

IN PURGATORY WE SHALL ALL BE MYSTICS

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The average Christian who accepts or rejects purgatory usually views it as a demi-hell set up by divine justice between heaven and hell to punish those who have died without having made sufficient reparation for their sins. This article contends, however, that the purgatorial stage of the consciousness of the mystics, caused by their intense experience of the incompatibility of sin and divine Love, is a paradigm of postmortem purgatory and is confirmed by recent theological writing.

IN HER BOOK, *The Divine Crucible of Purgatory*, Mother Mary of St. Austin maintains that “in purgatory (our masters tell us) we shall be mystics, whether or not any one of us had on earth the divine contacts and illuminations of the mystical state.”¹ Thus, the title of this article, which expresses my conviction that the mystical consciousness² of the Holy³ as *tremendum et fascinans* provides a foundation for a contemporary theology

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¹ Mother Mary of St. Austin, *The Divine Crucible of Purgatory*, rev. and ed. Nicholas Ryan, S.J. (New York: P. J. Kennedy, 1940) 9.

² Evelyn Underhill’s work, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, 12th ed., rev. (1911; Mineola, NY: Dover, 2002), initiated a shift from approaching mysticism in terms of “experience” to that of “consciousness.” However, the real change occurred through the ground-breaking work of Bernard McGinn, who was influenced by Underhill and especially by Bernard Lonergan’s cognitional theory. See Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, 4 volumes to date (New York: Crossroad, 1991–2005) and his article, “Mystical Consciousness: A Modest Proposal,” *Spiritus* 8 (2008) 44–63.

³ The classic study on the Holy is Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, 2nd ed., trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University, 1958).

of purgatory.⁴ The writings of four mystics who make an explicit comparison between their mystical life and purgatory—the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (ca. 1345–ca. 1386), Catherine of Genoa (1447–1510), John of the Cross (1542–1591), and Marie of the Incarnation (1599–1672)—provide an unusually perspicacious understanding not only of purgative consciousness as a stage in the mystical journey toward transforming union but also of a paradigm for comprehending the continuity between the earthly life of sin and grace, postmortem purification, and the beatific vision.⁵ Their acute consciousness of God,⁶ the Holy Spirit, and Christ indwelling their souls causes an intense, almost unbearable, but purgative and transformative awareness of the sinful creature’s resistance to divine life. The purgative and transforming encounter of the mystics with the Holy is, in my view, an apt paradigm for postmortem purgatory. Their views also prefigure what one finds in recent theological thinking on purgatory as the postmortem purifying and transforming meeting with Jesus Christ, or God, or the Holy Spirit.

EXPERIENCE OF THE HOLY AS *TREMENDUM ET FASCINANS*

The Holy is one of God’s proper names (Amos 4:2); it names the essence of deity. The Bible emphasizes that one cannot look upon God’s face and live. Who is like God, who is above all that is not God (Pss 71:19; 89:8; 113:5)? The Bible depicts God’s holy presence as both attractive and dangerous. Isaiah’s triple invocation of the Holy proclaimed not only God’s Majesty but also the prophet’s precariousness in the presence of the Holy because of his absolute unworthiness as a sinful creature. Even the demons quake in the presence of the Holy and cry out in fear: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God” (Mk 1:24).

The purgatorial consciousness of mystics also confirms the paradoxical nature of the human encounter with the Holy. The more deeply one experiences God’s nearness, the more one awakens to one’s sinfulness and creaturely nothingness. “I am nothing; I have nothing”⁷ is the refrain of

⁴ The classic work on purgatory is Jacques LeGoff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: Chicago University, 1981). The medieval view of purgatory has perdured to the present day.

⁵ For a study of numerous mystics who write of the purgative way but with no explicit link to postmortem purgatory, see Harvey D. Egan, *Soundings in the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2010).

⁶ The reader may wonder why I have not specified “God the Father” for “God” and so did not explicitly invoke the Trinity. The reason is that many mystical writers simply do not further specify “God.”

⁷ Walter Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection*, trans., intro., notes by John P. H. Clark and Rosemary Dorward; pref. Janel Mueller (New York: Paulist, 1991) 2.22.

numerous Christian mystics. Mystics also experience themselves as an infinite question to which only God is the answer; an immense longing that only Love can quench; an endless desire that finds “dissatisfied satisfaction” only in God’s incomprehensible Mystery; a nothing in the face of the No-Thing; and an abyss whose bottom is the Abyss, into which “even the soul of Christ vanishes” (Angelus Silesius). They pray that the Holy’s “Word will imprint in your soul, as in a crystal, the image of His own beauty . . . and the Holy Spirit will transform you into a mysterious lyre, which, in silence, beneath His divine touch, will produce a magnificent canticle to Love.”⁸ Above all, they desire only to unite with or simply to vanish into the Holy.

The Purgatorial Consciousness of the Anonymous Author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*

The depiction of mystical ascent by the anonymous 14th-century author of the classic *The Cloud of Unknowing* provides, in my view, an analogy for understanding postmortem purgation, purgatory.⁹ This unknown British Carthusian monk maintains not only that “man’s highest perfection is union with God in consummate love” but also that this union is so profound that the contemplative will be no more separated from God than God is from his own being.¹⁰ To the monk’s way of thinking, mystical union prefigures the beatific vision.

The anonymous mystic also underscores that nothing surpasses mystical contemplation as the means for achieving this loving union with God. Thus he writes specifically for those somehow attracted to mystical contemplation, for those “who feel the mysterious action of the Spirit in their inmost being stirring them to love” and have resolved to “follow Christ perfectly . . . into the inmost depths of contemplation.”¹¹

Adam’s fall, to the anonymous monk’s way of thinking, caused the human person’s disharmony with both self and God and the inclination to disorder and sin. Although baptism and sacramental confession remove original and personal sins, only the “one-ing” process of mystical contemplation—an earthly purgatorial process—can heal human fragmentation by restoring in Christ what was lost in Adam because “*God alone* is the chief worker here.”¹² The ascetical life, human effort—even

⁸ Letter 269, in Elizabeth of the Trinity, *Complete Works of Elizabeth of the Trinity*, vol. 2, *Letters from Carmel*, ed. Conrad de Meester, O.C.D., trans. Anne England Nash (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1995).

