HOW THE PROTESTANT THEOLOGICAL CHALLENGE TO PURGATORY REDEFINED
FEMALE CONVENT LIFE IN REFORMATION GERMANY

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A THESIS

Submitted to the faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN RELIGION
at Reformed Theological Seminary

Charlotte, North Carolina
September, 2019
Accepted:

___________________________________________
First Reader

___________________________________________
Second Reader
ABSTRACT

While the sixteenth-century theological debate concerning the legitimacy of monastic life was often waged over “human teaching” vs. Scripture alone, permanent vows vs. freedom of conscience, a life of prayer and contemplation vs. active service to neighbor and, of course, the rallying cry of the reformation—justification by faith—I argue that it was the Protestant challenge to the medieval doctrine of Purgatory that, in part, redefined female convent life in much of Reformation Germany. This study begins by considering the ubiquity of Purgatory on the eve of the Reformation, then summarizes the theology that gave it life and sketches its historical development in the West. The core research looks at how the funding and liturgy of Purgatory shaped and sustained monastic life and how the virgin ascetics of the fourth century became the medieval “prayer warriors” of Purgatory. Having established Purgatory’s defining role in medieval convent life, the study explores the Protestant challenge to the doctrine, the public reaction to that challenge and the convents’ response. The question is then asked: To what degree, if any, did the Protestant challenge to Purgatory directly impact female convent life in Reformation Germany? Four conclusions are reached. Further research is needed to firm up the connection between the Protestant challenge to Purgatory and the redefining of female convent life in Reformation Germany, but it seems clear that once the convents became “wedded” to Purgatory, their ongoing viability was linked to the viability of the doctrine itself. The study concludes with a brief evaluation of the theological foundations of Purgatory and how this research and its conclusions might apply to twenty-first-century Christians.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In the summer of 1523, Augsburg city resident Bernhart Rem was embroiled in a contentious and public exchange of letters with his cloistered sister, Katherine, hoping to convince her and his daughter, Veronica, a nun at the same convent, to leave. The “rule” and “works” of convent life Rem argued are based on “human teaching,” not the Bible, and even though “practiced with the fine glitter of holiness . . . [are] worthless straw.”¹ Two years later, and some ninety miles to the north, three mothers accompanied by members of the Nürnberg City Council, forcibly removed their daughters from the convent of St. Clare’s. The abbess of St. Clare’s, Caritas Pirckheimer (d. 1532), later records in her journal that the mothers “told their children . . . they were there to redeem their souls from hell.”² And in the spring of 1528, Ursula of Münsterberg (d. 1539) wrote a letter to her uncles, George and Heinrich, enumerating the many “Christian reasons” why she, in “good conscience,” could no longer remain in her convent, St. Mary Magdalene, in Freiberg.³ Here are some excerpts from her letter:

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³ Wiesner-Hanks, Convents Confront, 59.
7. Since faith alone is now our salvation and unbelief our damnation, we find this place and situation wholly the antithesis of it, both in words and works. And even the vows (in which salvation should rest, as they say) throw us who journey to God into uncertainty and eternal damnation; therefore we had to leave. . . .

. . . 55. Everywhere in sacred Scripture it is written that our life should be directed toward reaching out our hands [to serve others] . . .

. . . 56. Therefore, if we are put in such a place where we cannot serve anybody but are very vexed, is it not advisable to leave such a place? 4

How did this decidedly negative assessment of convent life come to pass when for over a millennium it was considered a holy and meaningful vocation for sisters, daughters, and nieces? Without discounting the anticlerical sentiment already simmering on the eve of the Reformation (for political, social and economic reasons), these accounts clearly show that the “Lutheran” theological critique of monastic life found resonance in the hearts and minds of many German families, their rulers and governing bodies, and the religious themselves. This resonance would lead not only to a significant exodus of monks and nuns from their houses and orders but the ever-increasing pressure for these houses to close or, if they remained open, to reinvent themselves to meet the demands and expectations of the new “evangelical” 5 communities: Lutheran services were introduced, parish clergymen, “who refused to swear to perform their offices only according to the gospel,” were removed, and convents were turned into schools. 6 With this latter development especially, the “raison d’être” of female convent life—“praying for the souls of the community”—was replaced by a different kind of service to neighbor, one that was now deemed more valuable. 7 Amy Leonard writes that this change

4. Wiesner-Hanks, Convents Confront, 43, 45, and 57.


would “represent a fundamental shift in mentality from the Middle Ages . . . [when] nuns acted as intercessors for the souls of all. . . . By their commitment to the liturgical hours, psalms, and prayers for the dead, the nuns helped free souls trapped in purgatory and allowed all (both lay and religious) to be looked on favorably by God.”

Purgatory, according to medieval theology in the West, was the place where all but the holiest of Christians would go after death to be “cleansed . . . by purgatorial or purifying punishments” before entering heaven. Concurrent with belief in Purgatory was the belief that pious acts or suffrages, offered by the living on behalf of the dead, can shorten their stay. While the sixteenth-century theological debate over the legitimacy of monastic life was often waged over “human teaching” vs. Scripture alone, permanent vows vs. freedom of conscience, a life of prayer and contemplation vs. active service to neighbor and, of course, the rallying cry of the Reformation—justification by faith—I argue that it was the Protestant challenge to the medieval doctrine of Purgatory that, in part, redefined female convent life in much of Reformation Germany. Here is the rationale: Because the “principle sacred duty” of nuns in the late Middle Ages was “praying for the souls of the community” (including souls in Purgatory), the Protestant challenge to the doctrine struck at the very heart of their vocational identity.

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10. Germany as a unified political nation did not exist at the time of the Reformation. The Germanic territories were part of “the fractured world” of the Holy Roman Empire. Leonard, *Nails in the Wall*, 7.

Given the massive amount of material that exists on any one of these topics, the bibliography for this paper is not exhaustive but selective, incorporating representative sources, primary and secondary, to make its case. It was also necessary to lay some preliminary groundwork (chapter two) in order to situate the focal research (chapters three and four) in its theological and historical context. Several first-hand accounts are cited in the introduction which convey some of the turmoil dividing families and communities amid the debate over the validity of monastic life in response to the new Lutheran teachings. These include the letters of Bernhart Rem and Ursula of Münsterberg, part of a collection of texts edited and translated by Merry Wiesner-Hanks (with the expressed intent to make these primary sources available in English) and the journal account of Caritas Pirckheimer, translated by Paul MacKenzie and published in 2006. With respect to the historical development of the doctrine of Purgatory, the work of medieval historian Jacques Le Goff (The Birth of Purgatory) was employed. Although Le Goff’s central thesis (that Purgatory was not “born” until the late twelfth century with the introduction of the noun, purgatorium) is disputed,¹² his extensive research, published in 1981, is considered a significant contribution to a topic that has not seen a “major work of scholarship” since 1936.¹³ Using Le Goff as our guide, we are introduced to some of the founders, fathers, and theologians of Purgatory and the key contributions they made to the development of the doctrine.¹⁴ These

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¹⁴. “In providing sketches of a long succession of theologians no one could be more conscientious.” Southern, “Between Heaven and Hell”, 651.
foundational ideas, put in place in the third through fifth centuries by the likes of Tertullian (*On Modesty*), Augustine (*Enchiridion* and *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*) and Gregory the Great (*Dialogues*), would be targeted in the sixteenth century by the Protestant Reformers.

Because bequests in medieval wills were a major source of funding for churches and monastic houses, the core research in this study begins with a selection of excerpts from the *Somerset Medieval Wills*, written and recorded in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These wills illustrate the variety of ways in which individuals sought to keep their memory alive in the local church long after their death believing that the intercessory prayers of the living could reduce their time in Purgatory. Eamon Duffy’s work (*The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580*) focuses extensively on the liturgy of medieval piety and reveals a Church steeped in prayers and devotions designed to remit purgatorial punishment. Challenging the notion that late medieval Catholic piety was in serious decline and ripe for a change, Duffy documents the vitality of religious belief and practice on the eve of the Reformation. While his research centers on medieval piety in England, many of the same practices, with their emphasis on Purgatory-relief, were found elsewhere in Europe as Steven Ozment documents in his study of religious life in Germany and Switzerland (*The Reformation in the Cities: The Appeal of Protestantism to Sixteenth-Century Germany and Switzerland*). To that end, Diarmaid MacCulloch (*A History of Christianity*) and Peter Marshall, in his article “Leaving the World” in *Reformation Christianity*, both point to important regional differences with respect to various communities’ preoccupation with Purgatory. Miri Rubin (*Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*) discusses the perceived benefits associated with the mass to souls in Purgatory.
To gain insight into the lives of the women religious, key resources include works by Carolyn Walker Bynum (*Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, and *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond*), Marilyn Dunn (*The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages*), Amy Leonard (cited above), Gertrude Jaron Lewis (*By Women, for Women, About Women: The Sister-books of Fourteenth-century Germany*), Jo Ann Kay McNamara (cited above), and Anne Winston Allen (*Convent Chronicles: Women Writing About Women and Reform in the late Middle Ages*). Dunn and McNamara trace the history and development of monasticism and conventual life whereas Leonard, Lewis, Winston-Allen and Bynum examine the writings of the religious themselves. Lewis surveyed a remarkable body of German literature written in the early fourteenth century by Dominican nuns from nine German-speaking convents chronicling their lives, “theological concerns and . . . spiritual aspiration.”15 While these texts have important historical value,” Leonard writes, “they are steeped in the tradition of medieval legend,”16—a tradition which played a vital role in the history of Purgatory. Winston-Allen’s research is broader in scope: in its time frame (covering the fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries), its territory (covering Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands), and the types of writings she


16. Lewis, *By Women*, xii.
surveys (those produced by women in the Observant reform movement\textsuperscript{17}) including “an astonishing amount of scribal activity”—copying and translating manuscripts, histories, sermons, devotional materials, etc. as well as record-keeping.\textsuperscript{18} Bynum’s three works focus on specific topics related to the female religious in the Middle Ages (food, blood, feast/fast, and so on) and are more theologically-oriented. Her research on medieval soteriology in *Wonderful Blood*, for example, sheds light on the theological rational behind the nuns’ belief that their suffering could be offered on behalf of others to help expiate their purgatorial punishments. From this collective body of work on the women religious, we trace how the virgin ascetics of the fourth century became the medieval “prayer warriors” of Purgatory and how this was manifested in the daily lives of the nuns.

Having established Purgatory’s role in *defining* medieval convent life, we turn to the Protestant challenge to the doctrine—specifically the Lutheran challenge—that would, in part, *redefine* convent life for many German nuns during the Protestant Reformation. The chapter begins with an overview of the theology of the Reformation with the help (again) of MacCulloch and Marshall along with noted theological historian, Jaroslav Pelikan and his work chronicling the development of doctrine at the time of the Reformation (*Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)*). The Protestant challenge to Purgatory is narrated through the early writings and sermons of Martin Luther beginning with his *Ninety-five Theses* (1517). Kurt Aland (*Martin Luther’s 95 Theses*) has compiled and edited various documents.

\textsuperscript{17} Originating in Italy, the Observant reform movement “was initiative to revive piety and reform religious orders [and] spread in the 1400s throughout the German-speaking territories and other parts of Europe.” Anne Winston-Allen, *Convent Chronicles: Women Writing About Women and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), xi.

\textsuperscript{18} Winston-Allen, *Convent Chronicles*, xii.
which give helpful background to the Theses. Though many of Luther’s colleagues would abandon belief in Purgatory at a much earlier date, it was Luther who laid the groundwork for the main lines of argument that would be used. Public sentiment against the Church on the eve of the Reformation (and in response to Luther’s writings) is chronicled in the work of Steven Ozment (cited above) and based on his examination of the popular literature of the day (pamphlets, tracts, lay catechisms, and such). Much of the resentment is directed at practices related to Purgatory—relief that, in the eyes of the public, enriched the churches and monasteries at the expense of the laity. This economic impact and the resentment it engendered was not only felt by individual parishioners but the municipalities in which they lived as documented by Lawrence Buck in his work, “The Reformation, Purgatory, and Perpetual Rents in the Revolt of 1525 at Frankfurt am Main” in *Pietas et Societas: New Trends in Reformation Social History*. Returning to the works of McNamara, Leonard and Winston-Allen, the study concludes with an examination of the impact of the theological challenge to Purgatory on the convents in Germany.

Before proceeding, it is important to state that the Purgatory of the late Middle Ages is not the Purgatory of the Roman Catholic Church today. As early as the mid-sixteenth century, in the Council of Trent (1545-63), the Church sought to remove not only much of the superstition and speculation that accompanied belief in Purgatory but its rampant commercialization. In modern Catholic theology, the term “does not indicate a place but a

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condition of existence”²⁰ (though this distinction is not necessarily shared by many lay-
Catholics) and the theology that undergirds the doctrine remains much the same. What
follows is the Purgatory of Katherine Rem, Ursula of Münsterberg and the nuns in the
convent of St. Clare’s.

²⁰ Libreria Editrice Vaticana, “John Paul II, General Audience, Wednesday 4 August 1999,”
accessed 11.6.18, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1999/documents/hf_jp-
ii_aud_04081999.html.
CHAPTER II

HOW PURGATORY BECAME ORTHODOXY IN THE CHURCH IN THE WEST

The Ubiquity of Purgatory in Everyday life on the Eve of the Reformation

In Book One of Hilary Mantel’s fictional trilogy published in 2009 and based on the life of Thomas Cromwell (d. 1540), chief minster to England’s Henry VIII, she has his character, recently bereft of his wife, who succumbed to the plague, and with a young family to raise, sitting down to write out his will:

July 1529: Thomas Cromwell of London, gentleman. Being whole in body and memory. To his son Gregory six hundred and sixty-six pounds thirteen shillings and four pence. . . . Money to the executors for the upbringing and marriage portions of his daughter Anne, and his little daughter Grace. A marriage portion for his niece Alice Wellyfed; gowns, jackets and doublets to his nephews; to Mercy [the housemaid] all sorts of household stuff and some silver and anything else the executors think she should have. Bequests to his dead wife’s sister Johanes, and her husband, John Williamson, and a marriage portion to her daughter, also Johanes. Money to his servants. Forty pounds to be divided between forty poor maidens on their marriage. Twenty pounds for mending the roads. Ten pounds toward feeding poor prisoners in the London jails.
   His body to be buried in the parish where he dies; or at the direction of his executors.
   The residue of his estate to be spent on Masses for his parents.
   To God his soul. To Rafe Sadler his books.  

When the plague returns to London later that summer, it claims the lives of Cromwell’s two young daughters—first Anne and then Grace. The author ascribes these imagined thoughts to her protagonist:

Grace dies in his arms; she dies easily as naturally as she was born. . . . They had intended the name to be Henry for a boy, Katherine for a girl. . . . But when he had seen her,

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swaddled, beautiful, finished and perfect, he said quite another thing and Liz had agreed.
We cannot earn grace. We do not merit it. . .
. . . His daughters are now in Purgatory, a country of slow fires and ringed ice. Where in
the Gospels does it say “Purgatory”?

