

Do We Really Have the Power to “Pray” Someone out of Purgatory?

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Let’s start with an important distinction that’s at the base of everything else we’ll say. The Church’s Catechism puts it in these words:

It is necessary to understand that sin has a double consequence. Grave sin deprives us of communion with God and therefore makes us incapable of eternal life, the privation of which is called the “eternal punishment” of sin. On the other hand every sin, even venial, entails an unhealthy attachment to creatures, which must be purified.... This purification frees one from what is called the “temporal punishment” of sin. These two punishments must not be conceived of as a kind of vengeance inflicted by God from without, but as following from the very nature of sin.¹

Actually, the concept of a “temporary punishment” for sin is deeply human. Suppose a man has defrauded many elderly people of their life savings by promising to invest their money in lucrative schemes, when in fact he takes their money to finance his own lavish lifestyle—and we know this isn’t just a hypothetical example!

After he’s been convicted of securities fraud and has affirmed before the judge and jury his sincere sorrow for what he’s done, we still want to see three things happen: restitution, retribution, and correction. 1) We want to see the victims compensated for their losses. 2) We want the perpetrator to be punished in some way for violating the law, giving him his just deserts—you do the crime, you do the time!—thus re-establishing the balance of justice which has been disturbed by violating the right order of society. 3) We want to offender to be corrected and to reform his ways.² After he’s completed his “temporal” or temporary punishment, we say that “he’s paid his debt to society,” and we hope that he’ll now be a law-abiding citizen who’s a credit to his community.

Now, something analogous applies in our relationship with God and our violation of divine law. When we commit sin and then throw ourselves on the mercy of

¹ CCC, 1472.

² See Austin Fagothey, S.J., *Right and Reason: Ethics in Theory and in Practice*, 3rd ed. (Saint Louis: C. V. Mosby, 1963), 346.

the divine “court,” our sins are washed away in the blood of Christ, who offered himself as a sacrificial lamb on the altar of the cross in atonement for those sins. If we had deserved eternal punishment, that debt is wiped away along with all the guilt of our sins. We are now holy and righteous in his sight. Nevertheless, we have the duty to make restitution if we’ve damaged another person’s right to health, property, or reputation, and, unless our love of God and neighbor is truly perfect—and it so rarely is!—we have to undertake the spiritual equivalent of accepting our just punishment and reforming our lives. The Catechism says:

The forgiveness of sin and restoration of communion with God entail the remission of the eternal punishment of sin, but temporal punishment of sin remains. While patiently bearing sufferings and trials of all kinds and, when the day comes, serenely facing death, the Christian must strive to accept this temporal punishment of sin as a grace. He should strive by works of mercy and charity, as well as by prayer and the various practices of penance, to put off completely the “old man” and to put on the “new man” [as St. Paul says in his Letter to the Ephesians, 4:22, 24].³

Immediately, two questions arise. Suppose we die before we finish “doing our time” and we’re not quite ready to enjoy our full rights as citizens of the heavenly kingdom? Secondly, if we haven’t paid our debt in full to ecclesial society, the Mystical Body of Christ, can our fellow members of that Body help us get to that point? The answers to these two questions are actually intertwined, and in answering one we’ll also be answering the other.

Let’s begin with the words of the Catechism: “All who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. The Church gives the name *Purgatory* to this final purification of the elect.”⁴ Sometimes people say to me that you don’t hear so much about purgatory anymore. I say that that’s a shame because it *is* an essential part of our faith or what we call a *dogma*, that is, something revealed by God which the

³ CCC, 1473.

⁴ CCC, 1030-31.

Church proposes as something we must believe as divinely revealed. Not to believe it breaks our communion of faith with the Mystical Body.

So the profession of faith included in the acts of the Second Council of Lyons in 1274 stated:

If, being truly repentant, [the baptized] die in charity before having satisfied by worthy fruits of penance for their sins ... 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.⁵

Here we already have a clear answer to both our questions: those who are in the state of grace when they die but haven't done sufficient penance for their sins can be purified after death before entering heaven. And, our prayers, Masses, and works of mercy can assist them in that process of purification. Here we have a clear statement of Catholic belief over 200 years *before* Martin Luther was even born! This teaching was reaffirmed—the actual Latin word used was *diffinimus*, “we define”—165 years later at the Council of Florence,⁶ almost a century before the Reformation began, and again at the Council of Trent⁷ in response to the rejection of Catholic doctrine by the so-called reformers.

This teaching of our faith should be considered both *reasonable* and a clear *elaboration* of what we find in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. First of all, common sense suggests some final stage of purification before we see God in the face. The Scriptures tell us again and again how absolutely holy God is and how nothing imperfect or impure can stand before him.⁸ Do you think you're a saint right now? Do you think your name will be proposed for canonization after you die? What about those of your loved ones? Oh, we're not bad people, but we're hardly as

⁵ DS 856; translation from *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, English ed. Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 283.

⁶ DS 1304

⁷ DS 1580, 1820.