⁹ *The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counseling*, new ed., intro. William Johnston (Garden City, NY: Doubleday-Image, 1976).

¹⁰ *Privy Counseling* chap. 11; see also chap. 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*; see also foreword.

¹² *Ibid.* chap. 17, emphasis added.

with “ordinary grace”—is insufficient to restore the soul’s pristine image and likeness of God damaged by Adam.

Mystical contemplation, in this Carthusian’s opinion, totally transcends ordinary Christian life, which he deems “mundane” and “far from” Christ.¹³ Even the very desire for contemplation is strictly gift. Without God’s extraordinary grace, he writes, “a person would be so completely insensitive to the reality of contemplative prayer that he would be unable to desire or long for it.”¹⁴ However, it is “not given for innocence nor withheld for sin,”¹⁵ although it may be “withdrawn” because of sin.

Special signs in one’s spiritual life indicate that one is called to mystical contemplation.¹⁶ First, the “exterior sign” is a *persistent*, joyful enthusiasm whenever one hears or reads about contemplation. Second, the “interior sign” is a growing and incessant “blind desire” for contemplation, a “secret little love” that makes one’s daily devotions almost impossible. Third, if the tiny flame of love briefly disappears from consciousness, its return causes an overwhelming joy that more than supplants the deep sadness produced by its departure: “Your whole personality will be transformed, your countenance will radiate an inner beauty, and for as long as you feel it nothing will sadden you.”¹⁷

The anonymous monk instructs the contemplative tyro to create a “cloud of forgetting” between himself and all created things. Because thought cannot reach God—only love—the novice must forget everything and reject all thoughts, even those of God, Christ, Mary, and the saints. The holiest and most sublime thoughts should be treated and rejected like the vilest temptations. “Firmly reject all clear ideas however pious and delightful,” he writes, for “they are more hindrance than help.”¹⁸

This practice, aided by the repetition of a short, meaningful word, such as “God” or “Christ,” causes a “cloud of unknowing” to arise between the contemplative and God. Because thinking has stopped, the contemplative must learn to be at home in the darkness caused by the absence of knowledge and to direct his “dart of desire,” “naked intent,” and “blind desire” toward God. Only blind and “naked” contemplation, that is, one shorn of all thought and images, can penetrate the cloud between God and the contemplative and allow the person to rest quietly in the loving awareness of God’s very being.

This blind, loving contemplation is initially easy, consoling, and joyful but quickly turns into a deeply purgative flame. However, the distractions that soon arise in creating the clouds of forgetting and unknowing become the

¹³ *Cloud of Unknowing* chap. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* chap. 34, 91.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.* chap. 75; *Privy Counseling* chaps. 18–19.

¹⁷ *Privy Counseling* chap. 19.

¹⁸ *Cloud of Unknowing* chap. 9.

person's "purgatory."¹⁹ Also a purgatory is an in-between state filled with "great storms" and "temptations" caused by the rebellion of the imagination and reason, which are now deprived of their natural activity. The purgative period intensifies when the person no longer experiences the contemplative desire, cannot return to regular meditations, and may give in to the temptation either to strain spiritually or to give up and return to an ignoble life.

Patience and perseverance will reward the contemplative with refreshing delights. However, as the blind stirring of love roots itself more deeply into the soul, it causes all past sins to arise and torture the person.²⁰ The monk writes: "No evil thought, word, or deed remains hidden. . . . At times the sight is as terrible as a glimpse of hell and he is tempted to despair of ever being healed and relieved of his sore burden."²¹ But, if he perseveres in the cloud of unknowing, he will be rewarded with the experience of his past sins' being healed. "Slowly he begins to realize that the sufferings he endures are not really hell at all, but his purgatory."²²

Once the naked dart of mystical love heals the remnants of personal sins, the contemplative suffers greatly from experiencing self as a "lump of sin." The root unity of one's sinfulness, that is, original sin, now shows itself for the evil it is. "This foul, wretched lump called sin," the monk writes, "is none other than yourself."²³ Instructive, however, is his observation that the cloud of unknowing causes both this profound, holistic tasting of one's sinfulness and, at times, of "some heavenly paradise."²⁴ In brief, the encounter with the Holy is both *tremendum et fascinans*.

According to the anonymous author, not only sinfulness but also human existence itself separates us from God. The contemplative comes to the excruciating realization that a great chasm exists between himself and God. The painful inability to forget himself during contemplation causes an even deeper purification. Our monk writes that "that elemental sense of your own blind being will remain between you and your God."²⁵ The "simple awareness of my being," the "cross of self," "the painful burden of self . . . makes my heart break with weeping because I experience only self and not God."²⁶ However, this purgative experience eventually sets the contemplative "on fire with the loving desire to experience God as he really is."²⁷

¹⁹ Ibid. chap. 23.

²⁰ Ibid. chap. 69.

²¹ Ibid. Shortly after his conversion, Ignatius of Loyola's scruples over past sins—which he confessed again and again—caused such pain and self-hatred that he contemplated suicide. See *St. Ignatius' Own Story*, trans. William J. Young, S.J. (Chicago: Loyola University, 1956) nos. 19–25.

²² *Cloud of Unknowing* chap. 69.

²³ Ibid. chap. 43.

²⁴ Ibid., chap. 69.

²⁵ *Privy Counseling* chap. 13.

²⁶ Ibid. chap. 14.