In this fictional account of Cromwell’s reflections, Purgatory is but a passing thought yet
what a wide shadow it casts in the (envisioned) disposition of his estate: in the bequests he
makes to the poor, the prisoner, and the community, in the desire to be buried in the church
parish where he dies, and in the anniversary masses he endows for his parents. Each, with the
overarching purpose of reducing Purgatory’s sentence for himself and for his family. In these
two imagined scenes from Thomas Cromwell’s life, Mantel vividly captures the existential
struggle of the sixteenth-century Christian caught between long-held religious belief and
practice and the challenge to those beliefs and practices by the Lutheran reformers. On the
one hand, Cromwell applies the Reformers’ key criteria for testing Christian belief and
practice: “Where in the Gospels does it say Purgatory?” On the other, he believes his
daughters and parents are there and that he will one day join them.

Later in the book, Cromwell’s two young nieces come to him with a request about his
wife’s stay in Purgatory. Our author pictures this scene and exchange:

It is All Souls’ Day: . . . Alice and Jo have come to speak to him. . . . Alice says, “Master, it
is more than two years since my aunt Elizabeth died, your lady wife. Will you write to the
cardinal, and ask him to ask the Pope to let her out of Purgatory?”

He says, “What about your aunt Kat? And your little cousins, my daughters?”

The children exchange glances. “We don’t think they have been there so long. Anne
Cromwell was proud of her working of numbers and boasted that she was learning Greek.
Grace was vain of her hair and used to state that she had wings, this was a lie. We think
perhaps they must suffer more. But the cardinal could try.”

[2. Mantel, Wolf Hall, 140.]

All Souls’ Day: the day set aside by the Church to offer prayers and masses for the souls of those suffering in Purgatory, the belief that the Pope has the power and authority to release loved ones from Purgatory’s grasp, the belief that there is a correspondence or proportionality between sins committed and duration of punishment. Each of these, building blocks in the medieval edifice of Purgatory, set in place little by little, over a long period of time. As Jacques Le Goff puts it, “Before Dante could map the other world’s three realms in his incomparable poem, the soil had to be prepared by long and arduous effort.”

The Theology of Purgatory

Because Cromwell’s wife and daughters died unexpectedly, it would be taken for granted that they, though in a state of grace because of their Christian baptism, would still need to complete any outstanding penance or punishment due for the temporal debt of venial (less serious) sins committed after baptism. Although Christ’s atoning death on the cross (“collectively”) and baptism (“individually”) removed the guilt of original sin inherited from Adam, the believer though forgiven, must still pay off sin’s penalty—up


to “the last penny” (Matt. 5:26, ESV). To “do penance,” the Church taught, was to render appropriate satisfaction to God and thereby preserve divine justice. “Such penances as the priest may impose in confession,” Peter Marshall writes, “constituted only a fraction of the satisfaction due; the remainder . . . would have to be paid off after death, in purgatory.” No longer personally able to acquire merit in this life through good works or gain indulgences (pards) from the Church’s treasury of merit to lighten that punishment, the deceased must rely on the meritorious sacrifices—and memory!—of others to help with the work of expiating sins in Purgatory. The most beneficial of these sacrificial works, or suffrages, were the giving of alms, the recitation of certain prayers (the *Pater Noster, Ave Maria, De Profundis*), and the sacrifice of the mass (the Eucharistic sacrifice)—the Church’s principle act of worship. One qualification: the believer must have departed this life in a state of grace, not having committed a mortal (or grave) sin which removes the grace of justification or righteousness before God (and why the sacrament of “extreme unction” or last rites administered by the priest just prior to death became so important). “In the hour of death,” Marshall states, “a sinful life could be redeemed by full and heartfelt penitence.” Justification, therefore, is a lifelong and synergistic process in Catholic theology, dispensed as an infusion of grace through the sacraments, merited through faith and good works, and joined to the saving work of

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Christ to make salvation possible. These terms and the way came to be understood, defined, and applied by the Latin Church, formed the basis of its theology of salvation, or soteriology, of which Purgatory became a necessary and logical development\(^{11}\) (as seen in the next section)—words and phrases that the Protestant reformers would interpret and apply very differently.

**The History of Purgatory**

As illustrated by what follows, few doctrines in Christian theology have spanned the length of time in their historical development, touched on the breadth of Christian thought and belief, or had the reach of influence on Christian piety and practice than the doctrine of Purgatory. Even its geographical journey was expansive: seed thoughts planted in Egypt; further developed in north Africa and Italy; influenced by people, places, and events in England, Ireland, and Germany; summarized, formalized, and given “birth”—at least linguistically\(^{12}\)—in France; and finally established as official Church dogma at the Second Council of Lyons in 1274, reaffirmed at the Council of Florence (1439), and the Council of Trent (1563). In laying the foundation stones of Purgatory, the Greek theologians Clement of Alexandria (d. prior to 215) and Origen (d. 253/4) built upon concepts drawn from the Old Testament (fire as a divine instrument), the New Testament (baptism and purification by fire), and, according to Le Goff, “pagan

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\(^{11}\) Contrary to Le Goff who contends that the establishment of the doctrine was not “inevitable [but] might easily have gone awry . . . there were long periods of stagnation which might have spelled an end for the doctrine once and for all.” Le Goff, *Purgatory*, 58.

\(^{12}\) “The crucial moment came in the second half of the twelfth century when the noun purgatorium was added to the vocabulary alongside the adjective purgatorius.” Le Goff, *Purgatory*, 362. One reviewer of Le Goff’s work, however, is “not convinced that anything new came into existence with the new word.” R. W. Southern, “Between Heaven and Hell,” *Times Literary Supplement* (June 1982), 651.
Greek philosophical and religious traditions” (a chastising or correcting fire). This image of fire as an instrument of postmortem purification would eventually be paired with ice or cold particularly in the many recorded “visions” of travelers to the other world and back. These stories would play a key role in “laying a firm basis for the future of Purgatory,” stories that originated, for the most part, not among the illiterate and “superstitious” masses but within the religious and intellectual centers of their day—the monasteries. Clement of Alexandria was the first to “distinguish” different categories of sinners and punishments and Origen, to “clearly state that the soul can be purified after death.” Origen was also the first to apply the Apostle Paul’s “building” metaphor in 1 Corinthians 3 to postmortem purgation:

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. (1 Cor. 3:10-15, New International Version (NIV); emphasis added.)

For Origen, the gold, silver and costly stones represented those saints who were pure enough to pass through the fire of judgment and enter heaven immediately; the latter


14. The Vision of Drythelm, The Vision of Wetti, The Vision of Charles the Fat and Saint Patrick’s Purgatory, to name a few. “This visionary literature was strongly influenced by the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic treatises,” particularly the early Christian apocryphal texts known as the Apocalypse of Peter and the Apocalypse of Paul. Le Goff, Purgatory, 108.


16. Le Goff, Purgatory, 54.

17. Le Goff, Purgatory, 57; emphasis added.
were those who must first be purged of remaining lesser sins after death.\textsuperscript{18} This passage would become the major proof text from the Bible for the existence of Purgatory.

Already, the concepts of mortal (or “criminal”) and lesser (later called “venial”) sins, remissible and irremissible sins, doing penance and receiving absolution, are being discussed, debated, and developed in the Church. Already, the groundwork is being laid that will ultimately extend the Pope’s—the “Bishop of Rome” at this stage—authority to “grant indulgence” or pardon to sinners beyond the grave\textsuperscript{19} and already, according to historian Kenneth Clark, salvation for the Christian has become a matter of keeping “a clean page” in the “book of life.”\textsuperscript{20} This emphasis on perfection would not only characterize monastic life but provide a rationale for the doctrine of Purgatory. If “nothing unclean” can enter Heaven (Rev. 21:27) and all penance must be completed prior to death, what is be done with the Christian who dies with the stain of unremitting sin still clinging to his or her soul? That was the dilemma that the Christian Hermas so

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{18} Origen taught that there were three levels of meaning in Scripture: the literal/historical sense that can be grasped by the “simpler” mind, the spiritual sense that is accessible to the “somewhat more advanced” and an hidden or allegorical meaning that can only be understood by those who are “perfect.” Origen, “On First Principles,” in \textit{Sources of Early Christian Thought: Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church}, ed. and trans. Karlfried Froehlich (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 57-58. Origen’s preference for the allegorical sense would prevail in the Church in the West for the next 1,300 years.


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ardently expressed in the popular second-century Christian allegory: “If this sin be set down against me, how can I be saved? or how can I obtain forgiveness from God for the multitude of my sins?”

Something else is beginning to take shape at this stage in Purgatory’s development: “a rudimentary ‘arithmetic of purgation’” or calculating the duration of one’s postmortem purification. These calculations would come into full bloom in the late Middle Ages when the Church began assigning a certain number of days, months, or years remission to the performance of certain kinds of suffrages: going on a pilgrimage, venerating the image or relic of a saint, reciting certain “indulgenced” prayers and so on. (In the eleventh century, Pope Urban II (d. 1099) promised a plenary (or full) indulgence to anyone who joined in the Crusades allowing them to bypass Purgatory altogether.) But at this stage in the development of the doctrine, the calculations of time are symbolic, the fire is spiritual, and purgatory is not yet a place and, according to Le Goff, “not really distinguished from Hell.”

For many proponents of Purgatory, the early Christian practice of praying for the dead presumes belief in an interim place or state of purgation. Indeed, the antiquity of


22. Le Goff, Purgatory, 57.

23. Le Goff, Purgatory, 55-57.

24. “‘This we preach, holding to the teaching of truth, and this is our belief; this the universal Church holds, by praying for the dead that they may be loosed from sins.’ This cannot be understood except as referring to Purgatory.” Thomas Aquinas (quoting Gregory of Nissa), “Two Articles on Purgatory,” Summa Theologica, appx. 2 (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2003); http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.html. C. S. Lewis makes a similar argument according to modern-day Protestant Purgatory proponent, Jerry Walls. Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory: A Protestant View of the Cosmic Drama (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015), 99. (See C. S. Lewis, Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1963), 139.)
this practice in the Church is clearly documented though the claim that it was handed down from the Jews (based on a passage in 2 Maccabees, a deuterocanonical book that mentions prayer for the dead) is disputed. First mentioned in the writings of Tertullian (d. 240), it was Ambrose (d. 397) who clearly stated that the prayers and suffrages of the living could help relieve the suffering of the dead. Ambrose’s own prayers for his recently deceased brother would point to the role of the family as a kind of “rescue service to relatives in the other world,” a role that would increasingly be shared by “monastic, lay-monastic and fraternal” communities and contribute to the growing and deeply-felt solidarity between the living and the dead. This same solidarity can also be seen in the already burgeoning cult of the saints that “swept across barbarian Europe in the sixth and seventh centuries” and would play a prominent role in the doctrine and liturgy of medieval Purgatory. “The saintly dead,” writes historian Peter Brown, represented collective loyalty at its most familiar and most intense. The graves of loyal martyrs and holy persons were visited on a regular basis. Their death-days were celebrated with regular

25. “That the early Christians were persuaded of the efficacy of their prayers for the dead we know from funerary inscriptions, liturgical formulas, and the Passion of Perpetua, which dates from the early third century.” Le Goff, Purgatory, 11.

26. See the discussion in Stephen Greenblatt, Hamlet in Purgatory (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 8-9. Greenblatt states that the “mourner’s kiddish” or Jewish religious practice of reciting prayers for the dead over a prescribed period of time (which his own father had included as a bequest in his will), appears to have originated in the twelfth century “precisely at the time that Christianity in the West formalized the practice of praying for the dead in order to alleviate their sufferings in Purgatory.”

27. “A woman is more bound when her husband is dead…Indeed, she prays for his soul, and requests refreshment for him meanwhile, and fellowship (with him) in the first resurrection; and she offers (her sacrifice) on the anniversaries of his falling asleep.” Tertullian, On Modesty, 75.

28. Le Goff, Purgatory, 60.

29. Le Goff, Purgatory, 60.

festivals. They were treated as heroic “fellow-citizens.” For the saints of old had once stood in the local church praying for the Christian people of ‘their’ city. It was assumed that they still did so [and] their spirits remained present at their tombs.31

Many of these tombs became pilgrimage sites often linked with miracles, past and present, attributed to the saint. According to Le Goff, belief in the efficacy of prayer for the dead (and, one might add, by the dead) “began a movement of piety that culminated in the creation of Purgatory” though at this stage, he emphasizes, it was not yet “linked to…postmortem purification.”32

Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) has been christened by Le Goff as “true father of Purgatory” in part because of the terminology he introduced.33 As one of the most influential theologians in the history of Christianity, Augustine’s contributions to Purgatory (“pre-Purgatory” at this stage) became the baseline by which all subsequent treatments were measured. This, in-spite-of-the-fact that Augustine, on at least one occasion, describes Paul’s metaphor in 1 Corinthians as “obscure” and will only entertain the possibility of purification by fire after death:

It is not incredible that something like this should occur after this life, whether or not it is a matter for fruitful inquiry. It may be discovered or remain hidden whether some of the faithful are sooner or later to be saved by a sort of purgatorial fire [ignis purgatorius], in proportion as they have loved the goods that perish, and in proportion to their attachment to them.34

Wherever it takes place—and for Augustine, the fire of purgation primarily “works in the span of this life,”35—he is certain about its intensity: “And because it is said, he shall

32. Le Goff, Purgatory, 11
33. Le Goff, Purgatory, 63.
35. Augustine, Enchiridion, 18.68.
be saved, that fire is thought lightly of. For all that, though we should be saved by fire, yet will that fire be more grievous than anything that man can suffer in this life whatsoever.”

Why would Cromwell’s nieces know, in 1530 (as depicted in Mantel’s fictional account), that Purgatory is a place of great suffering? Because of this oft-quoted benchmark set in place a thousand years earlier, an age that medieval historian Eamon Duffy describes as “dominated by suffering and death.” Add to that, the many graphic illustrations of Purgatory’s torments found in medieval picture catechisms and religious art and it is no wonder that “the most feared of all ills in the late Middle Ages [was] sudden and unprepared death.” Eamon Duffy writes that,

Late medieval men and women were circumstantially well-informed about what they might expect in Purgatory not only from the vivid evocations offered in sermons . . . but from the many accounts of visions and revelations about the afterlife which circulated among the laity and found their way into devotional commonplace books and collections. . . . Visitors to Purgatory saw souls in every posture of physical torment. . . . Often the punishment was carefully matched to the crime: the sexually promiscuous were tormented in the loins, the gluttonous forced to drink scalding venom or nauseous filth, the backbiters and liars had their tongues or lips sliced away. But always it was detailed vividness which seemed the essence of such visions.

If medieval belief in Purgatory as a place of unparalleled suffering can be traced back to Augustine, the reliance on visions to lend evidentiary support can be traced to the fourth and final “founder” of Purgatory, Gregory the Great (d. 604).


41. Le Goff, *Purgatory*, 94.
Like Augustine, Pope Gregory’s writings became a primary source of authority in the Latin Church. His best-known books, the four *Dialogues*, “were among the most popular reading of the Middle Ages and early translations exist in almost every European language.”  

It is in Book Four that we find Gregory’s contributions to the doctrine of Purgatory, written in the literary format of an exchange between student (Peter) and teacher (Gregory):

PETER: Desirous I am to be informed, whether we ought to believe that after death there is any fire of Purgatory. . . .