⁸ E.g., Rv 21:27.

good as we could be. We're decent folks, but hardly saints. But, my friends, *only saints* go to heaven! If we're not saints when we die, we're not ready for heaven yet. Thank the Lord, though, we have a chance to be purified by the burning love of God after we leave this world, and that opportunity is called purgatory. It's the place where good people become great people, where ordinary believers become real saints.

Secondly, since the earliest centuries Christians have prayed for the dead and offered the Sacrifice of the Mass for them. The epitaph of Abercius, a second-century bishop of Hierapolis in modern-day Turkey, explicitly asks believers to pray for him. In the early third century, Tertullian urged wives to have Mass offered for their husbands on the anniversary of their death, and a generation later St. Cyprian refers to celebrating the holy Sacrifice for the dead.⁹ St. Monica instructed her son, St. Augustine, shortly before she died: "Put this body anywhere! Don't trouble yourselves about it! I simply ask you to remember me at the Lord's altar wherever you are."¹⁰ In his *Mystagogical Catecheses*, St. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote:

After the spiritual Sacrifice, the unbloody service is completed, we pray to God over this sacrifice of propitiation for ... the dead ... since we believe that it will be of the greatest advantage if we, in the sight of the holy and most awesome Victim, discharge our prayers for them. We sacrifice the Christ, who was slain for our sins, to propitiate the merciful God for those who have gone before....¹¹

That great doctor of the Church wrote this in the 370s or 380s, describing what was already the well-established practice in Jerusalem, the city where Our Lord instituted the Holy Eucharist.

Our current Missal continues to express these ideas in the various prayers offered at Masses for the Dead. Here are just two examples:

Almighty and merciful God, by means of these sacrificial offerings, wash away, we pray, in the Blood of Christ, the sins of your departed servant N., and purify unceasingly by your merciful forgiveness those you once cleansed in the waters of Baptism.

⁹ Tertullian, *De monogamia*, 10; Cyprian, Letter 65.

¹⁰ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 9, 11, 27.

¹¹ Adapted from the citation in Joseph Pohle, "Sacrifice of the Mass," *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1911), <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10006a.htm>, accessed Nov. 2, 2020.

Having received the Sacrament of your Only Begotten Son, who was sacrificed for us and rose in glory, we humbly implore you, O Lord, for your departed servant N., that, cleansed by the paschal mysteries, he (she) may glory in the gift of the resurrection to come.¹²

It's easy to see that these prayers of the Catholic funeral Mass are an earnest supplication to God to forgive the deceased their sins and to grant them eternal happiness.

Now keep in mind that the saints in heaven don't need our prayers; they're already in paradise. And those in hell can't benefit from them since their condition is eternal. The Church's ancient practice of praying for the dead makes sense *only if* the dead are in some state in which they can benefit from our prayers, and that state we call purgatory. This practice was confirmed by the Second Vatican Council: "From the very earliest days of the Christian religion, the Church ... has honored with great respect the memory of the dead; and 'because it is a holy and a wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins' she offers her suffrages for them."¹³ As you can see, the Church had been praying for the dead since the earliest centuries and continues to do so today.

Occasionally, one even encounters a non-Catholic who finds our belief and practice to be sensible. Samuel Johnson was an 18th-century British author and sincere Anglican. One passage in James Boswell's *Life of Johnson* deals with purgatory and Masses for the dead. Johnson tells his friend Boswell that the idea of purgatory makes eminent sense to him. He reasoned that the vast majority of people who die should not be judged so bad as to deserve hell nor so good as to deserve heaven. So, he concludes, there must be a kind of middle state where some sort of cleansing takes place. When asked about Masses for those in purgatory, Dr. Johnson replies that it is as proper to pray for them as it is to pray for our brothers and

¹² *Roman Missal*, Masses for the Dead, D. Other Prayers for the Funeral Mass, Prayer over the Offerings and Prayer after Communion.

¹³ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, 50, quoting 2 Mc 12:45.

sisters who are alive.¹⁴ I think that's one of the clearest and most succinct statements of Catholic belief I've ever heard. That's why in the Church's liturgical life there's no such thing as a "celebration of life" Mass. At a Catholic funeral we're not there to revel in past memories, but to pray for the future happiness of our departed loved ones; and if we dream about them being already in heaven, we may very well be doing them a great disservice by failing to offer those prayers and penances they need to really get there.

Now, the Church's belief and liturgical practice are actually based on Scripture texts that suggest some sins will be forgiven in the next world. One such text is from the Second Book of Maccabees, just quoted by Vatican II: "It is a holy and a wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins." In Matthew 12:32, Jesus points out that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the only sin that will not be forgiven, "either in this world or in the next," implying that some purification from lesser sins can take place after death. In speaking of judgment day, St. Paul says: "That day will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each one's work. If the work stands ..., that person will receive a wage. But if someone's work is burned up, that one will suffer loss; the person will be saved, but only as through fire."¹⁵ In short, the Church's faith is based on what Scripture tells us about the holiness of God and the possibility of expiation after death, and on her centuries-old practice of praying that mercy and salvation will be granted to the faithful departed.