²⁷ Ibid.

Employing the typology of his day, the Carthusian presents Mary Magdalene, sitting lovingly at Jesus' feet, as the ideal contemplative.²⁸ (It was actually Mary of Bethany.) She is the one who reveals the most intense kind of contemplative suffering. Never ceasing to feel an abiding sorrow for the sins that she carried like a great secret burden in her heart all her life, Mary's greatest pain came from her inability to love as much as she was loved. The more one loves, the more one desires to love. "Sick from her failure to love," the monk writes, "for this she languished with painful longing and sorrow almost to the point of death."²⁹ The more one experiences contemplative love, the greater will be the desire to return this love in full. At the zenith of what is known as the dark night of the soul, love itself is the contemplative's healing and transforming torture.

The anonymous author emphasizes that the God-given blind stirring of love causes the dark night of the soul only because of the person's resistance and inability to love as much as one is loved. (To paraphrase Meister Eckhart: only the *Nî* (No) to Love in one's being burns.³⁰) However, the dart of love also nourishes the contemplative with joy, peace, repose, revelations, and even ecstasies. Most importantly, the monk underscores the salient feature of contemplation: the gift of full union with God, for "God is your being, but you are not his."³¹ This union is so profound that "just as God is one with His being because they are one in nature, so the spirit which sees and experiences Him is one with Him . . . because they have become one in grace."³² In summary, this earthly purgatory consisting of a deepened sense of one's sinfulness, creaturely nothingness, and inability to love enough serves as a stage on the way to full union with God is the paradigm of one's purgatory after death.

The Purgatorial Consciousness of Saint Catherine of Genoa

Some of the most captivating passages on purgation in the Christian tradition flow from the mystical wisdom of Catherine of Genoa. "The things that I speak about," she dictated to her spiritual director, "work within me in secret and with great power."³³ During a Lenten confession

²⁸ *Cloud of Unknowing* chaps. 16–17.

²⁹ *Ibid.* chap. 16.

³⁰ Sermon 5b: *In hoc apparuit charitas dei in nobis* (German Works) in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. and intro. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, pref. Huston Smith (New York: Paulist, 1981) 183.

³¹ *Cloud of Unknowing* chap. 44; *Privy Counseling* chap. 1; see also chap. 12.

³² *Privy Counseling* chap. 12; see also chap. 21.

³³ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory: The Spiritual Dialogue*, trans. and notes Serge Hughes; intro. Benedict J. Groeschel; pref. Catherine de Hueck Doherty (New York: Paulist, 1979) 86.

in March 1447, Catherine experienced God as pure love so suddenly and overwhelmingly that she rejoiced: "If, of that which this heart of mine is feeling, one drop were to fall into hell, hell itself would become all eternal life."³⁴ However, she was also seized with such despair and self-loathing because of her sins that her soul cried out, "O Lord, no more world, no more sins!"³⁵ In contrast to the many mystics who were gradually purified and illuminated by pure love before being united to it, Catherine's purgation and transformation seem to have occurred almost instantaneously.

God as pure, incomprehensible love is the salient feature of Catherine's mysticism. She contends that the ray of burning love so united her to God that from that time on nothing could separate them. Nothing but pure love now means anything to her and she rejects any love that would be *for* or *in* God because "pure love loves God who is Pure Love without a why or wherefore."³⁶ She testifies that just as food is transformed into what consumes it, she is God's food being transformed into Godself, who eliminates all waste products in the process—an arresting image of pre- and post-mortem purgation. "My *Me* is God," she cries out, "nor do I recognize any other *Me* except my God Himself."³⁷ In her view, her being is God's being and God's being is her being, and "not by simple participation but by a true transformation of [her] being."³⁸

For this reason, she judged her very own self as the "very opposite of God"—thus, her worst enemy. The slightest deviation from pure love caused her intense suffering. Moreover, God had revealed to her that self-will was so subtle and deeply rooted that it obeyed only itself—no matter how hard she tried to outwit it. The penetrating awareness of her spiritual corruption became so intense at times that she would have despaired and then died, had God not lessened the duration of this experience.³⁹

Although Catherine underscored as "most bitter" the purgatorial battle between pure love and self-love, she stressed another kind of war: the one between body and soul. Experience had taught her that the body is a "veritable purgatory" because of the soul's desire to depart from it to be with God. Although the soul has a natural instinct for God, it "finds itself bound to a body entirely contrary to its own nature."⁴⁰ This infelicitous

³⁴ Catherine of Genoa, *Vita*, quoted by Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1961) 1:159.

³⁵ Catherine of Genoa, *Spiritual Dialogue* 109.

³⁶ Catherine of Genoa, *Vita*, quoted in von Hügel, *Mystical Element* 1:268.

³⁷ *Vita*, quoted in von Hügel, *Mystical Element* 1:265.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory* 81.

⁴⁰ Catherine of Genoa, *Vita* in von Hügel, *Mystical Element* 1:273.

understanding of the body-soul relationship may have emerged from her long years of illness that ended in an excruciating death.

Catherine came to understand that purgatory is God's fiery love that by itself could annihilate the immortal soul. In so acting, God so transforms the soul in him that it knows nothing other than God; and he continues to draw it up into his fiery love until he restores it to that pure state from which it first issued. As it is being drawn upward, the soul feels itself melting in the fire of that love of its sweet God.⁴¹

The "rays of lightning" from God's fiery love annihilate all resistance to God, that is, the "impediments" from the "rust of sin." Mixing images, she taught that only these obstacles cause the sufferings of the soul in purgatory, and it "feels within it a fire like that of hell." However, the one undergoing purgatory does not dwell on the suffering; one dwells rather on the resistance felt in oneself against pure love. One of the most creative insights in the Christian tradition concerning purgatory results from Catherine's confession that "there is no joy save that in paradise to be compared to the joy of the souls in purgatory."⁴² The profound realization that the "rust of sin" is gradually being removed and opening the soul more and more to God's love, therefore, produces both suffering and joy.