. . . GREGORY: . . . It is plain, that in such state as a man departeth out of this life, in the same he is presented in judgment before God. But yet we must believe that before the day of judgment there is a Purgatory fire for certain small sins; because our Savior saith, that he which speaketh blasphemy against the holy Ghost, that it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, nor in the world to come. Out of which sentence we learn, that some sins are forgiven in this world, and some other may be pardoned in the next.  

Gregory infers from Christ’s teaching in Matthew 12:32 that because the sin against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven in this world, *nor in the world to come*, some sins will be forgiven in the afterlife. This passage will become another commonly cited proof text in support of the doctrine, although at this stage “Purgatory” remains an adjective (a type of fire) and not a noun (a place or location). And what falls into the category of “small sins?” Anne Cromwell’s pride in her mathematic and linguistic ability? Grace’s vanity about her hair or the lie about having wings? Pope Gregory’s list includes: “Daily idle talk, immoderate laughter, negligence in the care of our family . . . ignorant errors in

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matters of no great weight: all which sins be punished after death, if men procured not pardon and remission for them in their lifetime.”

Gregory’s unique contribution to the doctrine of Purgatory, however, is the way in which he supplements instructive statements with anecdotal stories (known as exempla). To reinforce the teaching just given, Gregory recounts the tale of a church deacon named Paschasius from a story he heard when he was young, “from the mouth of (his) elders, who know it to be true.” “Paschasius,” Gregory writes, was “a man of a wonderful holy life,” a generous giver of alms and “lover of the poor” who “fell out” with the newly appointed Bishop of Rome, Symmachus, because he (Paschasius) supported Symmachus’s rival, Lawrence. Many years after Paschasius’s death, another bishop, Germanus, goes to “the [popular Roman] baths” for health reasons and upon entering, finds Paschasius standing there ready to serve him. The “vision” frightens Germanus and he asks why “so worthy a man” is there as a servant in the baths. Paschasius replies,

For no other cause . . . am I appointed to this place of punishment, but for that I took part with Lawrence against Symmachus: and therefore I beseech you to pray unto our Lord for me, and by this token shall you know that your prayers be heard, if, at your coming again, you find me not here.” Upon this, the holy man Germanus betook himself to his devotions, and after a few days he went again to the same baths, but found not Paschasius there: for seeing his fault proceeded not of malice, but of ignorance, he might after death be purged from that sin. And yet we must withal think that the plentiful alms which he bestowed in this life, obtained favour at God’s hands, that he might then deserve pardon, when he could work nothing at all for himself.

From this illustrative story Gregory’s readers would learn that: 1) even “worthy” men and women (including the clergy and religious) may need to have sins purged after death before

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44. Gregory, *Dialogues*, 4:39. Gregory goes on to cite Paul’s building metaphor in 1 Corinthians 3 to support this statement.


entering heaven, 2) the prayers of the living accelerate that process, and 3) merit can only be earned in this life—powerful incentives for clergy and laity alike to pray for the dead and to live morally upright and generous lives in the present. Further along in the Dialogues, we find a forerunner of Cromwell’s imaginary bequest to be buried in the church parish where he dies:

PETER: Doth any profit, think you, redound to men’s souls, if their bodies be buried in the church? . . .

. . . GREGORY: Such as die not in mortal sin receive this benefit by having their bodies buried in the church: for when their friends come thither, and behold their sepulchers, then do they remember them, and pray unto God for their souls. 47

By the time we get to the Middle Ages, those praying “friends” in the local parish will include the Virgin Mary and various saints now in heaven. “Many testators stipulated burial near a favoured [saint’s] image or altar, thereby soliciting [his or her] intercession.” 48 But not everyone should seek church burial, writes Gregory, for “those that depart this life in the state of deadly sin, receive not any absolution from their sins, but rather be more punished in hell, for having their bodies buried in the church.” 49

One final note worth mentioning about Gregory. Having grown up in Rome during a time of repeated invasions by outside hostile forces he, like most Christians in his day, believed that the end of the world was near. “Inevitably,” writes Edmund Gardner, in his introduction to the Dialogues, “men [and presumably women] turned from the spectacle of a world . . . to prepare in the solitude of the cloister:

They naturally sought eagerly to grasp such phenomena as seemed to them miraculous, a sign that God had not utterly abandoned His creation, and to find proofs that the soul, at least, was immortal and might look forward to a better life hereafter by forgiveness of injuries, and by

47. Gregory, Dialogues, 4:49 and 50; emphasis added.


49. Gregory, Dialogues, 4:50.
offering herself up before death as a sacrifice to Him that had made her. It is this that gives
pathos even to the apparent triviality of some of the miracles that Gregory records, and deeper
significance to the note on which the work ends.50

And how does the work end? With Gregory extolling the saving benefits of the mass “which
in the mystery doth renew unto us the death of the Son of God . . . [who is] *again sacrificed
for us* . . . [and] there his flesh is distributed for the salvation of the people: there his blood is
. . . poured into the mouths of the faithful.”51 How much better, he warns, to seek the benefits
in this life in order to avoid having “any need of the holy sacrifice after our death.”52 Though
the doctrine of *transubstantiation*—the belief that the wine and bread of communion become
the literal body and blood of Christ at the moment of consecration (or sacring) by the priest—
has not yet come on the scene, we can see in the writings of Pope Gregory, that the Church is
well on its way to reaching that conclusion along with the view that a re-sacrifice of Christ
takes place in the Eucharist.53

Following Gregory’s death in 604, and for the next five centuries, “little progress
was made in Purgatory’s construction” but the visions and “imaginary voyages in the

50. Gardner, “Introduction to the *Dialogues*.”

51. Gregory, *Dialogues*; 4:58; emphasis added.


53. “There are certainly liturgical echoes audible in some of the language of the [early]
church fathers describing Christ’s death as a sacrifice, which was a term borrowed from pre-Christian
worship, both Jewish and pagan, and adopted very early for Christian worship. Just how early the idea
of sacrifice was applied to Christian worship, specifically to the Eucharist, is the subject of
controversy. But by the date of the *Didache*—although that date is itself a controversial issue—the
application of the term “sacrifice” to the Eucharist seems to have been quite natural.” Jaroslav
of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 146.
hereafter” kept the fire alive, particularly in the monasteries. The foundation was in place, however, and it would be left to the theologians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to add the final stones, remove the ones that did not quite fit and declare with certitude that the structure was sound. In his *Four Books of Sentences* or *Sentences*, Peter Lombard (d. 1160) would catalogue, clarify, and add another layer of certainty to what had been written about postmortem purgation up to that point. A century later, Thomas Aquinas (d. 1244) would enshrine Rome’s position in his magisterial *Summa Theologica*. Thomas writes,

> It is sufficiently clear that there is a Purgatory after this life. For the debt of punishment is not paid in full after the stain of sin has been washed away by contrition, nor again are venial sins always removed when mortal sins are remitted, and if justice demands that sin be set in order by due punishment, it follows that one who after contrition for his fault and after being absolved, dies before making due satisfaction, is punished after this life. Wherefore those who deny Purgatory speak against the justice of God: for which reason such a statement is erroneous and contrary to the faith. Hence Gregory of Nyssa [d. 395], after the words quoted above, adds: “This we preach, holding to the teaching of truth, and this is our belief; this the universal Church holds, by praying for the dead that they may be loosed from sins.” This cannot be understood except as referring to Purgatory: and whosoever resists the authority of the Church, incurs the note of heresy.

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54. It was in the monasteries, he tells us that “apparitions [of travelers to and from Purgatory] occurred most frequently . . . which should come as no surprise since it was in the monasteries that Gregory the Great was most assiduously read,” Le Goff, *Purgatory*, 96, 177.

55. *Sentences* would become the theological textbook of universities and seminaries in the late Middle Ages. While he did not add anything new, Lombard summarized “with force [and] clarity . . . the opinions of his predecessors.” Le Goff, *Purgatory*, 148.

56. “The editors of the late 19th-century Leonine edition of Thomas’s works included [the material of Purgatory] in an appendix.” Originally part of the *Supplement* that was added to the *Summa* after his death by some of his disciples, it was based on Thomas’s earlier writings and intended to complete the unfinished work. Le Goff, *Purgatory*, 272, 267.

Thomas’s citation of the Greek theologian, Gregory of Nyssa, is noteworthy in view of ongoing efforts being made by the Latin Church to reunite with the Greeks—efforts that would break down, in part, over disagreement about the doctrine of Purgatory. Ironically, the Greek Church that had “sown the first doctrinal seeds that eventually led to Purgatory,” failed to cultivate those seeds, remaining “content with a vague belief in the possibility of redemption after death, coupled with a practice [involving prayers and suffrages] that differed little” from the Latins.58

58. Le Goff, *Purgatory*, 218. Though there was disagreement over the definition of Purgatory, both Churches taught the need for postmortem purification.
CHAPTER III

HOW PURGATORY BECAME THE RAISON D’ÊTRE OF FEMALE CONVENT LIFE

The Funding of Purgatory

By the late Middle Ages, Christian wills reflected the variety of ways in which those approaching death sought to keep their memories alive in the prayers of the living. Trust funds or chantries were established to employ one or more priests to sing daily masses for the soul of the donor.\(^1\) For the very wealthy, chantry chapels were built on church and monastery grounds and chantry altars were erected in the aisles.\(^2\) Anniversary masses were endowed to be sung and recited on the seventh and thirtieth day after burial and the first anniversary of the decedent’s death—“the week’s, month’s, and year’s “mind” or remembrance,”\(^3\) —and requiem masses known as trentals were funded to be offered for the soul of the donor for thirty consecutive days following his or her death.\(^4\) For those “who could afford it [provisions were made] for candles to burn over their

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2. The very ornate Lady Chapel next to Westminster Abbey was built as a chantry chapel by King Henry VII and in his will he provided the funds for 10,000 Masses to be said for his and other souls.


graves during the parish Mass on Sundays and holidays and [clergy paid] to draw the
attention and the suffrages of the parish by reciting the De Profundis with an appropriate
collect, and sprinkling holy water on the grave before Mass began.”5 Bequests in the
form of gifts to the church included special vestments or ceremonial robes and vessels
for use in the Eucharistic service along with missals (liturgical books), candles, lamps,
bells, crucifixes, altar cloths, and altar plaques often inscribed or embroidered with the
donor’s name. “A favorite choice,” Duffy states, “was a chalice with one’s name on lip
or foot, so that as the priest raised it . . . he would read it [or] in any case . . .
symbolically raised one’s name to God.”6 Many of these “mortuary provisions” are on
display in the *Somerset Medieval Wills* as seen in this sampling:

On February 20, 1410, John Pakenham wills his “body to holy grave” and the residue of his
estate “to be disposed by my executors to pray for my soul and my parents’ souls.”7

On December 20, 1524, Thomas Rydowte bequests to “the high awter [altar] of Hengistringe for
my tithings forgotten 6s. 8d. and to every light in the same church 4d.”8

On July 2, 1532, James Hadley, “esquyer,” wills [that upon his death] his “wiff [wife] cause 3
tapers to be made, one to be set before the Rode [the carved wooden rood or chancel screen that
separated the Eucharistic altar from the congregation], the other before our lady, and the third
before they hed seynt [head saint] of the church where I shall happen to be buried.”9

To die “in charity” became a top priority for the Christian in the Middle Ages with provisions
for outstanding debts to be paid (including overlooked tithes), vows fulfilled, and conflicts

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7. F. W. Weaver, ed. *Somerset Medieval Wills: 1531-1558* 3rd series (London: Harrison and
Sons for the Somerset Record Society, 1905), 1-2.


with enemies resolved since “spiritual or material debts left undischarged would detain a soul in Purgatory.”\textsuperscript{10} To die in charity also depended on one’s dealings with the poor and less fortunate as delineated in the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned.\textsuperscript{11} While a person’s will afforded one last opportunity to discharge outstanding debts, one’s funeral became “the last occasion on which one might distribute meat and drink, shoes and stockings, if only by proxy,” to the poor.\textsuperscript{12} And so, James Hadley, in addition to furnishing his church with candles (as cited above), included bequests for money to be paid to his “poure tenants,” for the repair of the relics in his parish church, to “every hospital” housing the poor “within the Shire of Somerset,” and to the prisoners in the three neighboring prisons. “And for as moche as I have beyne negligent to visit holy places and in going of pilgrimage, therefore I give and bequeath to [the shrines of] Our Blessed Lady of Cleve 5s [followed by a list of bequests to shrines of over ten named saints concluding with], St. Thomas of Caunterbury 5d.”\textsuperscript{13} Finally, Hadley makes provision for masses to be sung for 15 years “from the daie of my burying” for his and the souls of his father, mother, wives, children, “kynsfolkes and all Christain sowles and after the same 15 yeare to the end of the world, as my wife and children executors will answer before God in the dredful daie of judgment.”\textsuperscript{14} One of the most thorough of mortuary provisions in the Somerset wills is found in the will of the priest Richard Wollman:

\textsuperscript{10} Duffy, \textit{Altars}, 355.
\textsuperscript{11} Duffy, \textit{Altars}, 357.
\textsuperscript{12} Duffy, \textit{Altars}, 259.
\textsuperscript{13} Weaver, \textit{Somerset Wills}, 13-14.
\textsuperscript{14} Weaver, \textit{Somerset Wills}, 13-14.
1528. RICHARD WOLLMAN.

June 19th, 20 Hen. VIII. Richard Wollman priest. To be buried in the cloyster of S. Stephen in Westmynster. To every canon, vicar and quyrester of the said college at my dirige and masse 40d. I will 24 poore and innocent children lernid of good fasson bere 24 torches abowte my herse . . . To each child 6s. 8d. to say dirige, or if he cannot, to say “De profundis,” about my herse. . . . To every prisone in London, vis., Newgate, Ludgate, the Benche and the Marshallse, 20s, praying those that be therein to say Dirige, or if they cannot “De profundis,” or if they cannot say “De profundis,” to say of their charitye such devotion as God shall put in their mynde. I will a priest sing for seven years at Cambridge in the church of St. Edwarde at the awter of Our Lady where my mother is buried, having 10 marcs yearly; the money for his contentacion to be putt in a hutche in the unyversitie Chappell. . . . To the poor of each of my parishes £3 6s. 8d. . . . To the Abbey of Walden silver plate etc. desiring the religious fathers there to pray for me. . . . I desire the vice-proveste or any other fellow of the College being a priest to be present at the said dirige and do suffrages among the children and singe the masse on the morowe having 6s 8d. . . . 13s 4d., for alms among my poor parissheners there. . . . I bequeath £20 among poor widows to here a masse the next day after they be paid and to say 5 paternosters, 5 aves [“hail” Marys], and a Crede [creed], before the beginning of the masse and in the mass time the salter [Psalter] of Our Lady. To the parish church of Claivering [Essex] where I was borne and where my father is buried whose soule Jhus pardon, a vestment price £10. And 13s. 4d. for a dirige and masse among the ministers of the quere and four nobles in alms. . . .

