

# ESCAPING PURGATORY

Rev. A. Gits, S.J.

*Don't take it for granted that you MUST suffer the pains of Purgatory.*

*THE ORDINARY CATHOLIC may legitimately hope to pass straight from earth to Heaven without experiencing them.*

*But on what is this hope founded?*

*Father Gits answers the question in this booklet.*

LET us suppose for the sake of argument that you knew for certain that Our Lord in His kindness would take you at your death into Heaven without any Purgatory, would you then love Him more and serve Him better; would you feel grateful? Suppose that Our Lord were to say to you: "Dear Child, I will count all the sufferings of your life and especially the pains of your death as being your Purgatory and you shall come straight from this valley of tears into eternal joy without any Purgatory," would your heart rejoice and would you love Him more in this life or, on the contrary, would you say to yourself: "Now I can have a good time. I need not struggle to lead a good life in future"?

If you were so ungrateful to God as to love Him less because He loves you more, then this book is not intended for you. If, however, you think you would love Him better and serve Him with a more joyful heart, then read on in God's name.

## *Think Well of God*

We ought to think good and generous thoughts of God. In reality He loves us so much that He thinks there is nothing too good for us His children. There is no limit to His love, for it is an Infinite love. The real trouble is that we do not think well enough of God's kindness. The fogs of ancient heresies still blind our eyes.

Take for example the question of our Purgatory after death. There are many good Catholics who depress themselves by thinking that they will be lucky indeed if they do manage to arrive in Purgatory at all. They seem to serve God from a motive of fear alone. Their hearts are frozen. "No one," they say, "but the greatest saint can hope to escape the cleansing pains of Purgatory. The Holy Oils are useful to comfort me at the hour of death and may perhaps shorten my sufferings in the next world, but indeed I shall consider myself lucky to escape Hell and to attain to Purgatory." It all sounds very pessimistic. Is this the true Catholic spirit? In the long history of God's Church there is the true Catholic spirit handed down from generation to generation in the very heart of the faithful, a sort of instinct echoing the teaching of our holy Mother the Church. It comes straight from the Heart of Christ, and like a golden thread it weaves its way down the years of history, but it is sometimes dimmed by the dust of the world. Protestantism is dying and Jansenism is dead, but the fogs raised by these cruel heresies have dimmed the brightness of the golden thread of Catholic tradition concerning Purgatory and the wonderful 'effects of Extreme Unction.

## *Catholic Tradition*

Here are a few quotations from saints and theologians which will help towards a knowledge of the true Catholic tradition from the earliest times:—

*St. Cyprian, 3rd century:* "Black should not be worn to mourn for our dead, for they are already robed in white." (*De Mortalitate* c. 20.)

*An Ancient Penitential, 9th century:* "It is written that the soul of one who has received this rite (Extreme Unction) is as pure as the soul of a child that dies immediately after Baptism." (Migne, 89, 416.)

*St. Albert the Great, 13th century:* "Extreme Unction leads to immediate glory because it takes away the remains of sin. Its chief purpose is the cleansing away of all those results of sin which hinder the passing of the soul to rest." (IV. dist. 23.)

**St. Thomas Aquinas, 13th century:** “This sacrament (Extreme Unction) prepares a man for immediate glory so that nothing may remain in him which could hinder the soul from receiving its reward of glory at its departure from the body.” (c.g. IV. 73.)

**Peter Paludanus, 14th century:** “A man is anointed for two reasons, first that he may fight unto final victory and second that conquering and purified he may enter into Heaven without any Purgatory.” (Sentences q. 4.)

**Catechism of the Council of Trent, 16th century:** “The Sacred Unction delivers the soul from the weakness and sickness of sin and from all the other *remains* of sin.” (II. 6. 14.)

**Suarez, 17th century:** “It is quite right to count the punishment due to sin as being part of the *remains* of sin. If this sacrament (Extreme Unction) is not wilfully hindered it takes away every evil which could prevent or postpone the entrance into glory.” (Disp. 41. I. 17.)