Catherine also taught that the "doors of paradise" are open to anyone who wishes to enter. God does not place a soul in purgatory or hell. In her view, when the person dies, the light and fire of God's pure love compels the soul to seek its "own place," based on the nature of its sins. If the soul in mortal sin did not find itself "in hell," for example, it would experience a still greater hell than the one due it. So it is with purgatory: "Should the soul find that the assigned place is not sufficient to remove its impediment, then it would experience a hell far worse than purgatory."⁴³

Catherine emphasized that nothing she says can compare to what she felt about the "correspondence of love" between God and the soul. As the soul returns to its original purity through purgatory's cleansing action, God draws and unites the soul to Godself with a burning love that seemingly annihilates it.⁴⁴ God transforms the soul into "that pure state from which

⁴¹ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory* 79.

⁴² Ibid. 79, 74, 72. Augustine of Hippo's view of purgatory is much harsher. The saving fire of purgatory causes suffering greater than anyone can bear in this life. See Augustine's commentary on Psalm 38:2, in *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF1-08/TOC.htm> (accessed July 14, 2012).

⁴³ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory* 77.

⁴⁴ Thérèse of Lisieux wrote: "To be able to gaze on your glory, I know that we have to pass through fire. So I, for my purgatory, choose your burning love" (*The Poetry of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*, trans. Donald Kinney, O.C.D. [Washington: Institute Carmelite Studies, 1996] poem no. 23:8, 120). Thérèse also taught that when one lives on love, it burns away everything contrary to God (poem no. 17:6, 90).

it first issued”⁴⁵ so that it knows nothing other than God. Feeling itself melting in the fire of God’s rapturous love and then stripped of all imperfections, “the soul rests in God with no characteristics of its own. Our being is then God.”⁴⁶

The Purgatorial Consciousness of John of the Cross

John of the Cross, the 16th-century Carmelite reformer and Doctor of the Church, blended mystical poetry, which he called “expressions of love arising from abundant mystical understanding,”⁴⁷ with discursive commentary to unfold somewhat systematically the classical purgative, illuminative, and unitive stages that culminate in the “highest degree of perfection one can reach in this life (transformation in God).”⁴⁸

John’s works underscore a general movement from an entrance into a twilight of the senses, by which one transcends the world of appearances to a total night of the spirit, by which the self is transcended, to a mystical dawn and journey toward the noonday sun, that is, spiritual betrothal and marriage. These phases, to my way of thinking, are analogous to postmortem purgation and entry into the full enjoyment of life with God.

Because “all the beauty of creatures compared to the infinite beauty of God is the height of ugliness,”⁴⁹ John counsels his disciples to empty completely intellect, memory, and will and to walk the mystical way in naked faith, hope, and love. The “desire to enter into complete nudity, emptiness, and poverty in everything in the world”⁵⁰ sets the tone for his entire mystical enterprise.

In one of John’s works, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, the contemplative lover sings of her good fortune in having departed “one dark night” to be united with her beloved. This book explains the process of mystical purification of the senses and of the spirit, “nights” that become progressively “more obscure, dark, and dreadful.”⁵¹

The twilight darkness begins when the person starts to wage war against disordered worldly appetites and desires by embracing what is most difficult, harshest, least pleasant, and least comforting. Moreover, contemplatives at this stage frequently find much satisfaction in long hours of prayer,

⁴⁵ Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and Purgatory* 79.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 80.

⁴⁷ John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, Prologue 1, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D., rev. ed. (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991). All subsequent references to works by John of the Cross are found in the *Collected Works*.

⁴⁸ John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love*, Prologue 3.

⁴⁹ John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel* 1.4.4.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 1.3.6.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 1.1.3.

great penances, fasts, and various devotional activities. Because a secret pride, spiritual greed, and complacency often accompany these activities, John writes of a God-given night of the senses whose hallmark is aridity.⁵²

According to John, this phase is the start of the mystical life. Nothing—neither God nor creatures—consoles the person. This night causes both a painful awareness of God and the dreadful feeling of not serving God well. This God-given purgation prods the person to become more interior by restricting the activity of the intellect, memory, imagination, and will. In short, the person can no longer meditate, an activity that previously brought much joy. Both the aridity and the fear of having gone astray cause the person intense suffering during this period. This dark night requires that the “enamored soul”⁵³ place all thoughts, imaginings, desires, and feelings into a cloud of forgetting so as to walk the way of naked faith.⁵⁴ Paradoxically, during purgative contemplation the person may also delight in remaining alone in a simple, loving awareness of God. The delicate, experiential knowledge flowing from this love may not be obvious at first. John therefore advises patience and an unconcern with meditation during this surface dryness. The advancing contemplative is now like an owl looking at the noonday sun.

John maintains that at this stage of the mystical life advanced contemplatives experience horrific suffering that “resembles that of purgatory.”⁵⁵ In John’s view, in this life souls are purged and cleansed with a “dark, loving spiritual fire”; in the afterlife, by a “dark, material fire!”⁵⁶ John insists, moreover, that here on earth one is cleansed and illuminated only by the “fire of loving wisdom,” which are “touches of the divine” that signal the “beginning of the perfection of the union of love for which the soul hopes.”⁵⁷ However, one should not expect to receive such sublime touches of God’s love without having been purified through great trials.

The irony is that, for John, infused contemplation is “nothing else than a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God, which, *if not hampered*, fires the soul in the spirit of love.”⁵⁸ “The fire and thirst of love”⁵⁹ is the Holy Spirit’s love flooding the soul, which seeks only to heal and to complete persons so that they “may reach out divinely to the enjoyment of all earthly and heavenly things, with a general freedom of spirit in them all.”⁶⁰ What should be experienced as a “gentle and delightful burning” of the soul in

⁵² John of the Cross, *Dark Night* 1.8–14.