Proved [the validity of the will once death has occurred] September 20th, 1537. 15

These wills testify not only to the liturgical wealth that became attached to Purgatory-relief but the financial wealth it provided to the Church, what Duffy terms “the large-scale channeling of resources” 16 motivated by the desire to minimize one’s stay in Purgatory:

The overwhelming preoccupation of clergy and laity alike from peasant to prince and from parish clerk to pontiff [was] with the safe transition of their souls from this world to the next, above all with the shortening and easing of their stay in Purgatory. It is a preoccupation which shows no slackening up to the very moment of the Reformation, and in England, as everywhere in Europe, it was the single most influential factor in shaping both the organization of the church and physical layout and appearance of the buildings in which men and women worshipped. 17

While this “commemorative impulse” may be found most everywhere in Europe, its “pattern” according to Peter Marshall, was not “identically replicated” in all parts of Europe: “Based on surviving evidence of wills, concerns about negotiating one’s way out of

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15. Weaver, *Somerset Wills*, 4-6.


purgatory seem to have been more intensely felt in Germany, France, and England than Italy and Spain.”

Diarmaid MacCulloch agrees: “Will-makers [in the north] put big investment into such components of the Purgatory industry as Masses for the dead. In Germany there was a phenomenal surge in endowment of Masses from around 1450, with no signs of slackening until the whole system imploded under the impact of Luther’s message in the 1520s.”

Steven Ozment, whose work centers on Germany and Switzerland, points to a study of religious life in the late medieval cities of Hall and Heilbronn that found “many endowments of chapels, masses, and anniversaries . . . numerous pilgrimages and processions, the worship of saints and relics, the purchase of indulgences, the formation of confraternities with their special indulgences and provisions.”

Here, he summarizes a tract written in 1524 by lay reformer Jörg Vögeli listing practices that Vögeli targets for removal:

deathbed endowments of masses . . . the canonical hours, alms, anniversaries, candles, masses, bells, and vigils for the dead . . . the “pope’s’ Mass”; invocation of the saints; the “scarecrow of purgatory”; the sacrament of extreme unction; the sacrament of holy orders; the blessing of monks, nuns, and their orders; the consecration of churches, cemeteries, chalices, clothes, crucifixes, lights, salt, and water; special altar cloths; special vestments for priests celebrating Mass; the practice of fasts, feasts “and numerous like superstitions, of which a special abomination is the baptism of bells by suffragan bishops.”

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And from a treatise written in 1525 by Strasbourg reformer Wolfgang Capito, we find a similar list: “singing, reading, and piping the canonical hours; the consecration of priests, churches, salt, and other things; praying for departed souls and seeking aid from departed saints’ revering images; going to confession; performing works of satisfaction for sin; distinguishing times, foods and places.”22 As one can see from these writings, the specter of Purgatory not only hovered over one’s end-of-life preparations but life’s daily and seasonal rhythms, centered around the Church calendar and its feasts, fasts, processions, and masses.

The Liturgy of Purgatory

Because monks and nuns were believed to be especially close to God—and heard by God—by virtue of their holy lives, it was common practice for lay men and women to incorporate certain monastic prayers and practices into their daily lives, for example “the monastic custom of reciting the ‘De Profundis’ for dead benefactors (especially parents) during grace at meals.” 23 The Book of Hours (or Horae), a monastic prayer guide based on the canonical hours, became a popular lay devotional manual and was “among the first books to be efficiently mass-produced all over Europe.”24 Along with the seven penitential Psalms that are “part of the normal intercession for the dead” (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143).25

22. Ozment, Reformation in Cities, 81. (See Wolfgang Capito, Was man halten / und Antworten soll / von der spaltung zwischen M. Luther und Andres Carolstadt (n. p., 1525), B 2 a)


24. Duffy, Altars, 211.

certain other Psalms, and the *Hours of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (or *Little Office*). Duffy states that most editions of the *Horae* included the *Litany of the Saints* and the *Office for the Dead*, both of which would keep the souls of Purgatory in mind. Also included were an additional range of popular devotions, over and above these core prayers derived from the liturgy . . . morning prayers, devotions for use at Mass . . . elevation prayers [for the moment when the priest elevates and consecrates the “host” or communion bread] such as the “Ave Verum Corpus”, suffrages to the saints and angels, prayers to the Virgin Mary, and above all, prayers to Christ in his passion.

These books would not only be used as private devotional guides but as handbooks in corporate worship. Next to the Little Office, “the prayers for the dead…formed the single most important element in the primer” (the English name for the *Book of Hours*): “Given the centrality of intercession for the dead in the piety of late medieval men and women, these were the most commonly used of all prayers, and ordinary men and women eagerly sought their recitation as part of their own mortuary provisions.” In the minds of the faithful, the efficacy of these prayers lay not only in their use as a means of invoking divine aid, but power resided in the words themselves. “This was a culture in which specific prayers or

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26. The fifteen *gradual*, ascent or pilgrim songs (120-34), two Psalms of *commendation* (119 and 139) and the Psalms of *the Passion* (22-31). See Duffy, *Altars*, 210.

27. “The Little Hours included some of the most beautiful and accessible parts of the psalter, notably the gradual Psalms, whose humane and tender tone was accentuated by the Marian antiphons [hymns sung to Mary invoking her prayers], and collects celebrating the beauty, goodness, and merciful kindness of the Virgin, with which the Office surrounded them.” Duffy, *Altars*, 210.


29. “Since the end of the twelfth century it had been customary for the consecrating priest to elevate the Host high above his head immediately after the sacring (the repetition of the words of the institution, “Hoc est enim Corpus Meum” [“This is my body”] which brought about the miracle of transubstantiation) for adoration by the people.” Duffy, *Altars*, 95.


Gospel passages were believed to be especially powerful;”⁴² the books themselves were “seen as sacred objects [and] focuses of power” evidenced by “the way in which [they] . . . might be kissed, censed, and venerated in the course of the liturgy, or, like relics and the Blessed Sacrament, used as the focus of oath-taking.”⁴³

This was also a very visual culture, most clearly seen in the emphasis placed on the visual adoration of the elevated Host over its actual consumption.⁴⁴ Because communion was received by most parishioners only once a year, at Easter, or when death was imminent,⁴⁵ “seeing the Host,” states Duffy, “became the high point of lay experience of the Mass” (and why “the provision of good wax lights” in the local church was a common bequest in medieval wills).⁴⁶ Miri Rubin, in her study of Eucharistic practices in the late Middle Ages, emphasizes that “the moment [of elevation] was all-important; before it, gazing and adoring matter was tantamount to idolatry, after it, spiritual gazing could convey great benefits.”⁴⁷ Elsewhere she observes: “the mass’s efficacy for the dead [may have been] debated by theologians, but in its teaching there is no such ambiguity. . . . It was so useful that souls were said to return and haunt their relatives and request masses.”⁴⁸ Eamon Duffy adds that “it

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32. Duffy, Altars, 114.
33. Duffy, Altars, 217.
34. Duffy, Altars, 95.
35. “Everyone received at Easter, and one’s final communion, the viaticum or ‘journey money’ given on the deathbed, was crucially important to medieval people.” Duffy, Altars 95.
36. Duffy, Altars, 96.
37. Miri Rubin, Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 54. (Rubin refers readers to Alexander of Hales, IV Sent lib. 111 d. 9, q. 6, a. 7, p. 107.)
38. Rubin, Corpus Christi, 153. Here she cites a “tale” told by Gregory the Great, n. 418.
was this sense of the blessings which flowed from seeing the Host which lay behind the increasing elaboration of all movement of the Blessed Sacrament, especially the founding of gilds or private endowments to provide a light to go before it in the street as it was carried to the sick, thereby alerting all who passed by to a further opportunity to kneel . . . and reverently see the Host.”

39. As a consequence of this visual emphasis, writes Duffy, “the overwhelming majority of prayers provided for the laity at Mass were, therefore, elevation prayers.”

40. Rubin agrees:

> Since so much that was tangible could be gained from the mass and especially at the moment of elevation, that moment of gazing was marked with the stamp of an exchange. Petitions and requests were made at the elevation in a pandemonium of vernacular prayers and salutations. . . . Rituals of petition and complaint, such as the monastic *clamor*, were grafted onto the moment. The *clamor* was a ceremony which developed in Cluniac houses in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, in which a monastic community cried for help after the consecration of the host, displaying their most precious relics and books, and pleading for help in Christ’s presence.

41. And the images that graced many of the prayer books—Our Lady of Pity, the Wounds of Jesus, the virgin martyr-saints—like the images on the windows and furnishings in the parish church, became sources of intrinsic power when combined with the words of the prayer and “affective” devotion to the image. Bynum states that “by the late fourteenth century, devotions to the five wounds, to the side wound, and to the wounded heart [of Christ] were proliferating; the faithful were urged to count Christ’s lesions and the number of blood drops he shed, using such numbers to calculate the prayers they owed for their own sins or those of

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39. Duffy, *Altars*, 100. According to Rubin the Corpus Christi processions which became popular in the fourteenth century were “introduced through episcopal initiative, . . . all over Europe.” Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 244.


their loved ones suffering in purgatory.”  

Add to that “the stupendous indulgences” attached to these prayers and devotions and one can see, Duffy reflects, how these practices might hold “special and urgent attraction to someone facing their own imminent death and the prospect of Purgatory.” He wryly observes that “set against this background, the proliferation of indulgenced devotions in successive editions of the Horae is readily understandable. . . . Equipped with his or her primer and an hour or two to spare for pious browsing, the devout lay person could clock up an impressive tally of days pardon . . . [though it could] not be gained without inner devotion.” These types of prayers and practices would become the valued currency of the monasteries and convents.

The “Prayer Warriors” of Purgatory

Like two childhood friends who later marry, Purgatory and monasticism grew up together appearing on the scene about the same time. With respect to monasticism (from the Greek word monachos meaning “alone”), men known as the Desert Fathers would lead the way retreating to the deserts in Egypt and Syria, some as ascetic hermits (Antony, d. 356) and others gathering in organized communities (Pachomius, d. 358). Women, drawn by the

42. Carolyn Walker Bynum, Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 3. Bynum includes multiple representative photos of these images (from woodcuts, statutes, altar and door panels, wall paintings, Book of Hours illustrations, and so on) in her work.

43. Duffy, Altars, 243.

44. Duffy, Altars, 290.

45. Marilyn Dunn, The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 3. Along with the renunciation of material wealth, “the most common form of asceticism practiced in later antiquity was based on sexual abstinence: renunciation of sex was seen as a means of cutting the individual’s links with the lower, material existence and therefore as the basis for self-transformation, leading to attainment of a more spiritual plane of existence.” Dunn, The Emergence of Monasticism, 7.
same ideal of retreat from the world in order to draw closer to God, would soon follow, living as virgin ascetics within their own homes, in monastic communities or, like the mystic Julian of Norwich (d. after 1416), living the solitary life of an anchorite (from the Greek work *anachoreo* meaning “to withdraw”) confined to a small room or “cell” attached to a church. Desert Mothers include Amma Theodora and Amma Sarah in the East and Marcella (d. 410), Melania the Elder (d. 410), and Paula (d. 404) in the West. From the beginning, these lives were marked by rigorous self-discipline, self-denial, and prayer. With this intense focus on “individualistic piety,” there was a tendency to become disconnected from the local church. The Eucharist, for example, “had little place in the routines of the early hermits.” To counter these tendencies, Basil of Caesarea (d. 379) “integrated the monastic communities more closely with the church,” by recommending they be placed under the authority of the bishop, instituting set times of prayer and, establishing ministries to the sick and the poor along with “some work in education.”

As the monastic ideal spread to the West, many who were attracted to it were individuals of great wealth and position, convicted by the words of Jesus that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:25, English, Standard Version, ESV). At this stage, monastic life was somewhat egalitarian.

46. *Amma* meaning “mother.”

47. Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 45-48. Melania and Paula would travel on pilgrimage to the East and establish monasteries in Jerusalem and Bethlehem respectively.


50. This concern about wealth seems to have carried through into the Middle Ages. “As several scholars have underlined, the behavior of medieval merchants often suggests ambivalence, even guilt about the wealth they so eagerly garnered. Permitting a wife or a daughter to give away this
When Augustine drew up his “rule” for monastic life, “he made no difference between women and men but repeated the same prescriptions for both.” McNamara writes that because “monastic spirituality was non-sacerdotal in nature [it was] equally suited to nuns and monks.” Elsewhere she states that,

Nuns and monks performed basically the same services and said the same prayers. With a spirituality designed for lay people, priestly duties almost dwindled to the consecration of hosts, apparently kept in reserve to be administered, if need be, by the abbess. The archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore of Tarsus, authorized women to read the lessons and perform altar ministries excepting sacramental functions.

In the desert monasteries “women and men collaborated in the missionary age on earth [and] respected one another as equals in prayer.” But in the city, “papacy and crown overcame” that collaboration and sense of shared purpose and, as a consequence, “the religious climate changed by the middle of the eighth century.” Under the advancing influence of the Rule of Benedict (d. 550) changes took place that not only “greatly expanded the devotional tasks of the religious life,” but greatly limited the nuns’ participation in certain tasks, particularly those connected with the service of the altar such as “caring for vestments, supplying oil, wealth might exacerbate such ambivalence but it might also assuage guilt. Some families and husbands clearly expressed their religious impulses through their daughters’ and wives’ asceticism.”


52. McNamara, *Sisters*, 152.


56. “Long elaborate chants, processions and prayers were woven into the daily routine to enhance the religious’ sense of closeness to God and focus their intensive study of Scripture.” McNamara, *Sisters*, 152.
wine and other ingredients for the ceremonies, lighting candles and ringing bells." The Office of the Dead, previously performed by male and female religious alike, was added to the mass which could only be performed by a priest and there was a “shift” from a weekly to a daily mass in the monasteries. Combined with the move from public to private confession and the introduction of tariffed penance, more priests were needed to hear confessions (as well as assign the appropriate penance) and to perform the mass. Monks increasingly answered the call. Marilyn Dunn summarizes the impact of these changes to monastic life:

Belief in purgatory and set forms of intercession, particularly Eucharistic intercession, began to change the shape of monastic life from the eighth century on. While other elements . . . would also lead to the multiplication of masses in monasteries, the idea of purgatory became one of the foundations of the medieval superstructure of monastic intercession, with its elaborate systems of liturgy and multiplication of ‘private’ masses, offered for intercessory purposes. In the seventh century it is thought that comparatively few monks were priests, but from the eighth onwards such numbers increased as monasteries accepted payment for priest-monks to say votive masses and masses for the dead. A new chapter in monastic history was gradually beginning to unfold.”

As a consequence of these changes, the nuns had to distinguish themselves—and justify their value to the community that supported them—in other ways: as virgin ascetics, mystics and visionaries, keepers of the church necrology records and the “prayer warriors” of

57. McNamara, Sisters, 152.

58. McNamara, Sisters, 153.

59. “Belief in the supreme efficacy of the Mass in relieving the pains of those in Purgatory . . . fueled an enormous inflation of the number of priestly ordinations in the later Middle Ages.” Duffy, Altars, 301.

