



# The Holy See

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JOHN PAUL II

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday 4 August 1999*

1. As we have seen in the previous two catecheses, on the basis of the definitive option for or against God, the human being finds he faces one of these alternatives: either to live with the Lord in eternal beatitude, or to remain far from his presence.

For those who find themselves in a condition of being open to God, but still imperfectly, the journey towards full beatitude requires a purification, which the faith of the Church illustrates in the doctrine of 'Purgatory' (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1030-1032).2. In Sacred Scripture, we can grasp certain elements that help us to understand the meaning of this doctrine, even if it is not formally described. They express the belief that we cannot approach God without undergoing some kind of purification. According to Old Testament religious law, what is destined for God must be perfect. As a result, physical integrity is also specifically required for the realities which come into contact with God at the *sacrificial* level such as, for example, sacrificial animals (cf. *Lv 22:22*) or at the *institutional* level, as in the case of priests or ministers of worship (cf. *Lv 21:17-23*). Total dedication to the God of the Covenant, along the lines of the great teachings found in Deuteronomy (cf. 6:5), and which must correspond to this physical integrity, is required of individuals and society as a whole (cf. *1 Kgs 8:61*). It is a matter of loving God with all one's being, with purity of heart and the witness of deeds (cf. *ibid.*, 10:12f.)The need for integrity obviously becomes necessary after death, for entering into perfect and complete communion with God. Those who do not possess this integrity must undergo purification. This is suggested by a text of St Paul. The Apostle speaks of the value of each person's work which will be revealed on the day of judgement and says: 'If the work which any man has built on the foundation [which is Christ] survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire' (1 *Cor 3:14-15*).3. At times, to reach a state of perfect integrity a person's intercession or mediation is needed. For example, Moses obtains pardon for the people with a prayer in which he recalls the saving work done by God in the past, and prays for God's fidelity to the oath made to his ancestors (cf. *Ex 32:30, 11-13*). The figure of the Servant of the Lord, outlined in the Book of Isaiah, is also portrayed by his role of intercession and expiation for many; at the end of his suffering he 'will see the light' and 'will justify many', bearing their iniquities (cf. *Is 52:13-53, 12*, especially vv.

53:11). Psalm 51 can be considered, according to the perspective of the Old Testament, as a synthesis of the process of reintegration: the sinner confesses and recognizes his guilt (v. 3), asking insistently to be purified or 'cleansed' (vv. 2, 9, 10, 17) so as to proclaim the divine praise (v. 15).<sup>4</sup> In the New Testament Christ is presented as the intercessor who assumes the functions of high priest on the day of expiation (cf. *Heb* 5:7; 7:25). But in him the priesthood is presented in a new and definitive form. He enters the heavenly shrine once and for all, to intercede with God on our behalf (cf. *Heb* 9:23-26, especially, v. 24). He is both priest and 'victim of expiation' for the sins of the whole world (cf. *1 Jn* 2:2). Jesus, as the great intercessor who atones for us, will fully reveal himself at the end of our life when he will express himself with the offer of mercy, but also with the inevitable judgement for those who refuse the Father's love and forgiveness. This offer of mercy does not exclude the duty to present ourselves to God, pure and whole, rich in that love which Paul calls a '[bond] of perfect harmony' (*Col* 3:14).<sup>5</sup> In following the Gospel exhortation to be perfect like the heavenly Father (cf. *Mt* 5:48) during our earthly life, we are called to grow in love, to be sound and flawless before God the Father 'at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints' (*1 Thes* 3:12f.). Moreover, we are invited to 'cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit' (*2 Cor* 7:1; cf. *1 Jn* 3:3), because the encounter with God requires absolute purity. Every trace of attachment to evil must be eliminated, every imperfection of the soul corrected. Purification must be complete, and indeed this is precisely what is meant by the Church's teaching on *purgatory*. The term does not indicate a place, but a condition of existence. Those who, after death, exist in a state of purification, are already in the love of Christ who removes from them the remnants of imperfection (cf. Ecumenical Council of Florence, *Decretum pro Graecis*: DS 1304; Ecumenical Council of Trent, *Decretum de iustificatione*: DS 1580; *Decretum de purgatorio*: DS 1820). It is necessary to explain that the state of purification is not a prolongation of the earthly condition, almost as if after death one were given another possibility to change one's destiny. The Church's teaching in this regard is unequivocal and was reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Council which teaches: 'Since we know neither the day nor the hour, we should follow the advice of the Lord and watch constantly so that, when the *single course of our earthly life* is completed (cf. *Heb* 9:27), we may merit to enter with him into the marriage feast and be numbered among the blessed, and not, like the wicked and slothful servants, be ordered to depart into the eternal fire, into the outer darkness where "men will weep and gnash their teeth' (*Mt* 22:13 and 25:30)" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 48).<sup>6</sup> One last important aspect which the Church's tradition has always pointed out should be reposed today: the *dimension of 'communio'*. Those, in fact, who find themselves in the state of purification are united both with the blessed who already enjoy the fullness of eternal life, and with us on this earth on our way towards the Father's house (cf. *CCC*, n. 1032). Just as in their earthly life believers are united in the one Mystical Body, so after death those who live in a state of purification experience the same ecclesial solidarity which works through prayer, prayers for suffrage and love for their other brothers and sisters in the faith. Purification is lived in the essential bond created between those who live in this world and those who enjoy eternal beatitude.

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*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Following our catechesis on the reality of heaven and hell, today we consider "Purgatory", the process of purification for those who die in the love of God but who are not completely imbued with that love.

Sacred Scripture teaches us that we must be purified if we are to enter into perfect and complete union with God. Jesus Christ, who became the perfect expiation for our sins and took upon himself the punishment that was our due, brings us God's mercy and love. But before we enter into God's Kingdom every trace of sin within us must be eliminated, every imperfection in our soul must be

corrected. This is exactly what takes place in Purgatory. Those who live in this state of purification after death are not separated from God but are immersed in the love of Christ. Neither are they separated from the saints in heaven - who already enjoy the fullness of eternal life - nor from us on earth - who continue on our pilgrim journey to the Father's house. We all remain united in the Mystical Body of Christ, and we can therefore offer up prayers and good works on behalf of our brothers and sisters in Purgatory.

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I am pleased to greet the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Ireland, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Japan and the United States. Upon all of you I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Happy summer holidays to you all!