HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Tracing Christian Doctrine Through Church History

MARY, SAINTS & THE AFTERLIFE

Purgatory, indulgences, intercession, and the state after death

Reading Packet

Reading 1 - Irenaeus: Mary and Eve

Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book III, chapter 22 (late 2nd century) - condensed reading

Irenaeus develops a parallel between Eve and Mary within his larger theology of Christ's recapitulation of humanity. Eve, while still a virgin, participated in humanity's disobedience; Mary, also a virgin, responds to God's message with obedience and becomes the mother of the incarnate Christ.

The point is fundamentally Christological and redemptive. Mary matters because the Son truly enters human history through her and reverses Adam's disobedience. Her obedient faith is contrasted with Eve's unbelief.

This early text is important in later Marian theology, but it should not simply be read backward as if it already contained medieval doctrines of immaculate conception, assumption, or universal mediation. It shows the early growth of theological reflection on Mary's place in the incarnation.

Reading 2 - Ephesus: Why the Church Called Mary Theotokos

Council of Ephesus (431), with Cyril of Alexandria's Christological argument - condensed reading

The title Theotokos, often translated 'God-bearer' or 'Mother of God,' became a flashpoint in the controversy over Nestorius. The question was not whether Mary originated the divine nature. The question was whether the one born from her is truly the one eternal Son.

To deny Theotokos could imply that Mary's son was a human person merely associated with the divine Word. Cyril and the council therefore used the title to protect the unity of Christ's person: the one whom Mary bore according to his humanity is truly God the Son incarnate.

The later history of Marian devotion goes far beyond this fifth-century controversy. Ephesus is best read first as a statement about who Christ is, even though the title also increased Mary's prominence in Christian piety.

Reading 3 - Augustine: Prayer for the Dead and Possible Purification

Augustine, Enchiridion and City of God, Book XXI (early 5th century) - condensed reading

Augustine accepts the practice of praying for some of the Christian dead and believes the church's prayers and Eucharistic offerings may benefit those who died in fellowship with Christ but still require mercy. He does not imagine that such prayers can reverse every final judgment.

He also speculates about a purifying fire after death for certain believers, but his language is noticeably tentative. Augustine does not present the fully developed medieval doctrine of purgatory as a settled system.

His writings nevertheless provide important building blocks for later Western teaching: postmortem purification, suffrages for the dead, and a distinction between those beyond help and those who may still benefit from the church's prayers.

Reading 4 - Thomas Aquinas: Saints, Intercession, and Purgatory

Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae and Supplement on prayer, the saints, and purification after death (13th century) - condensed reading

Aquinas integrates several practices that had developed over centuries. The saints in glory are alive in God and united in charity with the church on earth. Because Christians ask one another for prayer, Aquinas sees no contradiction in asking glorified saints to intercede before God.

He distinguishes the worship owed to God from the honor given to saints. Christ remains the unique mediator in the sense that salvation comes through him, while the prayers of saints are understood as subordinate participation in the communion of the body of Christ.

Aquinas also treats purgatory as a postmortem purification for those who die in grace but still require cleansing from the temporal effects of sin. The prayers, almsgiving, and Eucharistic suffrages of the living can assist such souls. By the high Middle Ages these ideas form a coherent theological system.

Reading 5 - Trent: Saints, Relics, Images, Purgatory, and Indulgences

Council of Trent, Session XXV (1563) - condensed reading

Trent affirms that the saints reigning with Christ offer prayers to God for human beings and that Christians may invoke their intercession. Honor shown to relics and sacred images is defended while abuses and superstition are condemned.

The council also reaffirms purgatory and directs bishops to teach it carefully without encouraging speculative or sensational claims. The faithful may aid the dead through the church's prayers and especially through the Eucharistic sacrifice.

Trent retains indulgences while condemning abuses connected with them. An indulgence concerns temporal punishment associated with forgiven sin, not the purchase of forgiveness itself. The Reformation controversy showed, however, how easily popular practice could blur such distinctions.

Reading 6 - Augsburg Confession: Honor the Saints, Do Not Invoke Them

Augsburg Confession, Article XXI (1530) - condensed reading

The Lutheran confession allows Christians to remember and honor the saints. Their lives can encourage gratitude for God's mercy, strengthen faith, and provide examples of faithful vocation.

It rejects, however, the practice of invoking saints for help. Scripture presents Christ as the one mediator, high priest, advocate, and intercessor whom believers are commanded to call upon.

The argument is therefore not that Christians should forget the historic saints. It is that commemoration and imitation must not become devotional invocation that, in the Reformers' judgment, obscures the sufficiency of Christ's mediation.

Reading 7 - John Calvin: Christ's Mediation and the Rejection of Purgatory

John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book III, chapters 20 and 25 (1559) - condensed reading

Calvin's doctrine of prayer centers on direct access to the Father through Christ. He rejects invocation of the saints because Scripture directs prayer to God and identifies Christ as the mediator through whom believers approach.

He also rejects purgatory as unsupported by Scripture and as a threat to the sufficiency of Christ's atonement. At death believers are with Christ and await the resurrection; the wicked await judgment. There is no intermediate process in which satisfactions are completed by purgatorial punishment.

For Calvin, the pastoral issue is assurance. The believer's hope after death rests on Christ's finished work, not on a continuing economy of postmortem satisfactions aided by the merits or prayers of others.

Reading 8 - Westminster: Communion of Saints and the State after Death

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapters 26 and 32 (1646) - condensed reading

Westminster strongly affirms the communion of saints. Believers united to Christ also share fellowship in one another's gifts and graces and are obligated to mutual service. Yet this communion does not authorize worship or invocation of any saint.

At death the body returns to dust while the soul immediately returns to God. The souls of the righteous are made perfect in holiness and received into heaven; the souls of the wicked are reserved for judgment. The confession denies any additional intermediate place for souls.

The Christian dead therefore remain members of Christ's redeemed people, but the living are not instructed to seek their mediation. Hope is directed toward resurrection, final judgment, and everlasting life through Christ.