60. Dunn, The Emergence of Monasticism, 190, emphasis added.

61. “By maintaining lists of the dead for whom they prayed, nuns thus served as keepers of written records, which included also the wills, charters, deeds, and transactions of the secular community.” Anne Winston-Allen, Convent Chronicles: Women Writing About Women and Reform in the late Middle Ages (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 20.
Purgatory. ⁶² (Among the “chief sources of income” in late medieval nunneries, according to Winston-Allen, “were donations for burials on the cloister grounds [and] endowments to finance prayers for souls.”⁶³) Hence, in the fourteenth-century monastery at Töss, Sister Beli von Liebenberg is wondering, after a morning spent in corporate and private prayer, “how many souls the sisters had released from purgatory that forenoon”⁶⁴ and on another occasion, a sister expressing confidence that she has helped “too many to be counted.”⁶⁵ The mystic, Mechthild of Magdeburg (d. c. 1282-94), was reported to have delivered 70,000 souls from Purgatory and Gertrude of Helfta (d. 1302) was told by Christ in repeated visions “exactly how many souls are released from exactly how much purgatory by exactly which devotions of the community.”⁶⁶ Reports of successful purgatory-relief efforts, and the visions connected with those efforts, could be employed for a variety of purposes:

To ensure ongoing family support (financial and otherwise):

The prioress of Unterlinden, Adelheid de Rivelden . . . saw many of her deceased acquaintances suffering in purgatory, but her vision served to reassure her of the efficacy of her sisters’ efforts.⁶⁷

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⁶² A contemporary term used more commonly in evangelical circles to describe someone who is committed to intercessory prayer and actively engaged in spiritual warfare on behalf of souls.

⁶³ Winston-Allen, Convent Chronicles, 39.


⁶⁵ Gertrud Jaron Lewis, By Women, for Women, about Women: The Sister-books of Fourteenth-century Germany (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1996), 146. (See [Elsbeth Stagel?], Das Leben der Schwestern zu Töss, 31.)


To register dissatisfaction with the clergy—even the pope:

Innocent III [had] noted with displeasure that [certain] nuns undertook ‘clerical’ activities of preaching, bestowing blessings and hearing confessions. . . . Soon after his death Lutgard of Aywieres saw him in a vision pleading with her to pray for his release from purgatory. 68

To exercise a measure of spiritual authority:

Many a holy woman, exhausted from fasting and prayer in her chaste and enclosed cell, had visions of clergymen fouled with sin or suffering in purgatory. 69

By becoming conduits—agents and brokers—of divine mercy, these women also gained the authority to mitigate the sufferings of souls in purgatory. 70

To procure funds and furnishings for the convent:

Birgitta of Sweden . . . claimed to be able to discover who was in purgatory and transmit to the living what alms and sacrifices might free their suffering friends and relatives. One lady, for example, instructed her that her friends should have chalices made for the communion offering if they would set her free of suffering. 71

And to implement reforms:

At Facons, Sister Jacomijne Costers was stricken with plague in 1489 but miraculously recovered. Afterward she wrote “Vision and Example,” a description of how, during her illness, she was taken on a journey through purgatory and hell, where she witnessed the fate that befalls the unrepentant. She received from Christ a program of reform that she was to institute. 72

The fact that the nuns might have capitalized on their role in the community as the prayer warriors of Purgatory, should not minimize the genuine rigor and sacrificial character of their

68. McNamara, Sisters, 249. (See Innocent III, Nova quaedam nuper, Epistola 137, in PL, 216:356.)

69. McNamara, Sisters, 349.


71. McNamara, Sisters, 359. (See Isak Collijn, ed., Acta et processus canonizaionis beatae Birgitte (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksells, 1924-1931), 84.)

devotional lives. “Between reading and singing services for the dead and performing the monastic office, convent women spent at least four to five hours a day in choral prayer [and] . . . roughly eight hours a day in chapel performing their liturgical duties.”73 One prioress pleaded with the bishop to allow them to “consolidate” some of their services because their many liturgical duties were “exhausting her nuns.”74 At the same time, Winston-Allen found that “the singing of the Hours [was] often mentioned in women’s writings as a very satisfying and fulfilling activity”75 and while it is true that much of their time was spent in prayer and performing the liturgical services, the women were engaged in other activities as well, including “a surprisingly broad range of theatrical, literary, and artistic pursuits.”76 Nevertheless, it was in the monasteries that suffrages for the dead were most rigorously performed: “The Töss sister who ‘genuflected daily two hundred times, and in addition . . . prostrated herself . . . thirty times on her bare knees’ is not unusual. . . . Cloistered life could not always accommodate practical acts of mercy, and the nuns had to resort to spiritual mercy that entailed saying hundreds of prayers every day.”77 It was not just calloused knees

73. Winston-Allen, Convent Chronicles, 58-59. (See Hieronymus Wilms, Das Beten der Mystikerinnen dargestellt nah den Chroniken der Dominikanerinnenklöster zu Adelhausen, Dießenhofen, Engeltal, Kirchberg, Otenbach, Töß und Underlinden, Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte des Dominikanerordens in Deutchland 11 (Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1918), 50; Marie-Luise Ehrenschwendtner, “‘Puellae litteratae’: The Use of the Vernacular in the Dominican Convents of Southern Germany,” in Medieval Women in their Communities, ed. Diane Watt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 59.)


75. Winston-Allen, Convent Chronicles, 50.

76. Winston-Allen, Convent Chronicles, 8.

77. Lewis, By Women, 146-7. (See [Elsbeth Stagel?], Töss, 61f.)
that the sisters possessed to display the sacrificial character of their piety. Other acts of self-mortification included “arduous fasting and night vigils,” the wearing of animal hair garments next to one’s skin and self-flagellation. In an “oft-cited example” of the latter, Winston-Allen relates how “Venturino da Bergamo (1304-1346) sent Katharina von Gueberschwirh, prioress at Unterlinden, a gift of several scourges along with instruction that she and the sisters should discipline themselves nightly in the church, giving their bared shoulders seven lashes for each verse of a Miserere.” These types of “austerities were regarded as ‘service,’ the substituting of one’s own suffering for that of others. Even illness, if offered as a ‘gift,’ could become a source of merit and a way to exercise charity, that is, the winning of mercy for souls in purgatory.” Bynum offers this illustration from the life of Lidwina of Schiedam (d. 1433): “Lidwina clearly felt that her suffering was service—that it was one with Christ’s suffering and that it therefore substituted for the suffering of others, both their bodily ills and their time in purgatory. . . . Her hagiographers tell us that the fevers she suffered almost daily for many years before her death released souls from purgatory.” Therefore, suffering was a key feature in female piety in the Middle Ages, especially for

78. Bynum includes an illustration in Wonderful Blood of Catherine of Siena flagellating herself in front of a crucifix of Christ. She writes that “the German translation of Catherine’s Life . . . was widely disseminated in fifteenth-century Germany as a work of spiritual edification for women.” Bynum, Wonderful Blood, Plate 11.


women mystics and visionaries.\(^{82}\) “Purgatory was to these women not primarily a place in the cosmos,” writes Bynum, but “rather, the fact of suffering [itself].”\(^{83}\)

Finally, the efficacy of the nun’s prayers, much like those of the martyred saints, was directly related to the holy and sacrificial character of their lives. “Unlike the sacramental system, the expiatory prayers that generated transferable grace depended for their efficacy on the virtue and self-mortification of ascetics . . . it was the surplus of grace they generated that was available to help suffering souls in need of assistance”\(^{84}\) which is why monastic reform was often vigorously supported by the public (and why the public turned against monasteries it considered too lax):

More important in medieval towns than the imposing physical presence of the convent, with its visible church and cemetery, was the vital spiritual presence it represented. Inside it, the women interceded in prayer for a populace—both the living and the dead—that needed security in this life and especially in the next. Indeed, for the soul’s journey through purgatory, the populace required very powerful and efficacious intercession.\(^{85}\)

The virtue most connected with powerful and efficacious intercession was chastity, particularly in women. While both monks and nuns took the vow (along with poverty and obedience), historian Peter Brown writes that a nun’s “virginity brought a particularly charged form of the sacred and placed it alongside the profane world in a way that the more

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82. In addition to the idea of substitution, the theological rationale behind this type of suffering, according to Bynum, was also understood as “participation” or “representation.” She elaborates: “We are all wrapped in the flayed skin of Christ, poured out with his blood, lifted to God as he is lifted up. Holy women . . . not only offered their pain for others; they felt that, through it, they were caught up with others into the salvific pain of God.” Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 202-3.

83. Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 235. Bynum takes “partial exception” to Le Goiff’s work which views Purgatory through the lens of becoming a place rather than the suffering itself. 399, n. 54.

84. McNamara, *Sisters*, 143.

distant heroism of desert monks, the models of male monastic piety could not hope to do.”

Elsewhere he writes:

Women’s monasticism had begun very much as a branch of family piety. A pious household would be proud to have “its” virgin. She would be secluded in the back of the house. She would be visible only as she proceeded (with due modesty) to the local church and back, to join her “sisters in religion” in the local virgins’ choir. But it is precisely this enclosed and faceless quality which caused the virgin to be valued so highly for it placed sanctity in the very heart of the profane world. The pious virgin was a human relic, encased in the midst of the city.

One can only imagine the collective intercessory power of a convent filled with human relics, serving their communities by praying (and suffering) for souls the living and the dead.

Therefore, what began in the fourth century with a desire on the part of Christian women (and men) to withdraw from society in order to draw near to God through a life of self-denial and “self-mastery,” gradually morphed into “the medieval superstructure of monastic intercession” built around the doctrine of Purgatory; what Duffy calls “the defining doctrine of late medieval Catholicism” and McNamara identifies as “the centerpiece of the monastic economy.” This marriage between Purgatory and monasticism would prove, however, to be especially problematic for many female religious in Reformation Germany.


88. Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism*, 207.


91. McNamara, *Sisters*, 143.
CHAPTER IV
HOW THE PROTESTANT CHALLENGE TO PURGATORY REDEFINED FEMALE CONVENT LIFE IN REFORMATION GERMANY

The Theology of the Reformation

The Protestant Reformation was not launched with a frontal attack on the doctrine of Purgatory. Indeed, that was not possible in 1517 because many of the early reformers, including Martin Luther, still believed in its existence. What Luther did do, however unintentionally, was to systematically dismantle the theological framework that made Purgatory a necessary step in the soul’s journey to paradise. Merit, penance, satisfaction, expiation, absolution, the nature of faith, grace, salvation and sin, the role of the clergy, the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, would all be redefined under the Protestant system of salvation. Of course, the reformers did not believe they were redefining these terms so much as recovering their original biblical meanings. In the Protestant understanding of salvation, merit belongs to Christ alone. “Don’t let it enter your mind,” cautions Luther, “that you can earn anything here or brag about your works or your wisdom or your merits. Here all glorying is taken away, so that, as Paul says to the Corinthians, ‘Let him who boasts, boast in

1. “As in much else, Luther proved himself on this issue a rather cautious conservative, not feeling his way to a complete rejection of the concept of purgatory until 1530.” Peter Marshall, “Leaving the World,” in Reformation Christianity: A People’s History of Christianity, ed. Peter Matheson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 179. Luther’s close associate at Wittenberg, Andreas Karlstadt (d. 1541), also expressed continued belief in the existence Purgatory in a sermon printed in 1522. See Vincent Evener, “Wittenberg’s Wandering Spirits: Discipline and the Dead in the Reformation,” Church History 84, no. 3 (2015), 531-555.
As for poenitentiam agite (“do penance”), it is not something to do or perform—a poor translation of the Greek, according to the Catholic humanist Erasmus—but a change of the heart’s disposition toward sin and toward God, better translated as resipiscite, “to repent.” Jaroslav Pelikan summarizes Luther’s thought:

The summons of the inaugural preaching of Jesus [in Matt. 4:17], therefore, could not mean that the sinner should merely “do penance” by going through the steps of contrition, confession, and satisfaction (including indulgences), as prescribed by the law of the church. On the contrary [quoting Luther now] ‘when our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent,”’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

In Protestant soteriology, believers are not made righteous through a divine infusion of grace but declared righteous on the basis of the righteousness of Jesus Christ “imputed” or credited to the believer through faith—the gift of God’s grace to those he predestined to save (in like manner, the believer’s sins are imputed to Christ). Grace is not “a disposition within man” in the Protestant understanding of the term “[but] rather . . . the unmerited favor and forgiving mercy of God.” And faith is not a work but “the divinely created ability to appropriate the promise of grace in Christ.” Luther defined faith as “a firm trust that Christ, the Son of God,  


5. “For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.’ (Rom. 4:3, ESV).

6. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:21).

7. Pelikan, Reformation of Church and Dogma, 153.

8. Pelikan, Reformation of Church and Dogma, 154.
stands in our place and has taken all our sins upon his shoulders and that he is the eternal satisfaction for our sin and reconciles us with God the Father.” 9 Jesus, he states must be faith’s object: “Observe, faith is not enough, but only that faith which hides under the wings of Christ and glories in his righteousness.” 10

The Catholic distinctions concerning sin are not maintained in the Protestant system; all sin is mortal and consigns sinners to hell apart from the saving grace and mercy of God. Perfect sinlessness is not a state that the Christian can achieve in this life, for even her best works are tainted with sin. 11 She is simul justus et peccator or “simultaneously righteous and a sinner”—a phrase that “contains the whole theology of Luther,” states Pelikan, quoting the German theologian, Rudolph Hermann. 12 And what about the need to satisfy divine justice through temporal punishment for post-baptismal sins (according to Church teaching)? “Only the damned must remain until they have paid the last penny.” 13 With one voice, the Protestant reformers affirmed that Christ’s death on the cross paid the entire debt—guilt and

9. Luther, “The Sixth Sermon [at Wittenberg], March 14, 1522, Friday after Invocavit”, LW 51:92, emphasis added.


12. Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma*, 154. (See Rudolf Hermann, Luthers These “Gerecht und Sunder zugleich.” (Gutersloh, 1960), 1.)

penalty—of the redeemed sinner. “The blood of Christ,” Calvin would later write, “is the sole satisfaction for the sins of believers, the sole expiation, the sole purgation.”