**Peter Arcudios (a Greek theologian), 17th century:** “Extreme Unction is called the oil of regeneration because the sick man departs as pure as if he were born anew, since by it are taken away the *remains* of sin.” (De Concordia V.)

Father Kern, a Jesuit theologian, writing in the year 1907, sums up the whole question in these words:—“Extreme Unction is the perfect healing of the soul with a view to its immediate entrance into glory. Since our most loving Lord instituted this sacrament in order that the faithful might be preserved not only from Hell but also from Purgatory it would not be kind to think that it only obtains its effects in rare cases. Such an opinion would attribute to Our Lord a line of action quite unsuited to His loving Heart. Who can believe that He gave us a medicine as the price of His precious blood in order to bestow perfect health to the soul of a dying person so that he may enter at once into Heaven and yet at the same time imparted so little power to this medicine that only a few chosen souls will go straight to Heaven and the rest cannot hope to be preserved from Purgatory even though they do their best to receive the sacrament worthily?”

### **The Good Thief**

There is no doubt that Our Lord has the power of cancelling all our sins and all punishment due to them if we will let Him do so. “All power is given to Me on earth and in Heaven,” He said, just before He bestowed upon His Apostles the power to forgive sins in His Name. On Calvary the Good thief dying on his cross laden with sins turned to Jesus and said: “Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.” Jesus was waiting for that appeal. As swift as a flash of lightning came the response: “This day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise.” All the sinners of the world are represented by that thief. He was near to Christ crucified and so is every sinner who attends at Holy Mass. He was dying close to Christ and so is every dying sinner who receives the sacraments. The Good Thief did not apparently make a very fervent prayer, but he meant what he said: “Remember me, Lord.” Poor dying sinners cannot be expected to be very fervent; they are too busy suffering and dying, but at least they can say: “My Jesus, mercy.” Our Lord’s sufferings on the Cross are infinite in merit and are amply sufficient to take away all the sins of the world and all punishment due to them. Our Lord, then, can and will do this by means of the sacraments if the poor sinner will let Him do so.

Arcudios speaks of Extreme Unction as being a regeneration (a new birth), the complete purification of the soul. St. Thomas Aquinas makes the matter still clearer when he remarks: “. . . so that nothing may remain which could hinder the soul from receiving its reward of glory at its departure from the body.” God in His kindness is eager to forgive the sinner. To obtain this mercy the sinner must, of course, repent of every sin that he has ever committed. This does not mean that he must **remember** all the sins that he has ever committed. God does not ask impossibilities. Nor does it mean that he must feel intense fervour such as the saints have felt. Again, God does not ask impossibilities of a poor sinner, but He does ask for confidence and humility. If a dying man receives the holy oils with contrition for all his sins there is no doubt that all his sins are wiped Out together with all punishment due to them, provided that he receives the sacrament of mercy with due preparation and humility.

The only difficulty in the way of God’s kindness might be in the sinner himself. Can he after a lifetime of sin really and sincerely possess a universal repentance for sin, distracted as he is by the fears, suffering and loneliness of death? Alone and unaided the sinner cannot do anything. Now God knows this very well and that is precisely why He has given

us a special sacrament to meet the difficulty, the sacrament of Holy Oils (Extreme Unction). The Church teaches us that this sacrament “washes away the remains of sin, completes the expiation of sin, rouses the soul to a great confidence in God’s mercy, enables the sinner to resist the temptations of the devil more easily and even restores the health of the body if such be good for the soul” (Council of Trent). The true Christian tradition teaches that this sacrament is “the completion of penance,” as the Council of Trent calls it. All that is required on the part of the sinner is a willingness to accept it as such. “If a man takes medicine,” says the great Spanish theologian, Suarez, “he shows a desire to get rid of his sickness: in the same manner if a sinner desires Extreme Unction he also desires to get rid of his sins” (Disp. 12. I. 9).

The poor sufferer on his death bed may be capable of very little spiritual effort. Perhaps he can only gasp the prayer: “My Jesus, mercy,” or the words of the Good Thief: “Lord, remember me.” Jesus understands full well and by means of the sacrament of Holy Oils He comes to the rescue and completes the work of expiation and frees the soul “from all the remains of sin,” All that He asks is a good will on the part of the sinner, the good will of the Good Thief.

