

The Anglican view of purgatory

Question: I am married to a nonpracticing Episcopalian and while we agree on most matters of faith, we disagree over purgatory. Your columns have been helpful to him. Can you clarify where Episcopalians stand on purgatory?

– **Name withheld**, Baltimore, Md.

Answer: The Episcopal Church in the United States (which is a member of the Anglican Communion) officially subscribes to Article 22 of the 39 Articles of Faith, which made up the founding documents of the Anglican Church during the English Reformation. It states: “The Romish Doctrine concerning purgatory ... is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.” Through the centuries, this has been the position of Anglicans worldwide, except for those who belonged to the Anglo-Catholic (High Church) tradition, who, for the most part, took a softer line.

In 1966, John Macquarrie, one of Anglicanism’s most distinguished theologians, wrote “Principles of Christian Theology,” in which he set forth a very positive and thoughtful exposition of the doctrine of purgatory. This influenced many Anglicans (and Catholics), and it gave fresh prominence to what many considered at best a minor doctrine and one that was no longer relevant. Macquarrie’s picture of purgatory is of a sanctifying process in which those who die in imperfection are conformed to Christ. In his view, purgatory makes perfect sense.

Blessed John Henry Newman (originally an Anglican) wrote a poem in 1865 titled “The Dream of Gerontius” about the process of an old man dying, going before the presence of God, and

then going to purgatory – which he presents as a cleansing lake. The poem was set to music by Sir Edward Elgar in 1900. Many Anglicans were not keen on the work, but many were, and it was widely accepted eventually, suggesting that Newman's view of purgatory modified old prejudices against the doctrine. Today, it is fair to say that on the concept of purgatory Anglican positions range from positive to negative.

Gospel and U.S. culture

Question: You recently said that liturgical preaching should be of a kind that “actually gains traction in our [American] culture.” Do you think Jesus, St. Paul, St. Augustine and other great preachers were really concerned about preaching that gained traction in the culture of their time?

– **Leon Keller**, Ellicott City, Md.

Answer: I do. In the catechumenal process of the Catholic Church, the first step is pre-evangelization. Before the Gospel can be preached it is necessary to know the values, moral outlooks, lifestyles and general concerns of the people to whom one hopes to preach. Catechetical attempts that do not first engage the worldview of individuals and communities will hardly get off the ground. This engagement is what I mean by preaching that “gains traction” in the culture.

One has then to move to evangelization; otherwise the whole pastoral enterprise remains one of adapting the Gospel to culture. The aim of evangelization is to adapt the culture to the Gospel. The culture of the Gospel and of the Church must become the culture of the person. This is what conversion is all about, and is what Pope Paul VI meant when he spoke of the “evangelization of culture” and what Pope John Paul II meant by the “new evangelization.”

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