Private confession and absolution will be retained by Luther because they are biblical practices; the former, however, should not be “commanded by the pope” and the latter does not convey intrinsic authority on the part of the Church to forgive and absolve sins. The Church can only declare what God has done in and through Jesus Christ consequently, all Christians function as priests in this capacity. Although good works do not merit God’s favor, the Protestant reformers did not dispute their necessity. Good works are useful insofar as they do tangible good for one’s neighbor but not “to gain the favor of God.” As to the sacraments, Luther and the reformers maintained that Christ instituted only two: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Luther (like Augustine) believed in baptismal regeneration but other reformers would insist that baptism is not the instrumental cause of salvation. All, however, would agree that the Eucharist is not a re-sacrifice of Christ and especially not a sacrifice for the dead. The Supper is for the living. “Luther deplored the way in which the traditional Mass sought to supplement the unique and unrepeatable sacrifice of Christ, which had put an


17. Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma*, 147.

end to sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 7:27; 9:25) and had perfected those who were sanctified for all time (Hebrews 10:14 and 1 Peter 3:18).”¹⁹

Differences would arise among the various branches of the Reformation on many matters but all would embrace the doctrine of justification by faith as “the foundation of the entire Reformation . . . the chief doctrine of Christianity and the chief point of difference separating Protestantism from Roman Catholicism.”²⁰ Shortly after Luther’s death in 1546, his long-time colleague, Philip Melanchthon (d. 1560), wrote the following condensed summary of Luther’s theology of salvation:

He began to lecture on the Epistle to the Romans and then on the Psalms. These writings he explained in such a manner that, in the judgment of all godly and wise men, a light of new doctrine seemed to arise after a long dark night. Here he demonstrated the distinction between the Law and the Gospel; here he refuted the error which then reigned in the schools and sermons, which teaches that men merit the remission of sins by their own works and that men are just before God be means of discipline, as the Pharisees taught. Luther, accordingly, recalled the hearts of men to the Son of God and like the Baptist pointed out the Lamb of God who has borne our sins. He showed that sins are forgiven freely on account of God’s Son and that this blessing, to be sure, must be accepted by faith.²¹

Luther’s justification by faith would have a profound impact on the doctrine of Purgatory and by extension, the monastic system of intercession built around it.

The Protestant Challenge to Purgatory

The opening volley into Purgatory’s camp was launched on October 31, 1517—what is now considered the birthdate of the Reformation—with the public posting of Luther’s

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²⁰. Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma*, 139.

Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences or Ninety-five Theses. Well within the
custom of the day, the theses were proposition statements intended for academic debate not
“assertions,” Luther protested in a letter to the bishop of Brandenburg a few months later.22
As a “leading” professor at the newly established University of Wittenberg Luther was still
very much a loyal servant of Rome and of the pope, yet already questioning the value of the
scholastic method of theology that prevailed at the time.23 Luther’s efforts to move his
school’s faculty “away from Scholastic theology into the direction of St. Augustine and St.
Paul” was not successful at first.24 Luther’s students, however, provided the catalyst for
change by submitting, under his direction, graduation theses “that would call forth discussion
about any innovation.”25 Initial reaction from the faculty at Wittenberg was “violent,” writes
Kurt Aland, but “a few professors were finally convinced that the shocking opinions of
Luther actually corresponded, in word or thought, to those of . . . St. Augustine,” the patron
of the university.26 By 1515, Luther’s lectures had become so popular they “not only
attracted a considerable audience” but many students were transferring to the University of
Wittenberg “solely because of Professor Luther’s fame.”27 This would be an important

22. Luther, “To Jerome Schultz, Bishop of Brandenburg, 13 February 1518” in Aland,
Luther’s 95 Theses, 75.

23. Scholastics, like Thomas Aquinas, were fond of employing philosophical categories,
especially those of Aristotle, to explain theological concepts. For example, the philosophical
distinction between “substance” and “accidents” gave the Church a rationale for how the bread
and wine could become the literal body and blood of Christ in the Mass.


development. The faculty and students won over to Luther’s developing theology would become the foot soldiers of the Protestant Reformation. Many of those foot soldiers would abandon the doctrine of Purgatory much earlier than Luther.

The Theses was not a challenge to the primacy of the pope, the tradition of the church, the legitimacy of indulgences or the existence of Purgatory but a protest against abuses and misrepresentations related to these teachings—deeply troubling to Luther as a pastor responsible for the spiritual wellbeing of his flock. There is a bit of comedic irony in the story behind the Ninety-five Theses. Luther had become aware of a particularly persuasive indulgence preacher making his way through German towns and cities, the infamous Dominican monk Johann Tetzel (d. 1519). Because the selling of indulgences was banned in Luther’s territory (by an elector that did not want to see all that money going to Rome) some of Luther’s parishioners were crossing over the border into towns, where the selling of indulgences was permitted, and making their purchases there.28 Luther heard Tetzel’s sales pitch through his congregants, was appalled and felt compelled to act.29 According to Luther’s sources, Tetzel was making all kinds of claims about the efficacy of indulgence letters: that contrition was not necessary on the part of those who purchased the letters, that salvation was assured and purgatorial punishments fully remitted with their purchase, that souls would escape Purgatory the moment the coin hit the collection chest, and a host of other promises.30 On the same day that his Theses was made public in Wittenberg, Luther

28. Luther, “Against Hanswurst, 1541” in Aland, Luther’s 95 Thesis, 40
29. Whatever qualms one may have about Luther’s forceful and sometimes undisciplined personality, it is clear, throughout his life, that he had a pastor’s heart.
sent a letter to the bishop, Albert of Mainz (under whose jurisdiction Tetzel was operating), with a copy of it. In the letter, Luther requests that the “Reverend Father” read what he has written to “see how dubious is this belief concerning indulgences, which these preachers propagate as if it were the surest thing in the whole world.”\(^{31}\) Luther feels certain that the bishop is not fully aware of what is going on in his diocese and wants to alert him to the fact that, “papal indulgences are [being] offered all across the land for the construction of St. Peter”\(^{32}\) (the basilica in Rome). With great passion and boldness Luther writes,

> Works of piety and love are infinitely better than indulgences; and yet [the indulgence preachers] do not preach them with an equally big display and effort. . . . The first and only duty of the bishops, however, is to see that the people learn the gospel and the love of Christ. For on no occasion has Christ ordered that indulgences should be preached. What a horror, what a danger for a bishop to permit the loud noise of indulgences among his people, while the gospel is silenced, and to be more concerned with the sale of indulgences than with the gospel!\(^{33}\)

What Luther does not know is that the pope and Albert have agreed to split the funds being raised from the sale of indulgences in the bishop’s territory. Many years later, reflecting on the indulgence “rumpus,” as Luther called it, he wrote,

> I [had] hoped the pope would protect me because I had so secured and armed my disputation with Scripture and papal decretais that I was sure the pope would damn Tetzel and bless me . . . . the papal decretais say quite clearly that indulgence sellers cannot redeem souls from purgatory with indulgences. But while I waited for the blessing from Rome, thunder and lightning came. I had to be the sheep who troubled the water for the wolf. Tetzel went free, but I had to be eaten.\(^{34}\)

It was not quite the case that Tetzel “went free.” He died two years later with a much battered and, some say, an unfairly maligned reputation.

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34. Luther, “Against Hanswurst, 1541” in Aland, *Luther's 95 Theses*, 42.
Because the sale of indulgences—the primary focus of the *Theses*—was inextricably bound up with the doctrine of Purgatory, Luther could not chip away at one without doing injury to the other. As already stated, Luther does not, in 1517, condemn the doctrine of indulgences per se but the selling and marketing of them. He also rejects the notion that the pope has authority to grant remission of penalties to souls in Purgatory. He complains that the “unbridled preaching of pardons makes it difficult even for learned men” to defend the pope’s honor and to respond to the “shrewd questions of the laity.”

Questions such as: “Why does not the pope empty purgatory, for the sake of holy love and the dire need of the souls that are there if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a church?” and “Why are funeral and anniversary masses for the dead continued and why does he not return or permit the withdrawal of the endowments founded for them, since it is wrong to pray for the [already] redeemed?” Although Luther’s formal rejection of Purgatory is still over a decade away, his *Theses* begins to rattle the theological foundations of monastic intercession by raising doubts about the efficacy of masses for the dead and the funding endowments that support them.

As Luther proceeds to grapple with the doctrine he still believes in—though more tentatively as each year passes—his objections coalesce around three main points: first, that belief in Purgatory can give one a false and baseless sense of security; second, that the Church—particularly its monasteries and cloisters—profits handily off the doctrine often at the expense of the poor; and third, that the doctrine has no basis in Scripture. Luther touches


on each of these objections in a sermon (later developed into a treatise) delivered on Epiphany Sunday, 1522:

You are not a heretic for disbelieving in purgatory, as there is nothing said about it in the Scriptures. And it is better not to believe that which is outside of the Scriptures, than to depart from that which is in the Scriptures. Let the pope and Papists here rage as they please, who have made purgatory an article of faith because it has brought to them the wealth of the earth but also countless souls to hell, souls that depended and relied on good works for redemption from it.  

Along the same lines but more revealing of the internal tug-of-war Luther is experiencing, are comments made in this sermon preached a week earlier:

Many depend upon purgatory, living as it pleases them to the end and expecting to profit by vigils and soulmasses after death. Truly, they will fail to receive profit therein. It were well had purgatory never been conceived of. Belief in purgatory suppresses much good, establishes many cloisters and monasteries and employs numerous priests and monks. It is a serious drawback to these three features of Christian living: sobriety, righteousness and godliness. Moreover, God has not commanded, nor even mentioned, purgatory. The doctrine is wholly, or for the most part, deception; God pardon me if I am wrong. It is, to say the least, dangerous to accept, to build upon, anything not designated by God, when it is all we can do to stand in building upon the institutions of God which can never waver. The injunction of Paul to live rightly in this present world is truly a severe thrust at purgatory. He would not have us jeopardize our faith. Not that I, at this late day (when we write 1522), deny the existence of purgatory; but it is dangerous to preach it, whatever of truth there may be in the doctrine, because the Word of God, the Scriptures, make no mention of a purgatory.

On the one hand, Luther confidently asserts that the doctrine of Purgatory is “dangerous,” “deceptive,” and “a serious drawback” to godly living. On the other, he feels compelled to qualify his assertions (see italics). The bottom line for Luther—and the Protestant reformers that followed—is the doctrine’s lack of Scriptural support. And notice how Luther points to “belief in Purgatory” as the stimulus behind the proliferation of monasteries and cloisters.


Hence, even in this developing stage of Luther’s theology, his challenge to Purgatory spilled over onto monastic life itself.

Although Luther is not ready to let go of the doctrine of Purgatory in 1522, he does not hesitate to suggest that the Church fathers, including Augustine and Gregory, could have been mistaken in their teaching about it. “Who will assure us that they did not err and were not deceived here as in many other things.”40 He also rejects the visionary support for the doctrine. Luther does not dispute the reality of the apparitions but their source: these “wandering spirits” are not loved ones languishing in Purgatory returning to request prayer from the living but, as Vincent Evener puts it, “demonic temptations to seek truth outside of Scripture [and] as the source of false beliefs about purgatory and the mass—beliefs that buttressed works-righteousness.”41

Criticism leveled at the religious during the early years of the Reformation also centered on the charge that the monastic way of life was counter to expressing love for neighbor as illustrated in this sermon:

But isn’t it a pitiful thing? A priest [or nun] has a commandment, not from God, but from the pope, such as praying the seven hours, fasting the long fasts, doing this and doing that. He [or she] attaches more importance to fulfilling obedience to the pope than he does to doing this for the love of Christ; he would rather let his neighbor suffer hunger and want. Here a lay person who is commanded.42

And monastic practices were seen by Luther as contrary to the teaching of salvation by faith. “The Spirit does not come through fasting, praying, pilgrimages, running to and fro around

40. Luther, “Epiphany 1522” in Luther’s Church Postil: Gospels, 1:347.


42. Luther, “The First Sermon [at Weimar], October 19, 1522,” LW 51:107.
the country;\textsuperscript{43} no, only through faith.”\textsuperscript{44} He reiterates this point in a second sermon preached that same day: “the gospel proclaims nothing else but salvation by grace, given to man without any works and merits whatsoever.”\textsuperscript{45} Not only do monastic “works” come under scrutiny but the monastic vow of chastity:

One who constantly prays much should rather be called a pray-er than a Christian. Likewise with a pilgrim, a flagellant, a virgin, a founder of churches and altars—this does not make them Christians. What makes him a Christian is that he has God and everything is God’s, that is, that he has the unsurpassable treasure, Christ, who is called rich in grace. . . .

. . . That is why Christ bids men to take young women and the young women to take men. That is why the monks and nuns enter the monastery to preserve their chastity; they can hardly bear it there, however. They should take husbands.\textsuperscript{46}

Luther again denounces what he sees as the true motivation behind the ministry of monastic intercession (a critique that will especially resonate with the laity), the economic largesse derived from the works of monastic piety (which would include the convents’ central work of praying souls out of Purgatory). “To us believers, Christ is salvation and consolation, but to the monks he is foolishness, for the gospel does not bring anything into their kitchens, cellars, or closets, as their laws did before.”\textsuperscript{47} Jo Ann McNamara sums up the impact of Luther’s theology on monastic life:

[Luther] argued that Christ’s sacrifice was sufficient atonement for the sins of those who believed unreservedly in his godhood. They needed only their faith in him to justify their salvation. Voices long silenced by monastic rhetoric rose to condemn celibacy as an occasion of sin and virginity as a crime against nature. . . . Protestantism attacked the spirituality most associated with women, denying the redemptive value of prayer and sacrifice. They mystical power nuns derived from reception of the Eucharist was scorned. Processions and chanting, the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{43} A reference to the mendicant (begging) preaching orders like the Franciscans and Dominicans.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Luther, “The First Sermon [at Weimar],” \textit{LW} 51:108.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Luther, “The Second Sermon [at Weimar],” October 19, 1522,” \textit{LW} 51:112.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Luther, “The Second Sermon [at Weimar],” \textit{LW} 51:113, 116.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Luther, “The Second Sermon [at Weimar],” \textit{LW} 51:113, 116.
\end{itemize}
extra sacramental liturgies that accumulated indulgences, came under attack. The cult of relics, pilgrimages, and the intercession of saints became anathema to men who attributed all power to a transcendent God, beyond the influence of human prayers or sacrifices. Human sacrifices intended to share the passion of Christ and incline God to mercy were stripped of their power. *Thus monastic life, based on the idea of saving souls still among the living or in purgatory through prayer and self-mortification, became a futile exercise.*

Although it would take Luther another eight years to arrive at a complete repudiation of Purgatory,49 “his disciples in Germany, the Netherlands, England, France, and Switzerland,” according to Peter Marshall, “had already moved to make purgatory a main focus of their attack on religion.”50 echoing many of Luther’s arguments given above.51

**The Public Reaction to the Protestant Challenge to Purgatory**

It may seem counterintuitive that the territories most preoccupied with Purgatory were the most receptive to the Protestant message. This may be explained, at least in part, when we examine the criticisms being leveled at the Church by German citizenry on the eve of the Reformation and why “Luther’s first attack on some of the more outrageous outcrops of the soul-prayer industry had so much more effect in the north than the south.”52 Steven

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49. *Ein Widerruf vom Fegefeue or A Retraction from Purgatory*, published in 1530.


51. In his study of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestant-Catholic debates over Purgatory, Tomáš Malý found that “the most important field of debate” was the effort to establish or refute the theological authorities used to support the doctrine. For Catholic theologians, according to Malý, 2 Maccabees was “among the most important evidence for the existence of purgatory.” From the Protestant perspective, 1 & 2 Maccabees, “although beneficial to read,” were not on par with Scripture and the text in question had been wholly misinterpreted by Church fathers. As to the canonical Scriptures, “Protestant authors agreed on the fact that the doctrine of purgatory . . . was based in its entirety on an incorrect interpretation of the Bible.” Malý, “Early Modern Purgatory: Reformation Debates,” 250 and 251, n. 31.