⁵³ John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2.15.4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 2.1–5.

⁵⁵ John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love*, stanza 1.25. See also *Dark Night* 2.12.1–6; 2.20.5; 2.6.6.

⁵⁶ John of the Cross, *Dark Night* 2.12.1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 2.12.2.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 1.10.6, emphasis added.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 2.13.4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 2.9.1.

the Holy Spirit, however, is transformed into the excruciating dark nights of the senses and of the spirit—an earthly purgatory—because of the contemplative’s disorder, sinfulness, and miserly love.⁶¹

Although John complains that the agonies of the dark night of the spirit are so “numerous and burdensome” that he lacks the time and energy to describe them fully,⁶² his depiction of this night remains unrivaled. The passive dark night of the spirit both completes the purgation of the senses and further deepens the contemplative’s transformation by intensifying the awareness of his or her imperfections and sinfulness. Like brilliant sunlight shining through a dirty window, the divine inflow throws into sharp relief the contemplative’s least flaw and fault. Past and present sins stand out in their total perversity to torture the person. The contemplative is seized by a powerful conviction of having been rejected by God, of being unworthy of any love, of not expecting any more blessings but only ongoing suffering. All creatures and friends seem to have abandoned him during this period. Even the consoling words of an expert spiritual guide have no impact because the contemplative is convinced that no one understands him.

The contemplative seems to come close to death through her sufferings. John writes that purgative contemplation “so disentangles and dissolves the spiritual substance—absorbing it in a profound darkness—that the soul at the sight of its miseries feels that it is melting away and being undone by a cruel spiritual death.”⁶³ It is as if she were experiencing the very pains of hell, although this is, in fact, an extremely meritorious, earthly purgatory.⁶⁴ Insofar as sin and imperfection have become an actual part of the contemplative’s being, they must be dissolved. To be totally efficacious, the dark nights may last many years. From time to time, God will relieve the contemplative through consoling gifts. Yet, because something is still lacking in the contemplative, one experiences even in the midst of consolations the haunting presence of a sleeping enemy on the brink of awakening. The fullness of this night is undoubtedly the greatest suffering possible on earth.

In John’s opinion, not many contemplatives attain the fullness of purgation and transformation. But for the blessed few who do, he maintains that neither old age nor illness causes their deaths. He contends that “the death of such persons is very gentle and very sweet, sweeter and more gentle than was their whole spiritual life on earth. For they die with the most sublime

⁶¹ Ibid. 2.9.11. The English hermit Richard Rolle (1290–1349) teaches something similar when he writes of the abnegated person: “If he were thrown into the fire of hell he would not burn! For he has completely extinguished the seductions and delights of life which come to him from outside” (Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love*, trans. Clifton Wolters [Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1972] chap. 8).

⁶² John of the Cross, *Dark Night* 2.7.2.

⁶³ Ibid. 2.6.1.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 2.6.6.

impulses and delightful encounters of love.”⁶⁵ This, in my view, is analogous to the postmortem passage from purification to eternal life.

The Purgatorial Consciousness of Marie of the Incarnation

The Relation of 1654, the spiritual autobiography of Blessed Marie of the Incarnation, a French Ursuline mystic and the first woman missionary to the New World, offers another example of an earthly purgatory that has ramifications for understanding the postmortem one.⁶⁶ The autobiography gives convincing evidence that only someone who has passed through all the mystical stages and attained spiritual maturity could have written it. Moreover, the explanation of Marie’s 13 states of prayer do not fit the classical pattern of mystical ascent as purgation, illumination, and union. Finally, when she was in her 40s—long after mystical marriage, filled with “so gentle and sweet a fire”⁶⁷—she suffered yet another eight years of mystical purgation, an anomaly because transformation union is usually recognized as the summit of the mystical life.⁶⁸

The slumbering disorders of her lower nature reawakened and brutally assaulted her. Temptations to blasphemy, immodesty, and pride—coupled with a strong sense of being the vilest and most debased of God’s creatures—surprised her. Debilitating lassitude, anger toward community members, and fear that past blessings were only diabolical delusions led to suicidal inclinations.⁶⁹ All the faults and imperfections committed since mystical union, which before “seemed like nothing to me now seemed horrible in light of the infinite purity of God who demanded exact reparation for all I had experienced.”⁷⁰ One evening she felt an evil spirit penetrating her “very marrow and nerves to destroy and annihilate [her],”⁷¹ which she vanquished by her graced humble submission to God’s will. Even confidence in her most trusted spiritual directors and confessors vanished—one of the classic signs of the dark night of the spirit.

⁶⁵ John of the Cross, *Living Flame of Love*, stanza 1.25.

⁶⁶ Marie of the Incarnation, “The Relation of 1654,” in *Marie of the Incarnation: Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. Irene Mahoney, O.S.U. (New York: Paulist, 1989) 41–178. All subsequent references to Marie are to the “Relation.” She writes of 13 states of prayer; I refer to them by the ordinal number followed by the chapter number and page number in *Selected Writings*.

⁶⁷ Seventh State XXII, 82.

⁶⁸ Marguerite Porete, a 14th-century Beguine, wrote that there are “two other stages . . . which God gives that are greater and more noble than this [mystical marriage]” (Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls* chap. 118 [New York: Paulist, 1993] 191). However, even Porete does not teach of dark nights after transforming union.

⁶⁹ Eighth State XXXV, 103.

⁷⁰ Twelfth State LII, 142.

⁷¹ Eighth State XXXV, 105.