### **Justice and Mercy**

Does it not seem too wonderful that a thief should go straight to Heaven? Does it not seem too wonderful that a lifetime of sin should be set straight by a few minutes of suffering and a gasping plea for mercy? What of - God’s justice? Justice is indeed vindicated because the merits of Christ’s sufferings are infinite and they have been applied to this soul which accepted Christ’s sacraments added to his little meed of suffering. “Justice and mercy have kissed.” “The mercy of the Lord is above all His works.” What a triumph for the Blood of Christ that a poor sinner should enter Heaven immediately after death!. We must not be scandalized at God’s mercy. A mother would do as much for her dying child if she could. Our Lord Himself speaks in this sense: “If you, then, being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father from Heaven give the good Spirit to them that ask Him.” The Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, comes to the dying man and stirs up the good spirit of repentance in order to remove all obstacles to the Divine work of Christ’s Passion and thus the sacrament of Extreme Unction can have its full effects. Let us not, then, begrudge God the glory that comes from His Infinite Mercy.

It will now be useful to reply to some of the common objections that may be urged against what has been said so far; but before considering these questions the reader is asked to turn back to the quotations (pp. 4 and 5). Read again what has been said by saints and theologians of all ages concerning Extreme Unction in order to keep a clear picture in the mind of the genuine Catholic tradition. This will help considerably to estimate objections at their true value.

### **I HAVE ALWAYS UNDERSTOOD THAT ONLY GREAT SAINTS CAN HOPE TO ESCAPE PURGATORY. HOW DID THIS IDEA ARISE?**

In the 16th century the Protestant. rebels against the Church began to teach that Masses and prayers for the dead are useless and that there is no Purgatory. To meet this cruel heresy Catholic preachers and writers began to speak strongly about Purgatory and its necessity. In the confusion of controversy the merciful effects of the sacrament of Extreme Unction were neglected and even forgotten. Men spoke much of God’s justice and less of His mercy. In order to show the necessity of Purgatory some began to maintain that very few would escape its cleansing flames. Some went so far as to deny that Extreme Unction could remove the temporal punishment due to sin. This kind of teaching had never been heard before the rise of Protestantism. About the same time there arose in the Church a school of writers and teachers called Jansenists, who showed great harshness towards sinners, and under the excuse of greater sanctity kept them away from the sacraments. The Church has long ago condemned this heresy, but its effects are still felt amongst Catholics, who too easily take a gloomy view of God’s mercy.

The result has been that some good people cannot believe their ears and are even shocked when they hear of God’s wonderful kindness to His children in such matters as the sacrament of Extreme Unction. They are suffering from the fogs of past heresies. For many long years the spirit of Jansenism kept good Catholics from frequent Communion and even from frequent Confession. There are still a certain number who fear Extreme Unction as though it were a sentence of

death, whereas in reality it is God's medicine to restore perfect health to the soul and (if God wills) to the body too.

## IF EXTREME UNCTION CAN TAKE AWAY OUR PURGATORY, WHY DOES THE CHURCH INSIST SO MUCH ON MASSES FOR THE DEAD, EVEN FOR HOLY PERSONS?

The Church, like a good mother, is pathetically eager to have Requiem Masses for her dead children. She encourages this pious duty in every possible way and for all her children. She seems determined to heap favours upon them to make sure that all will be well when she hands her children over to the chasm of death into the safe-keeping of God.

There are two very good reasons for these many Requiems. In the first place there is always a chance that in spite of the powerful graces of Extreme Unction and in spite of the graces that come from suffering, there may still be some malice of the will in the dying sinner, some venial sin, perhaps, of which he has not repented. In that case the poor soul would need to be purified in Purgatory, which is the hospital of the soul, Hence there would be urgent need of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

