

Tested by Fire

Is Purgatory taught in the Bible? 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 is considered by some Catholics as one of the clearest texts pertaining to purgatory. The Catechism makes reference to it as proof that “the tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire” [1].

It is worth studying this passage to see whether it really supports the doctrine of purgatory at all. The apostle Paul writes:

“Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire” (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

Paul is here speaking about Christian ministers. He says that God will test their work at the Day of Judgement, and reward them accordingly. Using the figure of a building, those who had built with “gold, silver, precious stone” (i.e. those who had done their work rightly and with good motives), will receive a reward. But the ministers whose works were worthless -- those who had built with “wood, hay, straw” -- will lose their rewards. They themselves, however, being believers, will be saved -- but “so as through fire.” Like people escaping from a burning house, they will be saved, but their works and reward will be lost.

The meaning of Paul's words is perfectly clear: God will test the believers' works and reward them; some will lose their rewards because their works were of no value. The idea of purgatory (expiation of sin by personal suffering) is absent in this passage.

1. According to Catholic teaching, the purifying of the souls takes place during the interval between death and the end of the world. But the testing by fire that Paul speaks of occurs on the Day of Judgement. “Each one's work will become clear; for *the Day* will declare it.” Catholic author, William G. Most, concurs on this point: “Still less could we deduce purgatory from First Corinthians 3:11-15. Paul means if the work of some Christian worker has been of such low quality that it burns down, he himself will be saved ‘as through fire.’ But the fire seems to mean the apocalyptic fire of the last day, not a fire of purgatory.”

2. The insertion of the concept of purgatory leads to an absurd conclusion. Those with works of wood, hay and straw will be tested by fire. But notice that those with works of gold, silver and precious stones will *also* be tested by the same fire. “The fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is.” If we suppose that “fire” refers to the purgatorial suffering and torments, should we say that even those with godly works must suffer along with the others? Of course not! *Quod nimis probat, nihil probat* -- what proves too much, proves nothing. In truth, Paul says nothing about *souls* suffering in fire; it simply tests the quality of their *works*.

3. The doctrine of purgatory requires ‘cleansing’, ‘purification’ and ‘purging’ of the soul, the expiation of sins. However, the ‘fire’ in First Corinthians 3 does not purify. Its purpose is altogether different; it simply *reveals* the quality of every man's works. The fire of judgement simply shows whether the works are valuable or not, but it does not change their quality. “Each one's work will become *clear*; for the Day will

declare it, because it will be *revealed* by fire; and the fire will *test* each one's work, of what *sort* it is." Gold is demonstrated to be, in fact, gold; whereas wood is burnt away revealing that it has no enduring value. The text is silent about purification of the soul from venial sins or the satisfaction of temporal punishments. The Catechism's claim that 1 Corinthians speaks of a *cleansing* fire is simply false.

Referring to 1 Corinthians 3:15, a Catholic Bible commentary plainly admits, "There is no reference to purgatory." [3]

Indeed, this passage says nothing about spiritual cleansing; Paul teaches about that subject elsewhere in the same letter. "You were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). Jesus Christ, not the fires of a nonexistent purgatory, cleanses us from all sin.

References: [1] Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 1031. [2] Rev. William G. Most. Purgatory. [3] Murphy O'Connor, J. "The First Letter to the Corinthians," The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2000), p 802.