Ozment’s research shows that (in addition to resentment over clerical immunities from taxes and civic responsibilities, and concern about the moral state of the clergy) complaints against the Church in Germany and Switzerland were directly related to its Purgatory-relief practices as illustrated in the writings of Vögeli and Capito cited above. As the Reformation was getting underway in Marburg, “the citizenry requested, among other things that the religious . . . be forbidden revenues from wills, services for the dead, . . . and endowed masses in memory of the dead.”53 Based on his examination of the popular literature of the day (pamphlets, tracts, lay catechisms, and so on) Ozment believes that the popularity of the Reformation in north German towns and cities can be boiled down to a desire on the part of its citizens to be liberated from “the burden of medieval religion.”54 Others feel that analysis is too simplistic and “lacking in discrimination.”55 The Protestant Reformation did not proceed in a systematic and uniform way; in its teaching, reception, or impact nor were the Protestant reforms always permanent:

There were, of course, immediate and enthusiastic converts, demonstrating their contempt for the old order in iconoclastic words and actions [as well as] reports from German towns in the early 1520s of people wiping their backsides with the indulgence letters they had purchased a short time before. . . . But alongside this there is much evidence of slow and grudging compliance with the new ordinances and sometimes outright resistance.”56

53. Ozment, Reform in the Cities, 35.

54. Ozment, Reform in the Cities, 32


And “despite the [eventual] abolition of purgatory, there remained right across Northern Europe ‘a thick sub-stratum of Protestant popular belief about spirits, ghosts, poltergeists, restless souls.’” At the same time, testamentary evidence from some German towns reveals “the virtual disappearance of the traditional Catholic commendation formula [that funded endowments for monastic intercession]” even among its Catholic citizens. “The intense fear of death and the great uncertainty over eternal salvation which characterized popular piety in Germany on the eve of the Reformation seemed to have been mitigated by a trustful hope in the merits of Christ’s sufferings and God’s boundless mercy among both Lutherans and the Catholics.”

With this lack of uniformity, can any conclusions be reached about the public reaction to the Protestant challenge to Purgatory? Two come to mind. First, distain for the Church and its “mortuary” funding did not emerge overnight. As Jo Ann McNamara states, “the theological revolution opened the festering wounds of old resentments.” In the earliest years of the Reformation we see profound disrespect for the clergy and religious already on display—in pamphlets, tracts, poems, plays and artwork generated by the laity. One of the more colorful, from the early 1520s, is the play by Nicholas Manuel, Die Totenfresser

57. Marshall, “Leaving This World,” 188, n. 17. (See Bob Schribner, “Introduction,” in Schribner and Johnson, *Popular Religion*, 10.) These were the souls—given currency in the visionary literature—that appeared to the living and begged for prayers to relieve their suffering in Purgatory. The “insistence of the pastors,” echoing Luther, that these apparitions might be demonic, “failed to convince their hearers.” Marshall, “Leaving This World,” 188. Stephen Greenblatt suggests that the ghost in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1601) is a nod to belief in Purgatory that was forced underground in Protestant England. Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, 248-249.


60. McNamara, *Sisters*, 421.
 (“Devourers of the Dead”), which satirizes sixteen different personages in the Church from the pope to a priest’s concubine. The drama opens with a dialogue between a priest and the officer in charge of the sacred objects (the sacristan): “[The priest] praises death as a great windfall: ‘the more the better / Would that there were ten corpses . . .!’ The sacristan agrees: ‘I like dead people better than fighting and screwing / They are our food and pay.’ Praying for them is ‘more fun than baptizing children!’”61 The pope is the first to speak and concludes with this eulogy to the dead:

Church offerings, weekly, monthly, and annual masses for the dead.
Bring us more than enough.
Pity the hardship it inflicts upon the children of the givers!
But if we will now just take care
We can remain free and secure
In no way bound to any layman
Neither by tolls, taxes, or other burdens.
We owe only holy water, salt and three hazel nuts!
—On earth none have it better than us.
Indulgences lend a hand
By making men fearful of penance.
We also put a lot of stock in purgatory
(Although Scripture doesn’t have much to say about it).
The reason is that we must use every chance
To scare the hell out of common folk.
For that is what keeps the cover on our deception.
. . . . So let us plague and punish the world
For wine, grain, meat and cash
And be thankful to the dead
Who make it possible for us to fleece the living.62

The pope is followed by a cardinal, then a bishop and so on. Eventually an abbot appears on stage expressing frustration that “the common folk have stopped buying indulgences, refuse to give alms, no longer fear the ban [of excommunication], and cannot be persuaded to


62. Ozment, Reformation in the Cities, 112-113 and n. 213.
endow masses and anniversaries for the dead.”63 When it is the nun’s turn, she “confesses to having a guilty conscience about the easy alms, indulgences, and endowments that come the way of nunneries that do nothing for mankind but are very profitable to the pope.”64 As seen in Manuel’s play, it is clear—and here is a second conclusion—that economic considerations were uniquely and inextricably bound to growing public opposition to the theology of Purgatory and its attendant practices. After all, these practices hit commoners (one expects, disproportionately so) where it hurt most—in their pocketbooks.

It was not just individual parishioners who were impacted by the funding of monastic intercession. Towns and cities could be affected. In his essay entitled “The Reformation, Purgatory, and Perpetual Rents in the Revolt of 1525 at Frankfurt am Main,” Lawrence Buck describes a particular type of financial exchange that developed in the Middle Ages to transfer funds from wealthy individuals to cash-strapped property owners.65 The seller—perhaps “a merchant in need of capital for his trade”—would obligate himself and his heirs to pay “rent charges” to the buyer for a set term or even sometimes in perpetuity.66 What does this financial exchange have to do with the monasteries? Rent charges were considered real property and therefore could be taxed, sold or bequeathed to others with many going to churches and monasteries to fund monastic intercession67 and these sale of rent charges

63. Ozment, Reformation in the Cities, 115 and n. 221.

64. Ozment, Reformation in the Cities, 115 and n. 226, emphasis added. Endowments secured the nuns’ ongoing prayers for the dead.


became a popular investment vehicle for monasteries. But here is the rub—rent charges transferred to churches and monasteries were tax exempt and the impact on city coffers could be significant. In the city of Frankfurt, the focus of his study, Buck found that:

Sixteenth century inventories of ecclesiastical rent charges show thousands of rents owned to the collegiate and monastic churches. . . . [and] approximately one-third of all real estate in the city was held in mortmain [perpetual ownership by the Church], and the ever-expanding number of clerical rent charges not only burdened the citizenry and contributed to urban blight [as properties were abandoned], it also deprived the city of part of its tax base.

Frankfurt city councils, over a period of several hundred years, made several attempts to remedy the situation but the clergy “circumvented” each of these efforts, “leaving the city fathers in a weak position” to face citizen unrest in the sixteenth century.

“In many towns,” observes Erik Midelfort, “the first recorded stirrings of religious rebellion centered on the arrival of a preacher.” True to form, protests in Frankfurt came on the heels of the first “evangelical” sermons preached in the parish church of St. Catherine’s monastery from 1522-24. These citizen-protests echoed the same themes being preached in the sermons that were attacking perpetual rents, the endowment of masses, and the doctrine of Purgatory. A citizen group known as the “Evangelical Brothers” formed and began engaging in theological disputes with local monks over the doctrine of Purgatory. One

69. Buck, “Perpetual Rents,” Pietas, 26; emphasis added.
altercation involved a Dominican lector, prompted by the sermon he preached on All Souls’ Day—the day in which intercessory prayer for souls residing in Purgatory is emphasized. “Later these same men presented the [monks] with five articles . . . to provide scriptural proof for the rejection of the doctrine of purgatory.”75 These altercations prompted the Dominicans to “ask the council for protection.”76 Within a few years of the printing of Luther’s Theses, towns like Wittenberg were experiencing popular uprisings in which “townspeople . . . expressed their dislike of the non-reforming clergy by pelting them with stones and mud.”77 They interrupted sermons, shouted down priests and “subjected images, relics and other religious objects to the same disrespect . . . they threw rocks through stained glass windows, tipped over holy water founts, subjected relics and holy images to ridicule and abuse, then damaged and destroyed them.”78 All of this would eventually lead to a massive insurrection that took place in Germany in 1524 and 1525 known as the Peasants War with the monasteries and cloisters becoming special targets for destruction.

Did the vehemence of the public challenge to Purgatory in Frankfurt (menacing enough to prompt the monks to ask for protection) arise out of genuine religious conviction or a belief that the doctrine was the linchpin in practices that enriched the monasteries at the expense of the worshipper and the community? How much did writings and performances like Die Totenfresser (in which the doctrine and funding of Purgatory was a special target)


78. Baylor, The German Reformation and the Peasants’ War, 11.
contribute to the “violent anticlericalism” that was present in the early stages of the
Reformation? Making a direct correlation will need more work. Still, given the horrors
awaiting unperfected souls in Purgatory, it begs the question: why would the laity attack the
very individuals, objects, and institutions that could give postmortem relief unless belief in
the doctrine itself was on the wane?

The Convents Respond to the Protestant Challenge to Purgatory

Luther’s writings and transcribed sermons, like other popular religious works,
naturally made their way into the convents—with mixed reception. Here is an entry from an
“old cloister chronicle” at Inzigkofen recorded in 1520:

At this time it happened that a Sermon was lent to our convent that the above mentioned doctor
[Luther] had made about the Lord’s Prayer. This was read at table and pleased all so much that
some copied down some points from it. But immediately afterward our father confessor Phillip
gave an exortation [sic] ordering that those who had copied down something of Luther’s
teaching, be it little or much, should turn it in or do without communion.80

At St. Mary Magdalene’s at Freiburg, on the other hand, Ursula of Münsterberg began
“bringing Luther’s books into her convent with the help of a noble aunt” and in response to
those teachings, “secured the appointment” of a Lutheran confessor, installed a Lutheran
prioress, and “persuaded about fifty of the Magdalene’s seventy-seven nuns to become
Lutheran”81 (revealing a remarkable degree of influence and standing considering that she
was not the abbess). In spite of these reforms, Ursula, who entered the convent as a child
following the death of her parents, felt compelled to leave escaping with two other nuns

79. Ozment, Reformation in the Cities, 45.

80. Winston-Allen, Convent Chronicles, 193, n. 111. (See “Die Gissenhof’sche Chronik des
Klosters Inzigkofen,” ed. Theodor Dreher Freiburger Katholischtes Kirchenblatt 38 (1894): cols. 476-
77.)

81. McNamara, Sisters, 420.
while the rest were in choir.\textsuperscript{82} The nuns who had remained Catholic “denounced the blasphemy of their preacher but in the end were apparently content to remain where they were under a Lutheran prioress”—an illustration, McNamara observes, of how some nuns “placed their communal life above their theological commitments.”\textsuperscript{83} There is more to this story. Ursula was not just a member of the nobility but the granddaughter of a king,\textsuperscript{84} a duchess and countess in her own right. Ursula’s uncle George was the powerful Duke of Saxony who, while sympathetic to the need for reform in the Church, became an ardent opponent of the Reformation. Much to his dismay, many in his family became Protestant, including his brother Heinrich and son-in-law, Philip, the Landgrave of Hesse. To add insult to injury, his cousin Fredrick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, was Luther’s protector. Though George combined forces with Philip and Frederick to suppress the peasant revolt of 1525, he soon joined with other German Catholic rulers (including Albert of Mainz) to form the League of Dessau to “protect Catholic interests.”\textsuperscript{85} As part of that effort, George sought to unite the now “almost vacant monasteries” in his territory.\textsuperscript{86}

These family and conventual histories illustrate the variety of outcomes for the convents in Germany as Protestant ideas swept through the land: some resisted and remained Catholic, some were reorganized as Protestant institutions, and some dissolved—either

\textsuperscript{82} McNamara, \textit{Sisters}, 420 and 421.

\textsuperscript{83} McNamara, \textit{Sisters}, 421.

\textsuperscript{84} Poděbrady of Bohemia.


\textsuperscript{86} Heinrich Creutzberg, “George the Bearded.”
through abandonment (like Duke George’s vacant monasteries), attrition (many town councils prevented convents from accepting novices), or forced closure although, as McNamara states, “the power of the Catholic emperor and Catholic nobles prevented German Protestants from using the sweeping methods of Thomas Cromwell.”

To what degree did the theological challenge to Purgatory directly impact female convent life? First, it became part of the “canon” of criticisms leveled at the convents as illustrated in the “Short Chronicle” of Jeanne de Jussie (d. 1561), a nun at Saint Clare’s in Geneva:

They [the Protestant “heretics”] completely condemned the Holy Mass as worthless and the divine sacraments as filthy and abominable things and all the other sacraments of the holy church.

Also, they called the Virgin Mary an immoral woman, with no power or merit before God, and they also said that all the saints in paradise were worth no more than men in this world, and less.

Also, they said that there was no purgatory and that no one should pray for the departed after their death because they would be judged at the end of the world and sent to paradise or to hell eternally.

Second, in convents that “survived as protestant [sic] establishments,” prayers and practices related to Purgatory-relief were banned or went underground and the devotional objects used in those practices were confiscated, including choir and prayer books, relics “and other holy things.” In Nürnberg, “the mass, the five sacraments, and other aspects of their divine services were prohibited. . . . prayers to the saints were abolished and the Salve Regina prohibited.”

A third impact to the convents was financial, including a decline in revenue

87. McNamara, Sisters, 439. Cromwell carried out the king’s “reform” and dissolution of monasteries in England in the 1530’s.