In the second place let us suppose that the powerful grace of God and the loneliness and pain of dying has brought about a complete and sincere act of contrition; then the soul will go immediately to Heaven fortified by the sacraments. Yet the Church still insists on the Requiem Masses. She knows that the Sacrifice of the Mass will plead with God for the multitudes who die without priest or sacraments or who are neglected by their own relatives. This is shown by the fact that the prayers said by the priest during Mass are worded almost entirely to include ALL the souls of the faithful departed. What a joy it must be for those who are safe in Heaven to know that the Mass is being offered for their brethren in Purgatory! That is one aspect of the Communion of Saints. This perhaps explains the curious fact that the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is more frequently offered on behalf of fervent Catholics and less frequently or not at all for those who need it most, the careless Catholics, the pagans, the heretics. It is God's wonderful way of making the good come to the rescue of their less favoured brethren. This is a partial explanation of frequent Masses offered for a child of seven years of age who has died perhaps still unsullied by wilful sin.

Nevertheless this explanation is far from complete. There *is* another reason which concerns the spiritual good of the dead person; for after all he is the one chiefly concerned. Let us suppose that this child of seven years of age, still untouched by wilful sin, has gone immediately to Heaven in its Baptismal innocence. Is there still a good reason for offering the Holy Sacrifice for this child's spiritual welfare? Yes, indeed; for the dying saint as well as the dying sinner can be helped not only by Masses that have been offered but also by those that will be offered. Even though a dying child of seven may still be free from sin he needs to be shielded from the attacks of Satan in his last moments. God in His goodness can help this dying child by means of the many Masses which are offered both before and after death. Does then our holy Mother the Church in her many requiems pray God to grant a happy death to those who are already dead? The answer will be discovered by a careful reading of the words of the Requiem Masses in the missal. Have you noticed that all the prayers in the Holy Sacrifice are offered that the dead "may escape punishment," may "enter into glory," may "escape the dangers of death and the snares of the Evil One," may have "a favourable judgment," may "enter into peace and rest," may enjoy the company of the Blessed," in other words the prayers are for a happy death. Thus there is need of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass even in the case of those who go straight to Heaven by the help of the sacraments; for the Mass is the treasure house of the sacraments.

The Church surrounds the dying sinner with countless Masses said before and after his death. Time is nothing with God. Can He not, if He wishes, help a poor dying child *now* because of some *future* offering of the Mass? This curious disregard of time is often seen in spiritual affairs. For example, our love for Jesus NOW consoles His suffering Heart in the Garden of Agony long ago (as Pius XII tells us in his encyclical on Reparation).

Here is another example of this disregard of time: A man who has fallen into serious sin may win back the friendship of God by an act of perfect contrition on condition that he resolves to go to confession. He is making use of the grace of God by virtue of a future sacrament, at least in his intention.\* Christ Himself dying on the Cross put aside the ordinary

\**Saltem In Voto (Trent)*.

laws of time by atoning for the sins of the world, past, present and *future*. In the same way the Sacrifice of the Mass pleads with God to deliver us from all evils, “past, present and to come.” Hence the Masses to be offered in the *future* can benefit a saint or a sinner dying *at the present moment* and win for him the grace of a happy death.

There are therefore many good reasons which explain the motherly anxiety of the Church urging that many Masses should be offered for the dead even though they have been fortified with the sacraments.

I SHOULD LIKE TO ACCEPT THIS CONSOLING TEACHING ABOUT EXTREME UNCTION, BUT THERE ARE SO MANY STORIES ABOUT THE REVELATIONS OF HOLY PERSONS CONCERNING PURGATORY THAT I FEEL CONFUSED IN MIND.

The answer to this difficulty is to be found in the writings of Pope Benedict XIV, who teaches us that we should reject any so-called vision or revelation which opposes the true Catholic tradition. He says that even saints can be mistaken in their revelations sometimes; he adds that a certain saint is said to have believed that she received a revelation telling her that our Blessed Lady was not free from original sin. This was in the middle ages, long before the definition of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, but it is an example of a saint being mistaken. The real test of truth is not the private revelations of holy people but the teachings of the Church. Pious writers are sometimes too fond of quoting these so-called revelations. Father Faber, in his valuable book, *All for Jesus*, devotes five pages to the revelations of a certain Sister Frances of Pampeluna, which give the impression that very few souls can escape Purgatory. There are a great number of such stories. They seem to have begun their appearance about the time of the Jansenist heresy, as though they were influenced by the ideas of the time. Before that time (says Father Cappello of the Gregorian University) the private revelations were in the opposite direction. One holy person believed that she had received a revelation to the effect that the majority of Catholics went straight to Heaven.

