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### **Defending the Doctrine of Purgatory**

In this paper I wish to consider one method for establishing the Catholic doctrine of purgatory. While there are several functions and several bases for this doctrine, I will limit myself to one function of purgatory and to one particular way of coming to this conclusion. The manner in which I will proceed is as follows: (1) I will establish the conditions for gaining salvation simultaneously showing that salvation can be lost; (2) I will show the basis for distinguishing degrees of sins; (3) I will show the incompatibility of God in heaven and sin, which cannot exist in heaven; (4) I will show that accepting the previous three premises logically implies purgatory; and finally (5) I will offer some more support for my conclusion.

(1) There are several conditions that Jesus makes to gaining salvation or entering the kingdom of heaven. One is that a person be “born of water and Spirit.”<sup>1</sup> Although many Protestants take this (albeit without the necessity of the waters of baptism) to be the only condition, which condition is synonymous with “accepting Christ as your personal Lord and Savior,” there are other conditions, like “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you... He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.”<sup>2</sup> While this latter does not seem to make eating Jesus’ body a condition for salvation (one would have to show that having life in you is connected with salvation), it does logically imply that without doing so you can lose your salvation if you take the following passage in conjunction with these: “If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers;

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<sup>1</sup> John 3:5

<sup>2</sup> John 6:53, 56

and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.”<sup>3</sup> But ultimately, any and all conditions can be summed up in this, that to attain salvation and eternal life, one must do the will of the Father: “Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”<sup>4</sup> Part of the will of the Father is to believe in Jesus (cf. John 6:40), but the Father’s will includes various proscriptions of the moral life: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from immorality...”<sup>5</sup> In fact, there are also positive commands associated with the will of God: “Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”<sup>6</sup> We already saw that abiding in Jesus is necessary in order not to lose salvation, but since abiding in Jesus is the will of God, we can generalize by saying that continually doing the will of God is necessary to secure salvation: “For you have need of endurance, so that you may do the will of God and receive what is promised... But we are not of those that shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and keep their souls.”<sup>7</sup>

(2) This condition of doing the will of God is behind the doctrine of degrees of sin. Clearly, rejecting the will of God is the definition of sin, but not all sin is of the same order: “If any one sees his brother committing what is not a mortal sin, he will ask, and God will give him life for those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin which is mortal; I do not say that one is to pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not mortal.”<sup>8</sup> This shows at least two general degrees of sin. The more serious type of sin is *πρὸς θάνατον* [pros thanaton], i.e. towards death. This does not mean that the less serious type does not cause spiritual death, for “God will

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<sup>3</sup> John 15:6

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 7:21

<sup>5</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:3

<sup>6</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

<sup>7</sup> Hebrews 10:36, 39

<sup>8</sup> 1 John 5:16-17

give him life for those whose sin is not mortal.” Hence, even in the less serious type of sin, divine life was lost, or at least damaged. Given that the preposition used is *pros*, implying action towards something, the idea seems to be that these sins, in addition to immediate spiritual death, put you on a path towards another death, namely eternal death or loss of salvation. Nevertheless, the apostle does not say that it is unforgivable, but only that a brother may not effect its forgiveness merely by his prayer. Hence, we can see that by sinning (not doing the will of God) after accepting Jesus into your life, you can lose your salvation, but some sins put the Christian at greater jeopardy of such a loss.

(3) To understand how sin affects Christians after death we need to show the incompatibility of God and sin. Unlike the case in forensic justification which Protestants profess, the Bible constantly states that God and sin are utterly foreign to each other. Psalm 103:12 states that “as far as the east is from the west, so far does [God] remove our transgressions from us.” External justification would have us believe that righteousness is merely imputed to us and that God merely accounts us as righteous. But this fails to live up to the Psalmist’s declaration of God’s cleansing us, making us whiter than snow.<sup>9</sup> This also makes Jesus’ command that we be “perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”<sup>10</sup> superfluous. It does not seem that merely counting us righteous suffices, for God is not externally righteous but righteous to His very being. Hence, God’s intent is to sanctify and transform us inwardly so that we become truly holy. One final biblical observation of this point comes in Revelation 21:27, where the prophet sees the New Jerusalem, the dwelling of God with men, into which “nothing unclean shall enter.”

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<sup>9</sup> Psalm 51:7

<sup>10</sup> Matt. 5:48

(4) The logical deduction from all these passages is that a Christian who dies having committed sin which was not forgiven cannot enter heaven, or the New Jerusalem. Such a Christian has not been made whiter than snow, since he has not been separated from his sins. But, the basis of purgatory is that not all Christians who die with sin will be given to the fires of hell. Rather, on the basis of the distinction between mortal (*pros thanaton*) and non-mortal sin, the Church has deduced that some sins do not warrant eternal death. Nevertheless, those that die in non-mortal sins are not yet ready to enter heaven; hence there is a need for a place of purification where Christians can be made clean of their non-mortal sins.

(5) In support of this conclusion, we can quote Hebrews 10:26-27. “For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries.”<sup>11</sup> Of course, this does not mean that if a Christian sins, he will definitely lose salvation, but rather that those sinning after receiving the truth will be judged *and* suffer a fury of fire. There seems to be two choices here: 1) The aforementioned Christian is judged, still goes to heaven, but (and) passes through fire; or 2) this Christian is judged, does not go to heaven, and remains in the fire eternally. The question of purgatory, then, comes down to whether one believes the first choice is possible. The Catholic position takes the distinction between mortal sin and non-mortal sin as the basis for this possibility. A denial of purgatory would have to account for this and interpret why some sin is called “*pros thanaton*” above and beyond spiritual death.

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<sup>11</sup> Hebrews 10:26-27