The Holy Spirit revealed how cunning her corrupt human nature was in hiding her sins and imperfections. She came to realize that only God's light could illuminate the skewed nooks and crannies of her soul to purify, heal, and transform it. The Spirit's presence—which previously had been that of embracing love—now became “a sword that divides and cuts with subtle sharpness,”⁷² which Marie called a “honing purgatory.” “This is a purgatory,” she writes, “more penetrating than lightning—a sword that divides and cuts with subtle sharpness. In this purgatory, however, one never loses sight of the Sacred Word incarnate.”⁷³ Yet, the Spirit's “subtle” and “penetrating” thrusts into her spirit never reached the soul's center, where God is master. The experience of God leaving this center for a while hurled her into an “intolerable void,” in which “are born those despairs which would like to throw body and soul into hell.”⁷⁴

Paradoxically, this spiritual dereliction was experienced only as a “punishment” to be endured, and not as something that ensnares and leads to immoral conduct. Moreover, except for brief periods of God's seeming absence, Marie always experienced an intimate peace in the soul's center. “What I was suffering,” she wrote, “was contrary to the state that his divine Majesty maintained at the center of my soul.”⁷⁵ The trials ended, the “garment of darkness” vanished, and peace came flooding into her soul.

Marie's unconditional love of the cross was an integral aspect of her espousal and trinitarian mysticisms that culminated in the state of “the despoilment of the soul, the state of victim, and true and substantial spiritual poverty.”⁷⁶ She had once received a vision of a magnificent building constructed of crucified bodies. Some of the crucified had only their legs pierced; others were crucified at the waist; still others, their entire bodies: “But it was only those who were entirely attached [to the cross] who bore it willingly.”⁷⁷ Marie belonged to the latter group, but as an apostolic mystic whose inner and outer life bore all the marks of the “spiritual poverty” of a “victim of love” for the “salvation of souls.”

RECENT VIEWS OF PURGATORY

Most contemporary Christians—both those who accept and those who reject purgatory—imagine it as a demi-hell established by divine justice, a place between heaven and hell, where those who have died are punished for a length of time proportionate to the number and quality of the sins for which they have made insufficient reparation. In recent years, however, many thinkers have not only rejected or ignored this view of purgatory but

⁷² Twelfth State LII, 142.

⁷⁴ Twelfth State LII, 143.

⁷⁶ Thirteenth State LXV, 171.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Thirteenth State LVIII, 156.

⁷⁷ Eleventh State XLVII, 130.

also have come to understand it in vastly different ways. From these numerous recent scholars,⁷⁸ several seem to have attracted the most attention: C. S. Lewis, Karl Rahner, and theologians who emphasize the unfinished person's encounter with God, or the Holy Spirit, or Christ. I chose these thinkers because they confirm the teaching of the mystics that the earthly purification process caused by intrinsic resistance to the divine influx is analogous to the postmortem purifying and transforming encounter with the Holy.

C.S. Lewis's View of Purgatory

Because C. S. Lewis's down-to-earth view of purgatory is so often mentioned in popular literature, it deserves mention here.⁷⁹ Confessing that he prays spontaneously and inevitably for the dead, "Jack" (as his friends called him) was often ridiculed by his colleagues. He retorted: "What kind of God would forbid us to mention our loved ones to him?"

Rejecting the "Romish" understanding of purgatory, Lewis focuses on John Henry Newman's *Dream of Gerontius*. At the foot of God's throne, the "saved soul" *demand*s to be removed from the Holy's presence to be cleansed.

And if God said to it: 'It is true, my son, that your breath smells and your rags drip with mud and slime, but we are charitable here and no one will upbraid you with these things, nor draw away from you, enter into the joy,' . . . would that person still not plead to be taken away in order to be scrubbed clean and to change clothing?

Even if God told him it would hurt, Lewis contends that he presumed as much, given tradition and the fact that suffering in this life has often done him "real good." However, suffering, in his view, is not purgatory's purpose. The dentist's chair is his favorite image.

I hope that when the tooth of life is drawn and I am "coming round," a voice will say, "rinse your mouth out with this." This will be purgatory. The rinsing may take longer than I can now imagine. The taste of this may be more fiery and astringent than my present sensibility could endure. But . . . it will not be disgusting and unhallowed.

As attractive as Lewis's images and analogies are, they are still far from capturing the suicide-inclining suffering mystics undergo from the intense awareness of their sinfulness.

Karl Rahner's Understanding of Purgatory

The pioneering work of Karl Rahner creatively transposed Roman Catholic views on purgatory by underscoring its anthropological

⁷⁸ For an excellent summary of more approaches to purgatory, see William J. LaDue, *The Trinity Guide to Eschatology* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

⁷⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1964) 108–9. My following remarks come from here.

foundations.⁸⁰ The human person, in his understanding, is *one* human being, self-conscious and free, with a unity of origin and goal, yet inwardly plural—in short, a “plural unity” with a multifaceted nature. Whenever the one complex human being, consisting of many levels, attempts to love God totally and the neighbor as self, resistance is encountered from the unintegrated realities of the person’s being—from a learned and unlearned tangle of emotions, from the id, from the subconscious, from an unruly imagination—to the inclinations fostered by deliberately and semideliberately formed habits. That the self is at war with the self is evident.

Rahner also maintains that even the most interior sin embodies itself and alters the person’s bodily, physiological, emotional, and spiritual constitution.⁸¹ The “penalties of sin,”⁸² as the tradition calls them, are in Rahner’s view the “objectifications” or “embodiments” of sin, which contradict the person’s integral structure. The temporal punishments due to sin, the *reatus poenae*, are the consequences intrinsic to sin, the indication that sin gives birth to its own punishments. In other words, they are the connatural results, the “repercussions,”⁸³ the “incarnations” of evil decisions that are not simply annihilated by conversion and repentance. This means that, at death, most people surrender as imperfect beings to God, to Christ, and to the saints.