It would of course be unwise to despise all private revelations; for God in His goodness can and does speak to His saints in visions and revelations, but at the same time it is also true that the Evil One can transform himself into an angel of light and deceive even the elect. No one, therefore, ought to be upset if he hears stories about so-called revelations which contradict the age-long traditions of the Fathers. “Test the spirits and see whether they be of God,” says Holy Writ. Pope Benedict XIV warns us to be very cautious in this matter and to follow the guidance of the Church. We should rather listen to the teachings of Catholic tradition than to private revelations. It is true that the Church has in some cases approved of the visions of certain saints and has even established feasts to honour them. St. Bernadette and St. Margaret Mary are famous examples. Here the Church does all she can to encourage the devotion of the faithful, but she has never given her approval of those many “revelations” concerning the number of those who go to Purgatory and the length of their purgatory and so forth. It is far better to reject such stories as unreliable, even though they are related in books.

NEVERTHELESS I STILL FEEL THAT ONLY SAINTS CAN GO STRAIGHT TO HEAVEN, AND I AM NOT A SAINT.

“Being a saint” is not the same thing as being without sin. A baptized person who is an idiot from birth is spoken of as one of God’s “innocents.” He is sinless but is probably not a “saint.” Nevertheless at death he will go straight to Heaven because he is sinless. Sanctity is something positive. In this sense a soul in Purgatory may possess greater sanctity than a sinless baby.

The whole question of your Purgatory turns upon your sinlessness at the hour of death, and your having made due satisfaction for sins of the past. If you have been freed (1) from all guilt of sin and (2) from all the debt of punishment at the hour of death, nothing can prevent your immediate “entrance into glory.”

*Freedom from Sin:* Our Lord will certainly give you this freedom if you are sincerely sorry for all your sins. He desires to take you to Himself at death without any Purgatory, and if you also desire that, all will be well. It must not be thought that this complete contrition is very difficult for those who practise it during life. Nor should it be forgotten that to make an act of contrition we need the grace of God. Every time you make an act of sorrow for all your sins you are preparing

for the final act of sorrow on your deathbed. Every time you go to Confession you are making yourself more ready for that wonderful sacrament of Extreme Unction which the Church calls “completion of Penance.”

During the air-raids in the last war a Catholic woman in a bomb shelter was so terrified at the explosions in the streets round about that she suddenly dropped on to her knees and cried out from the bottom of her heart :“O my God, I am sorry for all the sins I have ever committed in the whole of my life.” A poor Protestant woman hearing this came beside her, knelt down and said timidly: “ME, too, God.” The approach of death had aroused in these two hearts an act of complete contrition. Similarly the fears and pains of the deathbed are a mercy from God inducing us to cry to Him in our helplessness: “ME, too, God.” This contrition can remove all obstacles to God’s mercy, which is poured into our souls by the sacraments, making us completely sinless. It was for this that Christ died. Such a work is not difficult for God.

*Freedom from Punishment:* Why should you not be freed from all punishment? Is that too difficult for God to accomplish? The crosses you bear during life are a penance for sin. “The whole of a Christian life is an act of Penance completed by Extreme Unction,” says the Council of Trent. In God’s plan, therefore, temporal punishment should end with this life. Listen to the words of a saintly Benedictine priest who died in the 16th century: “No exercise can be more useful at the hour of death than to resign oneself absolutely to the Divine Will, humbly, lovingly and fully trusting in the mercy and goodness of God. This is certain: that anyone who goes forth from this world in a spirit of true and perfect resignation will fly immediately to the Kingdom of Heaven” (Blosius).

