

Purgatory as seeing fully for the first time



Imagine being born blind and living into adulthood without ever having seen light and color. Then, through some miraculous operation, doctors are able to give you sight. What would you feel immediately upon opening your eyes? Wonder? Bewilderment? Ecstasy? Pain? Some combination of all of these?

We now know the answer to that question. This kind of sight-restoring operation has been done and is being done and we now have some indication of how a person reacts upon opening his or her eyes and seeing light and color for the first time. What happens might surprise us. Here is how J.Z. Young, an authority on brain function, describes what happens:

"The patient on opening his eyes gets little or no enjoyment; indeed, he finds the experience painful. He reports only a spinning mass of light and colors. He proves to be quite unable to pick up objects by sight, to recognize what they are, or to name them. He has no conception of space with objects in it,

although he knows all about objects and their names by touch. 'Of course,' you will say, 'he must take a little time to learn to recognize them by sight.' Not a little time, but a very long time, in fact, years. His brain has not been trained in the rules of seeing. We are not conscious that there are any such rules; we think we see, as we say naturally. But we have in fact learned a whole set of rules during childhood." (See: Emilie Griffin, *Souls in Full Flight*, p. 143-144)

Might this be a helpful analogy for what happens to us in what Roman Catholics call purgatory? Could the purification we experience after death be understood in this very way, namely, as an opening of our vision and heart to a light and a love that are so full so as to force upon us the same kind of painful relearning and reconceptualization that have just been described? Might purgatory be understood precisely as being embraced by God in such a way that this warmth and light so dwarf our earthly concepts of love and knowledge that, like a person born blind who is given sight, we have to struggle painfully in the very ecstasy of that light to unlearn and relearn virtually our entire way of thinking and loving? Might purgatory be understood not as God's absence or some kind of punishment or retribution for sin, but as what happens to us when we are fully embraced, in ecstasy, by God, perfect love and perfect truth?

Indeed isn't this what faith, hope, and charity, the three theological virtues, are already trying to move us towards in this life? Isn't faith a knowing beyond what we can conceptualize? Isn't hope an anchoring of ourselves in something beyond what we can control and guarantee for ourselves? And isn't charity a reaching out beyond what affectively feeds us?

St. Paul, in describing our condition on earth, tells us that here, in this life, we see only as "through a mirror, reflecting dimly" but that, after death, we will see "face to face". Clearly in describing our present condition here on earth he is highlighting a certain blindness, an embryonic darkness, an inability to actually see things as they really are. It is significant to note too that he says this in a context within which he is pointing out that, already now in this life, faith, hope, and charity help lift that blindness.

These are of course only questions, perhaps equally upsetting to Protestants and Roman Catholics alike. Many Protestants and Evangelicals reject the very concept of purgatory on the grounds that, biblically, there are only two eternal places, heaven and hell. Many Roman Catholics, on the other hand, get anxious whenever purgatory seems to get stripped of its popular conception as a place or state apart from heaven. But purgatory conceived of in this way, as the full opening of our eyes and hearts so as to cause a painful reconceptualization of things, might help make the concept more palatable to Protestants and Evangelicals and help strip the concept of some of its false popular connotations within Roman Catholic piety.

True purgation happens only through love because it is only when we experience love's true embrace that we can see our sin and drink in, for the first time, the power to move beyond it. Only light dispels darkness and only love casts out sin.

Therese of Lisieux would sometimes pray to God: "Punish me with a kiss!" The embrace of full love is the only true purification for sin because only when we are embraced by love do we actually understand what sin is and, only there, are we given the desire, the vision, and the strength to live in love and truth. But that inbreaking of love and light is, all at the same time, delightful and bewildering, ecstatic and unsettling, wonderful and excruciating, euphoric and painful. Indeed, it's nothing less than purgatory.

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