

## IS THERE ROOM FOR HITLER IN HEAVEN?

Theologically, the Catholic Church's teaching is that we must believe there is a hell, and we must believe we are capable of making choices such that we would end up there, separated from God and others. But we are NOT committed to believing that any person is actually in hell. But surely Hitler...?

It is cases like this that make the strongest appeal to the theology of and need for purgatory, not as a place of fire and torture, but as a process of purification. This is, after all, what the word 'purgatory' means: a purgation or purification. Let me explain a possible scenario as an illustration.

Hitler's life and deeds were consummately evil. No amount of rationalization can even begin to face the horror of the extermination camps and the millions of Jews and others (including Catholics and gypsies) liquidated under the Nazi regime. But as God is a God of justice, those victims of injustice are surely in that place of refreshment, light and peace of which our liturgy (Eucharistic Prayer #1) speaks. I think nothing speaks to me of this conviction more powerfully than the final scene of *Les Miserables*.

To be in heaven, to be part of God's Kingdom, is to be a person completely healed and therefore capable of forgiving and loving. This is one side of the equation.

The other must believe that Hitler's choices, evil and odious as they were, might have been the result of other things besides free will (C. S. Lewis is strong on this, in *Mere Christianity*, though his example is Himmler). Alternatively, before his cyanide capsule fully took effect, he may well have come to a true belief in the evil of his actions and repented (as the 'Good Thief' in Lk. 23:39-43). Even the Prodigal Son, with halfhearted remorse, was welcomed home by the Father (Lk. 15:11-32). But while the reality of welcome must be clear, the process would not be quite so easy...

John Henry Newman (in his poem "The Dream of Gerontius") suggested that the process of realizing we are face-to-face with Love Absolute will produce a remorse unlike anything we can ever imagine; we will completely and totally confront every example of un-love in our lives, and that will be "our veriest, truest purgatory." Hitler would do the same. And the image I have, for his 'purgatory,' is the image of the restorative justice meetings between victims and criminals, modeled on the "Truth & Reconciliation" sessions in post-apartheid South Africa.

Hitler would have to confront each and every person who was killed in the Nazi camps, one at a time. He would have to listen to each and every story of their suffering. And he would have to ask forgiveness of each and every one. They, being heavenly and

healed at this point, would be capable of giving forgiveness. He, by having to deal with everyone in his life, would come through the purifying process with no magic wand to make the past disappear, nor without supplying some sense of satisfaction and restorative justice to his victims.

One can easily see why, from our temporal point of view, we refer (inaccurately but by analogy) to “time spent in Purgatory”! Would such an experience be intense? Could it be truly restorative? I believe the answer to both questions is YES.

Now shift the paradigm—how would this process be played out, if it were WE and not Hitler? Who are the ones who would be sitting across the table from us, confronting us with our evil and yet willing, once we truly were confronted and repented, to forgive and heal us? Would this be a price we would think too great or too unfair to pay? We might actually choose to leave the table (read: choose the hell of self alone). Is such a choice possible? I suggest C. S. Lewis’s imaginative work *The Great Divorce* to see how folks could make exactly this choice...

This is an awesome notion that to my mind properly respects free will, issues of God’s mercy and justice, and the dignity of victims. But it is simply my notion, and at best is an analogy. But consider it for what it is worth, and see the place and value of Purgatory in God’s great scheme of salvation for the world.