You might still object that God is so holy that even if you were to do penance for a hundred years you could not make proper reparation for sin. That is true, but remember that our little crosses united with Christ’s sufferings and penance are of infinite value, i.e., they are sufficient to make reparation for all the sins of the world. Therefore, take courage. It is not difficult to go straight to Heaven, for Christ has all power in Heaven and on earth. All that is needed is a good will and an unshakeable confidence in the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Who is waiting to welcome you into Heaven.

This aspect of Extreme Unction is not something new. As we have: shown, it was the ordinary tradition of the Church in the past, but, has been somewhat dimmed by the dust raised in the religious quarrels of the Protestant revolt and the Jansenist heresy. Now that these quarrels are buried in the past it is high time that God’s children should begin to have a nobler idea of God’s kindness. Teach others to think well of God’s mercy and then they will serve Him with greater joy rather than with craven fear. Instead of dreading Extreme Unction they will rejoice to receive this sacrament (1) because this sacrament brings peace to the mind and soul and pays the debt of temporal punishment if received in good dispositions and (2) because this sacrament of Extreme Unction is not a “death warrant,” to be put off as long as possible, but on the contrary is God’s medicine which often restores the health of the body.

No one would hesitate to call a doctor to a person dangerously ill for fear of alarming the patient. No one should hesitate to call a priest in time of sickness for he is God’s doctor bringing God’s healing oils. If you will read through the prayers said by the priest when he anoints the sick with these blessed oils you will find that there is no mention of death. All the prayers ask God to bring the sufferer back to health so that “he may have strength to take up his former duties, through Christ Our Lord. Amen.” (See the end of this book.)

And if God wishes to take the sufferer home to Heaven He will give him perfect health and freedom from all suffering in the next life. It is therefore cruel to put off calling the priest until the last moment with the terrible risk to the patient of dying without the sacraments and thus perhaps of suffering a long Purgatory.

*Note:* The custom of placing Mass cards instead of funeral wreaths upon the coffin is very pleasing in the eyes of God. Speaking of flowers at funerals, St. Augustine says: “Flowers are pleasing to the living but useless to the dead.” Hence the Church does not encourage the use of flowers in Catholic funerals except in the case of baptized infants. A Mass card is a token that the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass will be offered for the dead person. This honours God, consoles the Catholic relatives and helps the dead.

## THE PRAYERS OF EXTREME UNCTION

*After blessing the room and hearing the sick person’s confession, the priest extends his hand and prays that the powers*

*of evil may be driven away through the prayers of the saints. He then anoints the sick person with the holy oil, saying at the same time these words:— “By this holy oil and His sweet mercy may the Lord forgive whatever sins thou hast committed by sight, (hearing), (speech), etc. Amen.”*

*After wiping away the oil with cotton wool he prays as follows:— Let us pray: “Lord God Who hast spoken by Thy apostle James, saying: Is any man sick among you? Let him call in the priests of the Church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of Faith shall save the sick man and the Lord will raise him up and if he be in sins they shall be forgiven him: cure, we beseech Thee, O our Redeemer, by the grace of the Holy Ghost, the ailments of this sick man; heal his wounds and forgive his sins: drive out from him all pains of body and mind and mercifully restore him to full health both inwardly and outwardly, that having recovered by the help of Thy mercy he may once more have strength to take up *his* former duties. Who with the Father and the Holy Ghost livest and reignest God, world without end. Amen.*

“Look down, we beseech Thee, O Lord, upon Thy servant, *N.*, failing from bodily weakness, and refresh the soul which Thou hast created, that being bettered by Thy chastisements he may feel himself saved by Thy healing. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

“O holy Lord, Father almighty, eternal God, Who by shedding the grace of Thy blessing upon our failing bodies dost preserve by Thy manifold goodness the work of Thy hands; graciously draw near at the invocation of Thy name that having freed Thy servant from sickness and bestowed health upon him Thou mayest raise him up by Thy right hand, strengthen him by Thy might, defend him by Thy power and restore him to Thy holy Church with all desired prosperity. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

#### **PRAYER FOR A HAPPY DEATH**

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, assist me in my last agony.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, may I breathe forth my soul in peace with you. Amen.

(Seven years indulgence for each time recited.)

Nihil obstat:

WILLIAM M. COLLINS, D.D.

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