Rahner emphasizes that the “punishments of sin,” the unintegrated realities of the person, neither cease at death nor are they simply eliminated by God’s fiat. Purification in purgatory is an aspect of death itself, a lengthy process of integrating all the plural elements of one’s being around one’s “fundamental option” for God. The person’s complex plural unity, consisting of several levels, cannot be integrated in one stroke. Purgatory, in Rahner’s view, is the total and painful integration of the person in and through death—not after death.⁸⁴ The painful consequences of sin underscore the difference between what a person is and should be—which purgatory eliminates. The diverse depth and intensity of the sufferings in death are the “time” one spends in purgatory. The whole reality of the damaged person must be integrated into a new and fundamental decision in order for all to be forgiven. In short, purgatory is an aspect of death

⁸⁰ Karl Rahner, “Purgatory,” *Theological Investigations* 19, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1993) 181–93.

⁸¹ Karl Rahner, “Guilt and Its Remission: The Borderline between Theology and Psychotherapy,” *Theological Investigations* 2, trans. Karl-H. Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1963) 265–81, at 271.

⁸² Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, “Penalties of Sin,” *Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., trans. Richard Strachan et al. (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 369–70, at 369.

⁸³ Karl Rahner, “Penance,” *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (New York: Seabury, 1975) 1187–1204, at 1204.

⁸⁴ Rahner and Vorgrimler, “Satisfaction,” *Dictionary of Theology* 461.

itself, which, in Rahner's view, does not necessarily coincide with medical death.⁸⁵

Because Rahner understands the human person as "spirit-in-world," he disagrees with the traditional belief that the soul at death becomes acosmic, i.e., that it goes somewhere not of this world. When the soul surrenders its limited bodily structure at death, it becomes "pancosmic," all-cosmic, even more open to God's one creation, more deeply connected to creation, more radically spirit-*in-world*, and a codetermining factor of the universe itself.⁸⁶ This theory does not mean that the world then becomes the individual soul's body or that the soul is now omnipresent. It signifies, in Rahner's view, that the essence of the human spirit is to be related to the world, to actualize matter, even after death. Although Rahner moved away from his pancosmic theory later in life, he never accepted Thomas Aquinas's view of the separated soul and emphasized that this present earthly body is simply the way spirit relates to this world now, a relationship that endures even after death.

Purgatory, the maturing of the one person in and through death, has another aspect. The person remains spirit-in-world. After the freed soul surrenders its limited bodily structure, it experiences more clearly and acutely its own harmony or disharmony with the objectively right order of the world. The person, as spirit-*in-world*, experiences just how much his sinful decisions have injured the world. It is both surprising and disappointing that Rahner's thinking about the cosmic dimension of purgatory has been neglected. Paul speaks of the "groaning of creation" (Rom 8:22) and the "new creation" in Christ (2 Cor 5:17). Peter calls attention to the "new earth" (2 Pet 3:13). More than one mystic has cried out in wonder and asked why creation did not annihilate him or her.

Greshake and Küng: Purgatory as the Postmortem Encounter with God

One of the first theologians to change the course of Roman Catholic thinking on eschatology was Gisbert Greshake, emeritus professor of the Albert-Ludwig University of Freiburg. His book *Stärker als der Tod* produced a flurry of praise and criticism because, in essence, it reduces all eschatology to God. In his view, purgatory is nothing more than the person's postmortem encounter with God.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Karl Rahner, "The Life of the Dead," *Theological Investigations* 4, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 347–57; and Rahner and Vorgrimler, "Intermediate State," *Dictionary of Theology* 247–48.

⁸⁶ Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death*, trans. C. H. Henkey (New York: Herder, 1961) 19–21.

⁸⁷ See Gisbert Greshake, *Stärker als der Tod: Zukunft, Tod, Auferstehung, Himmel, Hölle, Fegfeuer* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald, 1976) 92–93.

In line with this approach, Hans Küng also writes of purgatory as a dimension of the imperfect person's humiliating, painful, and purifying encounter with God, "in the wrath of his grace." For Küng, purgatory "is the encounter with God in the sense that it judges and purifies, but also liberates and enlightens, heals and completes man."⁸⁸

Gnilka, Nicholas of Cusa, and Pope Benedict XVI: Purgatory as the Postmortem Encounter with Christ

The approach to purgatory took a christological turn with the groundbreaking work of German exegete Joachim Gnilka. The testing fire found in 1 Corinthians 3:10–15, he argues, is no fire at all, but the coming Lord.⁸⁹ It is instructive, however, that the 15th-century mystic Nicholas of Cusa, commenting on this same passage and on Hebrews 12:29, writes of Christ as the "purest fire," "the spiritual fire of life and understanding that consumes all things and takes all things into itself and so proves and judges all things, as the judgment of material fire, which tests all things. All rational spirits are judged in Christ, just as every thing flammable is judged in fire."⁹⁰

The scholarly views of a theologian who becomes pope necessarily attract attention. When Joseph Ratzinger, the Regensburg University professor, published his book on eschatology,⁹¹ it was well received—for the most part. But when, as Pope Benedict XVI, he promulgated the encyclical letter *Saved in Hope* (*Spe salvi*), which contains the same understanding of purgatory as that in his book, theological circles became more attentive. According to Ratzinger, if one views 1 Corinthians 3:10–15 christologically, Christ himself is the judging fire who transforms and conforms us to his own glorified body. In the transition from death to eternal life, Jesus' purging fire frees our closed-off heart and renders us capable of perfect union with God, Christ, and the entire communion of saints.⁹²

Both the Apostle Peter and Ignatius of Loyola are examples of earthly, purgatorial encounters with Christ. After a night of fruitless fishing, Peter is instructed by Jesus to set out into the deep to lower the fishing nets. On seeing the huge catch of fish, Peter fell to his knees and said to Jesus, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Lk 5:8). At the time of

⁸⁸ Hans Küng, *Eternal Life?: Life after Death as a Medical, Philosophical, and Theological Problem*, trans. Edward Quinn (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984) 139.