Since it is a "holy and wholesome thought" to pray for the faithful departed so that "they may be loosed from their sins," what should we do? On the website called "Catholic Exchange," Fr. Ed Broom, an Oblate of the Virgin Mary, recently offered 10 ways to help the souls in purgatory.¹⁶ He includes fervent prayer, almsgiving, practicing a corporal work of mercy, offering up your sufferings, having

¹⁴ Quoted by Karl Keating in *Catholicism and Fundamentalism*, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/purgatory-982>, accessed Nov. 1, 2020.

¹⁵ 1 Cor 3:13-15.

¹⁶ See <https://catholicexchange.com/for-november-here-are-ten-ways-you-can-help-the-souls-in-purgatory>, accessed Nov. 2, 2020.

Masses said, praying the Rosary, etc. Curiously, though, the one thing he doesn't mention is the centuries-old practice of gaining indulgences for the faithful departed.

What is involved, then, in an indulgence? The Church's Catechism, quoting Pope St. Paul VI, says:

An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven, which the faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains under certain prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints.¹⁷

To put this in simpler terms, an indulgence means that some of the temporal punishment you still owe for sins already forgiven can be remitted if you perform, with the proper intention, certain acts of prayer or mercy that have been designated by the Church for the purpose of lessening the satisfaction you owe. The Church can do this because she has been empowered by Christ to dispense all the spiritual blessings that have been stored up by Our Lord and by the good works of his saints.

During the current pandemic we've heard so often that "we're all in this together." Well, in the spiritual realm that describes the communion of saints to a T. Just as our sins harm the spiritual well-being of our fellow believers, so too the prayers, good works, and patient sufferings of the holy ones have, in union with Christ, created an immense store of spiritual merit that the Church can dispense on our behalf. St. Paul VI describes it very beautifully:

Following in the footsteps of Christ, the Christian faithful have always endeavored to help one another on the path leading to the heavenly Father through prayer, the exchange of spiritual goods and penitential expiation. The more they have been immersed in the fervor of charity, the more they have imitated Christ in his sufferings, carrying their crosses in expiation for their own sins and those of others, certain that they could help their brethren to obtain salvation from God the Father of mercies. This is the very ancient dogma of the Communion of the Saints, whereby the life of each individual child of God in Christ and through Christ is joined by a wonderful link to the life of all his other Christian brethren

¹⁷ CCC, 1471, quoting Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution, *Indulgentiarum doctrina*, Norm 1.

in the supernatural unity of the Mystical Body of Christ till, as it were, a single mystical person is formed.¹⁸

When we perform an indulgenced work with sincere sorrow for our sins and fulfill whatever other conditions the Church may require, we receive a partial or total remission of the temporal punishment still owed for sins already forgiven. Whether the indulgence is partial or plenary depends on what the Church has prescribed for that particular action.

The Catechism also reaffirms what has been the constant teaching of the Church that “indulgences may be applied to the living or the dead.”¹⁹ This is really wonderful because it means that not only do our prayers and sacrifices help the faithful departed, but we can also perform indulgenced works which have added to them the great treasury of merit of Christ and his saints. No doubt you’re familiar with the idea of a “matching gift”: for every dollar you donate, some anonymous donor will double or triple what you’ve given. Indulgences are kind of like a matching gift: whatever you spiritually give is greatly enhanced by the spiritual treasure of the whole Mystical Body. Moreover, on October 23 the Apostolic Penitentiary issued a decree stating that a plenary indulgence, under the usual conditions, can be gained for the souls in purgatory by visiting a cemetery and praying for them on any or every day of November. Also, the plenary indulgence that can be gained for the faithful departed on *November 2* by visiting a church or oratory and reciting the Creed and the Our Father can be transferred this year to *another* day of November of our own choosing.

With regard to the souls in purgatory, though, we have to remember that the Church’s direct authority over temporal satisfaction applies only to members of the Mystical Body in this world. She has no direct authority to remit temporal punishments for the faithful departed. So theologians say that the way we apply an indulgence to the souls in purgatory is *per modum suffragii*, that is, as an earnest supplication or entreaty to God that the indulgence be applied as he in his mercy sees

¹⁸ *Indulgentiarum doctrina*, 5, notes omitted.

¹⁹ CCC, 1471.

fit. How he answers our prayers is known only to him, but we continue to trust and hope in his abundant kindness.

So in answer to the question in the title of this spiritual call, “Do We Really Have the Power to ‘Pray’ Someone out of Purgatory?”, the answer is yes and no. Yes, our prayers, Masses, sacrifices, and the indulgences we gain can and do help release the souls of the faithful departed from purgatory. But that release from temporal punishment depends on God’s good time and mercy, and cannot be forced by us. So the Church prays for the faithful departed at *every* Mass in these or similar words: “Remember also, Lord, your servants, who have gone before us with the sign of faith and rest in the sleep of peace. Grant them, O Lord, we pray, and all who sleep in Christ, a place of refreshment, light and peace.”²⁰

And so, for the deceased members of our Order and for all our relatives, friends, and benefactors we pray: Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May their souls and the souls of all the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace. Amen.

²⁰ *Roman Missal*, Eucharistic Prayer I, 95.