89. McNamara, Sisters, 444.

90. McNamara, Sisters, 443.
from endowments given to secure the nuns’ ongoing prayers for the dead. In many towns, rulers and city councils took over the financial management of the convents (previously in the hands of the abbess). When the town of Kitzingen “moved to take control of parish churches [it established] a common chest in 1523 to finance the schools, orphanages, and hospitals supported by the abbey.” Seeing the handwriting on the wall, “the abbess adjusted swiftly. As early as May 1524 she invited a lay peasant preacher to preach against the cult of the saints [and] although she told the margrave that she was neutral toward Lutheran preaching, she convinced the townspeople that she was sympathetic.”91

Finally, and more consequentially, the Protestant challenge to Purgatory forced many nuns in Germany to redefine not only their theology but their cherished vocation:

The pamphleteers all agreed that the nuns’ vows were invalid, their rules based on those of man, not God, and their enclosure spiritually elitist. But in the end, the most damning charge against the convents was made almost universally; they were no longer useful. It was not merely that corruption and human learning had ruined the cloister; the writers attacked its very raison d’être. Prayers, singing and religious contemplation were all deemed useless in helping society gain salvation.92

Amy Leonard writes that the nuns’ commitment to help “free souls trapped in Purgatory” through their daily liturgical tasks was no longer valued and even seen as “selfish.”93 Christ’s command to “love thy neighbor” (Matt. 22:29), became the measure of one’s usefulness to society expressed in tangible service to the community. The task of the reformers was to make the convents useful again. Kaspar Nützel, the superintendent of Caritas Pirckheimer’s convent in Nürnberg (and city council member), “laid out the clearest plan for reinventing

91. McNamara, Sisters, 432.


93. Leonard, Nails in the Wall, 50.
the convents where ‘young children could learn Christian discipline, doctrine, and manners’ [and] the old nuns who did not want to leave the cloister would thus be rehabilitated as teachers.”\textsuperscript{94} Nützel also drafted a plan for devotional life within the cloister. Amy Leonard summarizes,

The things nuns should do and learn within the cloister: hold to God above all others, read the Bible, hear daily Protestant sermons, and read the books of Luther. Because the cloister helped no one in its fasting and prayers, these should be replaced by studying Luther’s writings about good works, confession, cloister vows, and the Mass . . . . \textit{Nuns should stop: singing the hours, the Salve Regina, and Beate Virginis} and replace them with Christian prayers based on the true faith. For example, at matins they should read Luther’s sermons on the Old and New Testament; during meals, his writings on human doctrine and laws.\textsuperscript{95}

This “increasing emphasis on utility was not limited to Protestantism,” Leonard writes, “but appeared in Catholicism as well, as shown in the new active ethos of the Counter-Reformation.”\textsuperscript{96} She adds,

Although early modern Catholic society still viewed convents as both spiritually and practically useful, more emphasis was placed on the social, political and economic roles these houses played within society. Convents were also schools, orphanages, hospices, halfway houses for repentant sinners, retirement homes, asylums, and centers of learning and artistic expression.\textsuperscript{97}

What happened to the nuns in convents forced to close? Some were able to transfer to other houses. Some married or found jobs or returned home (reluctantly or willingly). But “hundreds of nuns all over Germany were left homeless and without means of support.”\textsuperscript{98} In a pamphlet written in the mid-1500s, following the German Peasants’ War, the Catholic humanist and Lutheran opponent Johannes Cochlaeus “lamented the lot of aged and indigent

\textsuperscript{94} Leonard, \textit{Nails in the Wall}, 56 and note 123. (See Noricus Philadelphus [Kaspar Nützel], \textit{Wie alle Klöster}, fol. Biv.)

\textsuperscript{95} Leonard, \textit{Nails in the Wall}, 56, emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{96} Leonard, \textit{Nails in the Wall}, 153.

\textsuperscript{97} Leonard, \textit{Nails in the Wall}, 153.

\textsuperscript{98} McNamara, \textit{Sisters}, 448.
women who, after having prayed for their fellow creatures for decades, were forced out of their cloisters with nowhere to go and no bread to eat.”99 While many female convents in Germany would survive, either as Catholic or Protestant establishments, the men’s houses often did not.100 The impact of the closures would be felt differently. Monks were still priests and pastors and could perform their ecclesiastical duties under the new regime (and many of the earliest advocates of the Reformation were former monks). For the nuns, however—including those who converted to Protestantism like Ursula of Münsterberg—it meant the complete reordering of their lives and the loss of their vocational identity as the “prayer warriors” of Purgatory.

99. McNamara, Sisters, 448 and n. 40. (See Franz L. Baumann, Quellen zur Geschichte des Bauernkriegs in Oberschwaben (Tübingen: Litterarischer Verein, 1876), 685.)

100. Following the Diet of Augsburg in 1526, “Protestant territories were released from Catholic discipline, and management of monastic goods passed to lords who openly declared themselves Lutheran. Monkeries were universally dissolved and prince abbots became secular princes.” McNamara, Sisters, 432.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

By the late Middle Ages, the doctrine of Purgatory had become the *raison d'être* of female convent life, particularly in northern Europe. Its extraordinary reach into the lives of Christians in the West would be hard to overstate. While the Protestant debate over the legitimacy of monastic “vows” was consequential for the convents, it did not fundamentally change their mission. And while justification by faith was, indeed, the central doctrine of the Reformation, it was the theological challenge to Purgatory that, in part, defined the terms of change in the day-to-day lives of the nuns. No longer focused on praying souls out of Purgatory, the nuns’ “usefulness” to the community would have to be expressed in more tangible ways. Conventual life in Germany continued to be sure but divested of much of its medieval content even within Roman Catholicism.

This study began by considering the ubiquity of Purgatory on the eve of the Reformation, summarizing the theology that gave it life, and sketching its historical development in the West. The core research looked at how the funding and liturgy of Purgatory shaped and sustained monastic life and how the virgin ascetics of the fourth century became the medieval “prayer warriors” of Purgatory. Having established Purgatory’s defining role in medieval convent life, it explored the Protestant challenge—specifically the Lutheran challenge—to the doctrine, the public reaction to that challenge, and the German convents’ response. The question was asked: To what degree, if any, did the Protestant challenge to Purgatory directly impact female convent life in Reformation Germany? Four
conclusions were reached: first, the Protestant challenge to Purgatory became part of the “canon” of criticisms leveled at the convents; second, prayers and practices related to Purgatory-relief were banned and devotional objects confiscated in the convents that became Protestant; third, revenue from endowments, given to secure the nuns’ ongoing prayers for the dead, declined; and finally, the theological challenge to Purgatory forced many nuns in Germany to change not only their theological commitments but their cherished vocation.

Further research is needed to firm up these conclusions, but it seems reasonable to conclude that once the convents became “wedded” to Purgatory, their ongoing viability would be linked to the viability of the doctrine itself.

What applications can be made from this research and these conclusions? First, though the plight of the nuns was tragic, this study is not a lament over the loss of conventual life as it was practiced in the Middle Ages. Moderns who look nostalgically upon ancient monastic life (as a way to preserve Church and family in the midst of a declining culture\(^1\)) or to Christian mysticism (as a way to recover a more “authentic” Christianity\(^2\)), tend to gloss over what Bynum calls “the savagery of some medieval asceticism, the sentimentality of much medieval preaching, [and] the sexism of medieval (and modern) society.”\(^3\) Second, I

\(^1\) “As our civilization seems to be going the way of the Roman empire, more Christians among its nations are asking themselves—and one another—how to be latter-day St. Benedicts who preserve the living faith that gave birth to our own civilizations amid empire’s fall.” Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2018), xix.

\(^2\) “There is nothing more important, I believe, for the future of the mystical renaissance that is struggling to be born everywhere in the West—and thus for the future of the planet—than an authentic and unsparing recovery of the full range, power and glory of the Christian mystical tradition.” Andrew Harvey, *Teachings of the Christian Mystics* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1998), xix.

\(^3\) “However beautiful the prose of Catherine of Siena or the poetry of Hadewijch, the actual lives of some late medieval women must give us pause.” Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and
cannot agree with Wesleyan philosopher Jerry Walls that Protestants should reconsider the idea of Purgatory and incorporate it into their theology of salvation. Purgatory, at the end of the day, is based on very thin ice: questionable inferences and interpretations of Scripture, the presumption of an ancient practice (praying for the dead) that has no biblical warrant, a belief that was popularized by visions, and given sanction in the writings of certain Church fathers. It would be a serious mistake, however, to write off the teachings of any Church father (or Church tradition itself) just because he entertained the idea of Purgatory. Augustine, Aquinas, Gregory of Nyssa, and the like, all made vital contributions to the Christian faith. While the Word of God is infallible, it is good to remember that even the most brilliant interpreter of Scripture, ancient or contemporary, can err. Purgatory rightly belongs to a system of salvation that requires some measure of human contribution to reach heaven’s shores—God initiates, man cooperates. Protestants and Catholics can debate this very significant divide and yet still come together on the many truths that unite us, especially those summarized in the ancient creeds that we jointly confess.

Is Purgatory a doctrine on which Christians today, like the nuns of the Middle Ages, should build their lives? It is doubtful, and perhaps disingenuous to suggest, that Roman Catholics would support that view today. The more relevant question to ask is this: On what foundation do we as twenty-first-century Christians—Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox—build our theologies, lives and churches? Building a theology on obscure inferences and arguable interpretations of Scripture, culturally driven beliefs and practices, personal


experience, and popular Christian literature that embodies these tendencies is not just a weakness in the ancient and medieval Church. The Apostle Paul, in his preface to what would become the key proof text for Purgatory, gives this counsel: “Each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:10-11, NIV). May we all build well.

On a final note: Earlier this year I attended a series of lectures on medieval art and piety given by eminent scholars and historians from prestigious museums and universities in Europe and America. I was surprised that this formidable presence that defined so much of medieval Europe and preeminently monastic life—Purgatory—was not even mentioned (at least in the three sessions I attended). Pictures of artifacts were shown (relics, altarpieces, paintings and Horae illustrations, and so on) from Germany, England and elsewhere and were rightly admired for their artistic and historic value. But the religious significance of these artifacts was referred to only tangentially. In fact, it was left to someone in the audience to ask how they were used in medieval religious devotion. The lecturer made no mention of Purgatory, saying only that the relics (under discussion) were thought to have supernatural healing properties. My point is not to criticize—every lecture I attended was excellent and informative—but to suggest that there may be room in the field of medieval studies for greater awareness and appreciation of Purgatory’s defining role in medieval life and piety.
APPENDIX I
A REFORMED EXEGESIS OF 1 CORINTHIANS 3:10-15

Origen’s application of Paul’s metaphor to postmortem purgation in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 became the major biblical proof text arguing for the existence of Purgatory. But this interpretation would run aground with the Reformers. Under the *ad fontes* (“back to the fountain/sources”) scholarship of the humanists, “the [now] fourfold sense of Scripture was gradually abandoned, and the principle established that the Bible had but one sense.” ¹ The Protestant reformers would call this “the plain meaning” of the text² and situate that text in its grammatical, literary and historical context. Returning to the passage in question, the Apostle Paul is writing to a church he established on his second missionary journey, a church that is now experiencing serious disorder: factionalism, self-promotion and pride, sexual immorality, public lawsuits between its members, impropriety in worship, abuse in the Lord’s Supper, and unloving disorder in the expression of spiritual gifts. Despite the disorder and serious sin in the church, Paul speaks to the congregants as fellow-believers. As the letter begins, he laments the report of serious division in the Church where some are boasting that they follow Paul and others that they follow Apollos. We are merely servants, Paul says,


“through whom you came to believe” (1 Cor. 3:5). One plants, another waters, but it is God who makes things grow. As the key passage begins, Paul switches metaphors from the field to a building and makes these points: 1) He (Paul) laid the foundation of the church at Corinth others are building on it. 2) Each one must take care how they build for there can be only one foundation on which the Church is built and that is Jesus Christ. 3) Although everyone may be building on the same foundation of faith in Christ, not everyone is building Christ’s church with the same quality of materials; some are building with gold, silver and costly stones, others with wood, hay and straw. For Origen, the former category represented those saints who were pure enough to pass through the fire of judgment and enter heaven immediately, the latter were those who must first be purged of remaining lesser sins after death. But Paul is not speaking of sins that will be purged in the fire but works. And when will that fire of judgment take place? There is no suggestion here of an interim period of postmortem purgation; “the Day” in Scripture always refers to the Day of God’s judgment at the end of the age. Finally, in the context of the entire letter, chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians—the “love chapter”—seems to be the culmination of what Paul is getting at in 3:10-15:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

. . . Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres (1 Cor. 13:1-7).

Using this passage to interpret Paul’s building metaphor: The works that will not stand the fire of God’s judgment at the end of the age (and thus, not be rewarded) are those done with a spirit of pride, self-promotion and the absence of love. It is not the mere performance of one’s spiritual gift that gains reward but the heart’s disposition behind the gift.
GLOSSARY OF CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL TERMS

**absolution.** “The declaration by a bishop or priest that the sins of a person who has repented and confessed have been forgiven.” (GTT)

**alms.** Voluntary contributions to the needy “as an act of penance or charity.” (GTT)

**beatific vision.** The unmediated vision of God seen by “all the saints in heaven.” (WHMT)

**breviary.** Also known as the Divine Office, “refers to a collection of the official daily prayers of the Church . . . that are to be recited at various hours of the day.” (GTT)

**canonical hours.** The sevenfold division of monastic prayer marking the hours of the day: matins (midnight), lauds (3 am), prime (6 am), terce (9 am), sext (noon), none (3 pm), vespers (6 pm) and compline (9 pm). Each of the hours includes set “office” of Scripture reading, prayers, and hymns. Also known as the Divine Office or Breviary.

**collect.** A short, structured prayer used in corporate worship.

**confraternities.** Lay brotherhoods formed for charitable or religious purposes.

**creed.** Summary statement of belief “recited at Baptism, Mass, and other services.” (GTT)

**De Profundis.** The Latin title of a prayer chant based on the opening line of Psalm 130: *Out of the depths* I have cried to The O Lord!

**deuterocanonical books.** A secondary canon of seven books accepted as authoritative by the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches but not part of the Hebrew or Protestant canons which are based on the Masoretic text.

**dirge.** A funeral lament.

**expiation.** The reparation made for sin through penance.

**indulgence.** The Church’s remission of the temporal debt due for sins already forgiven. Indulgences can be gained, for oneself or the deceased in purgatory, through good works known as suffrages like prayer, fasting and almsgiving. They can be plenary (full) or partial and are granted on the basis of the infinite merits of Christ and the saints which are dispensed by the Church from the “treasury of merits.” The medieval system of indulgences included the exchange of remission of sins for contributions to the Church.

**keys, the power of.** “The authority of the Pope to govern the universal Church and . . . the power of absolution accorded to priests to forgive sins in the sacrament of Reconciliation [or Penance]” based on Matt 16:19. (GTT)
**merit.** The reward (*meritum*) that “God freely promises and gratuitously gives” to those who perform good works in this life and are in a state of grace. (GTT)

**mortal sin.** “A deadly or serious sin that turns a person away from God and destroys charity in that person’s heart. For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must be present (1) a serious matter as indicated by the Ten Commandments, (2) full knowledge of the serious sinfulness of the act, and (3) free and deliberate consent. (GTT)

**pater noster.** Latin for “Our Father” from the opening words of the prayer Jesus taught his disciples recorded in Matthew (6:9-13) and Luke (11:2-4).

**penance.** A sacrament in the Latin Church since the Middle Ages. Penance is the means of grace by which sinners are reconciled to God and His Church following the commission of sins after baptism. The steps to reconciliation include contrition, confession and satisfaction. The role of the confessor is to assess the gravity of the sin(s), assign the appropriate works of penance and pronounce absolution or forgiveness.

**psalter.** The Old Testament book of Psalms.

**Psalter of Our Lady.** The recitation of 150 Hail Mary’s, one for each Psalm.

**sacring.** The moment of consecration in the Mass where, in the teaching of the Catholic Church, the substance of the bread and wine in the Eucharist become the literal body and blood of Christ.

**state of grace.** The condition of being in God’s friendship, free from mortal sin.

**tariffed penance.** The linking of specific sins with specific acts of penance introduced by the Irish.

**temporal debt.** According to Catholic theology, Christ’s redemptive work on the cross removed the eternal but not the temporal penalty of sin; the Justice of God and Scripture requires the sinner to make that payment. Matthew 5:26 is the passage most cited in support of this view: “Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny” (NIV).

**transubstantiation.** “The medieval philosophical term . . . [used] to describe the change that occurs at the consecration of the Mass when the whole substance of the bread and wine is changed into the substance of the body and blood of Christ, although the appearance or accidents of bread and wine remain.” (GTT)

**venial sin.** “Less serious sins which, while turning a person away from God, do not destroy a person’s basic relationship with God.” (GTT)

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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