⁸⁹ Joachim Gnilka, "Fegfeuer II: Lehre der Schrift im Neuen Testament," *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 3rd ed., cols. 50–51, at 51.

⁹⁰ *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. and intro. H. Lawrence Bond, pref. Morimichi Watanabe (New York: Paulist, 1997), *On Learned Ignorance* 3.9.233–34; 3.9.191–92.

⁹¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 2nd ed., trans. Michael Waldstein, ed. Aidan Nichols (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1988).

⁹² Ratzinger, *Eschatology* 229, 232.

the Passion, when Jesus looked at Peter just after the betrayal, Peter remembered Jesus' words, "and he went out and wept bitterly" (Lk 22:62). When Jesus cooked breakfast for Peter and other disciples, he asked Peter three times whether he loved him. To this purifying questioning, Peter replied painfully, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you" (Jn 21:17).

When Ignatius was recuperating from his war wounds at Loyola, the Virgin Mary holding the child Jesus appeared to him, and he later wrote:

He felt so great a loathsomeness for all his past life, especially for the deeds of the flesh, that it seemed to him that all the images that had been previously imprinted on his mind were now erased. Thus, from that hour until August 1553, when this is being written, he never again consented, not even in the least matter, to motions of the flesh.⁹³

This meeting with the Holy, Jesus and Mary, purified him of much from his past life.

Although some scholars have embraced Ratzinger's view of purgatory as the postmortem encounter with Christ, his emphasis on the entire communion of saints has been undeservedly neglected. I suggest that one comes face-to-face with one's "embodiments" of sin not only vis-à-vis God and Christ but also vis-à-vis the members of Christ's mystical body. As stated in 1 Corinthians 6:2, "the saints will judge the world." Just as mystics suffer not only from their resistance to God's loving influx during the dark night of the soul but also from the painful misunderstanding of their spiritual fathers and from their often cruel treatment at the hands of community members, relatives, and friends, so persons "in purgatory" will meet those they wronged in this life and become aware of the injury they did to those still living on earth. As one Jesuit wisely said: "I'm not afraid to meet Christ. I do fear my embarrassing encounter with St. Ignatius." It is both disappointing and surprising that little thinking has been done about the communion of saints in connection with purgatory.

In *Spe salvi*, Benedict XVI insists that most people possess in their hearts an essential "openness to truth, to love, to God." The concrete compromises of their lives, however, have covered this openness with "much filth." When they appear before Christ, their "foundation" will endure but they will suffer loss and "be saved, but only through fire" (1 Cor 3: 14–15).⁹⁴

The pope then expounds the theological opinion "that the fire which both burns and saves us is Christ himself, the Judge and Savior" in such a

⁹³ Ignatius of Loyola, *A Pilgrim's Journey: The Autobiography of Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Joseph N. Tylenda, S.J. (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1985) nos. 10, 16.

⁹⁴ Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi* no. 46, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi_en.html (accessed July 14, 2012).

way as to make clear that he is convinced of its truth and recommends its adaption by the faithful.

The encounter with Christ is the decisive act of judgment. Before his gaze all falsehood melts away. This encounter with him, as it burns us, transforms and frees us, allowing us to become truly ourselves. . . . Yet in the pain of this encounter, when the impurity and sickness of our lives become evident to us, there lies salvation. His gaze, the touch of his heart heals us through an undeniably painful transformation “as through fire.” But it is a blessed pain, in which the holy power of his love sears through us like a flame, enabling us to become totally ourselves and thus totally of God.⁹⁵

The pope also insists that “no one lives alone. No one sins alone. No one is saved alone.”⁹⁶

CONCLUSION

Abandoning a legalistic view of purgatory as a place of torture located between heaven and earth in favor of understanding purgatory as an encounter with Jesus Christ, or God, or the Holy Spirit and with the mystical body and the cosmos that purifies and transforms the multidimensional social person that we are has many advantages. First, the encounter notion is faithful to the church’s defined teaching—anchored in the practice of praying for the dead—that the “cleansing fires” of “purification” exist “for all who die in God’s friendship” but are “still imperfectly purified.”⁹⁷ Second, it comprehends the “cleaning fires” as the “dark, loving spiritual fire” of the Holy Spirit, Christ, the communion of saints, and also creation itself. Third, it shifts the theological discourse away from extrinsic, legalistic, and mythological terminology to intrinsic, personalistic, and more pastorally useful categories. Fourth, a creative synthesis of the views of the thinkers cited in this article could provide a theological, pneumatological, christological, anthropological, and cosmological foundation for a contemporary and orthodox understanding of purgatory. Fifth, this approach has already born ecumenical fruit. Anglican exegete N. T. Wright has embraced the views of Rahner and Ratzinger.⁹⁸ Some Lutheran scholars⁹⁹ and Evangelicals¹⁰⁰ have expressed more openness to current Roman

⁹⁵ Ibid. no. 47.

⁹⁶ Ibid. no. 48; see also nos. 53–54, 56.

⁹⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington: US Catholic Conference, 1994) nos. 1030–32.

⁹⁸ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 2008) 169–70.

⁹⁹ See *The Hope of Eternal Life: Common Statement of the Eleventh Round of the U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue*, ed. Lowell G. Almen and Richard J. Sklba (Minneapolis: Lutheran University, 2010).

¹⁰⁰ Brett Salkeld, *Can Catholics and Evangelicals Agree about Purgatory and the Last Judgment?* (New York: Paulist, 2011).

Catholic thinking on purgatory. Sixth, the fruitfulness of this line of thinking underscores that the writings of the Christian mystics can and should be used as serious theological sources. Finally, few Christians would disagree with Paul when he writes: "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6).