cahill & Company Ltd., 1958, 483.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 484.

¹⁶ Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer & Roland E. Murphy, (Eds.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 807, s.v. The First Letter to the Corinthians by Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, O.P.

¹⁷ Cf. Charles M. Laymon, (Ed.), *The Interpreter's One-Volume, Commentary on the Bible*, Nashville Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1971, 914, s.v. The Letter to the Hebrews by Warren A. Quanbeck.

¹⁸ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Saved in Hope, Spe Salvi*, no.46.

¹⁹ Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, (New York: Random House Inc., 1950), Bk 21, 784.

²⁰ Cf. *The 1983 Code of Canon Law*, (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1997) nos. 336 – 338.

²¹ **Dogmas** are the doctrines which have been solemnly proposed by the Church as formally revealed in Scripture and Tradition. Solemn proposition of Dogmas is either by Papal pronouncement, for instance, the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception which was pronounced by Pope Pius IX in 1854, in his papal bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, (Cf. CCC nos. 491 – 494) or by a General Council for instance, the Dogma of the two natures of Christ in one Person, which was pronounced by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 (Cf. CCC no.s 467 – 468).

Therefore, in the Catholic Church, a dogma is a definitive article of faith (*de fide*) that has been solemnly promulgated by the college of bishops at an ecumenical council or by the Pope when speaking in a statement *ex cathedra*, in which the magisterium of the Church presents a particular doctrine as necessary for the belief of all Catholic faithful. For instance, one of the Christian dogmas states that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the basic truth from which salvation and life is derived for Christians. This means that a dogma is a truth revealed by God. It is a small part of Christian faith, from which the Christian faith derives its meaning and hence, the Magisterium declares it as binding on the faithful.

²² Cf. Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, 43rd Edition, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), no. 830.

²³ *Ibid.*, no. 838.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Michael Schmaus, *Dogma 6: Justification and the Last Things*, (Westminster Maryland: Christian Classics, 1984), 245.

²⁶ Norman L. Geisler & Ralph E. Mackenzie, *Roman Catholics, and Evangelicals, Agreements and Differences*, (Grand Rapids Michigan, A Division of Baker Book House Co., 1995), 332.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 246.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Praying for the dead among the Christians is a practice which could have its origin from Jewish tradition and it goes back all the way to the 2nd and 3rd centuries. All Souls' Day which was established at the end of the 10th century, focused attention on the fate and the condition of departed souls and also fostered a sense of solidarity between the living and the dead. In many of the Church Fathers' writings, we find the belief in the purification after death and of the communion of the living with the dead. *For instance*: Irenaeus (c. 130-202), Augustine, Gregory the Great, St. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215) and his pupil, Origen of Alexandria (c. 185-254), Tertullian (c. 160-225), St. Cyprian (d. 258) and St. John Chrysostom (c. 347-407) and Thomas Aquinas.

³⁰ Heinrich, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, no. 838.

³¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, no. 850.

³² *Ibid.*, no. 856.

³³ Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, Bk 21, 795.

³⁴ Heinrich, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, no. 1304.

³⁵ Cf. Norman P. Tanner, *The Councils of the Church, A Short History*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 77 – 78.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Cf. CCC no.s 1987 – 2029: Justification is God's act of removing the guilt and penalty of *sin* while at the same time declaring a sinner righteous through *Christ's atoning sacrifice*. To justify means to cleanse us from our sins and to communicate to us the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ and through Baptism. In justification, there are conversion, detachment from sin, acceptance of God's righteousness, the establishment of the cooperation between God's grace and man's freedom that leads to a continual process of sanctification (through works of love) and final salvation. At justification faith, hope and charity are poured into our hearts. For the Catholics, a distinction

is clearly made between initial justification, which ordinarily occurs at *baptism*, and final salvation, accomplished after a lifetime of striving to do *God's will (sanctification)*.

³⁸ Cf. Heinrich, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals* no. 1573.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 1820.

⁴⁰ Norman & Ralph, *Roman Catholics, and Evangelicals, Agreements and Differences*, 332.

⁴¹ Cf. Heinrich, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, no. 1580.

⁴² For the Protestants, such as Lutherans and Calvinists, justification is a singular act in which God declares an unrighteous individual to be righteous, an act made possible because Christ was legally “made sin” while on the cross (2 Co 5:21). For them, Justification is granted to all who have faith and that it is viewed as a gift from God or unmerited favour. (Ep 2:8, Ac 16:4 and Ph 1:29).

⁴³ Cf. Heinrich, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, no. 1581.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, no. 1573.

⁴⁵ The Tripartite Church refers to three states which are the Militant or Pilgrim Church on earth, the Suffering Church in Purgatory and the Triumphant Church in heaven. These three states of the Church form the Communion of Saints in the Mystical Body of Christ.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, no.s 3000 - 3045.

⁴⁷ *Lumen Gentium* no. 49. See also Paul VI, Cons. LG., A.A.S Vol. 57 (1965), no. 49, pp. 54 - 55.

⁴⁸ Cf. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, (New York; The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1978), 442.

⁴⁹ *Lumen Gentium* no. 50, See also Paul VI, Cons. LG., A.A.S Vol. 57 (1965), no. 50, pp. 55 - 56.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 51. See also Paul VI, Cons. LG., A.A.S Vol. 57 (1965), no. 51, p. 57.

⁵¹ CCC no. 954.

⁵² *The Catechism of the Catholic Church Compendium*, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005), no. 211.

⁵³ Jacques Dupuis, (ed.) *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2014), 1014.

⁵⁴ CCC no. 955. Also, see *Lumen Gentium* no. 49.

⁵⁵ Charles Nyamiti, *Studies in African Christian Theology Vol. 4, Christ's Ancestral Mediation Through the Church Understood as God's Family: An Essay on African Ecclesiology*, (Nairobi: CUEA Press, 2010), 314.

⁵⁶ Cf. Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 483.

⁵⁷ CCC no.1371

⁵⁸ Cf. Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa, A Political Theology for Africa*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 155.

⁵⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 156.

⁶⁰ Laurenti Magesa, *WHAT is NOT SACRED? AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY*, (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2014), 158.

⁶¹ Cf. John Paul II, “Heaven is the Fullness of Communion with God,” Catechesis at the General Audience of 21 July 1999, in http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_21071999, accessed in August 04, 2017.

⁶² Cf. John Lukwata, *Integrated African Liturgy*, (Nairobi: AMECEA Gaba Publications – CUEA Press, 2003), 16.

⁶³ Cf. Eugene Hillman, C.S.Sp., *Toward and African Christianity: Inculturation Applied*, (New York and Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1993), 57.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Charles Nyamiti, *Studies in African Christian Theology Vol. 4*, 314.

⁶⁷ Jacques Dupuis, (Ed.) *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, 1014.