IN MEMORIAM
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A Reminiscence

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The Debate over the Patristic Texts on Purgatory at the Council of Ferrara-Florence, 1438

James Jorgenson

The Council of Florence was summoned to heal the schism between the Eastern and Western Churches. The Latins hoped that the restoration of unity between the Roman pope and the Greek Church would strengthen his position against the conciliarists, whose council was still in session at Basel, and the Greeks desperately yearned for military aid from the western princes to relieve the beleaguered city of Constantinople which was under threat of Turkish invasion.

The chief differences which divided the Churches at that time were the Procession of the Holy Spirit (the filioque addition to the Creed of Nicea), the Eucharistic Sacrifice in leavened or unleavened bread, the position of the Roman pope in the ecclesiology of the Church, and the doctrine of purgatory. Although the reunion council is known historically as the Council of Florence, the first sessions of the council were held in the city of Ferrara, whence at the approach of the plague the council members adjourned to Florence. The first session began on Holy Saturday, April 9, 1438. The principal representatives of the Greek Church were Patriarch Joseph of Constantinople, the Byzantine Emperor John VIII Paleologus, and the Metropolitan Mark Eugenicus of Ephesus and Bessarion of Nicea. The main spokesmen for the Latin members of the council were Cardinal Julius Cesarini, Archbishop Andrew of Rhodes, and the Spanish Dominican theologian, John of Torquemada.
After preliminary debates on the order of topics to be discussed, the doctrine of purgatory was chosen to be first. On June 4, at the request of the Greeks, the Roman teaching on purgatory was presented by Cardinal Cesarini. According to this exposition of the faith of the Roman Church, the souls of the faithful who are truly penitent, when they have died in charity before having made satisfaction by worthy fruits of penance for their faults of commission and omissions, are purified after death by the pains of purgatory. They can be alleviated by the suffrages of the faithful who are living: sacrifices of the Mass, prayers, alms, and other works of piety. The souls of those who after baptism have not committed any fault, or who having committed faults have expiated them fully, whether during this life or after death in purgatory, are immediately received into heaven. The souls of those who die in mortal sin, or with only original sin, immediately descend into hell, there to be subjected to chastisements more or less rigorous. This is without prejudice to the final judgment where all men appear with their bodies at the tribunal of Christ to render account for their works.1

This belief of the Roman Church is alleged to be justified by seven arguments: from the Book of Maccabees, from the Gospel, from St Paul, from the tradition of the Catholic Church, from the authority proper to the Roman Church, from the teaching of the Latin and Greek Fathers, and from theological reasoning.

Concerning the Scriptural arguments, first is mentioned the deuterocanonical II Maccabees 12:46: “Therefore it is a holy and pious thought to pray for the dead, that they might be released from their sins” (Vulgate). Here Judas Maccabeus dispatched to Jerusalem the proceeds of a collection for a sacrifice for the soldiers killed by the enemy, thereby thinking that

1For the summary of A) the opening statement of Cesarini; B) the response of Bessarion; C) the rejoinder of Torquemada; and D) the reply of Mark of Ephesus, I have followed closely the article of A. D'Alès, “La Question du Purgatoire au Concile de Florence,” Gregorianum III (1922), pp. 8-50. This article is a summary of the critical edition of the acts of Ferrara-Florence published by Petit in Patrologia Orientalis, XV. I have also consulted A. Michel, “Purgatoire: le Concile de Florence,” Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique, XIII, cols. 1252-64. Michel is basically a summary of D'Alès.
the dead can be delivered from their sins through the intercession of the living.

Secondly, in Matthew 12:32 we hear the teaching of Christ that "whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come." These words of the Lord give the impression that certain faults will be forgiven in the age to come, that is, after this life; and this implies the existence of purgatory.

Thirdly, St. Paul says in I Corinthians 3:11-15, "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each man's work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire." These words can be understood only about a fire which purifies the souls in the other life after death.

The tradition of the Catholic Church, whether Latin or Greek, witnesses that it prays and has always prayed for the dead. Unless there is a purification after death, this prayer would be in vain; for this prayer is neither for those who are already in glory nor for those who are banished to hell.

The Roman Church has held and has always taught this doctrine, even from the time before the two Churches went into schism. The authority of the Roman Church is singularly venerable since it was trained and formed by the holy apostles Peter and Paul and it was confirmed by innumerable miracles of other holy pontiffs.

Both the Latin and the Greek Fathers have taught this doctrine. Among the Latins: Ambrose, Augustine, and Gregory the Great; and among the Greeks: Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite, Epiphanius of Cyprus, Theodoret of Cyr, and John Damascene.

Finally, divine justice requires that it does not permit any faults to go unpunished, but it proportions the expiration to the offense. This is apparent from the Scriptures: "if the guilty man
deserves to be beaten, the judge shall cause him to lie down and be beaten in his presence with a number of stripes in proportion to his offense" (Deuteronomy 25:2); and "though I say to the wicked 'You shall surely die,' yet if he turns from his sin and does what is lawful and right, if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, committing no iniquity; he shall surely live, he shall not die" (Ezekiel 33:14-15); and "nothing defiled gains entrance into her" (Wisdom 7:25). One must therefore come to admit that, between heaven and hell, there is another place for purification to be accomplished where the soul can clear away its offenses and become worthy to enter the presence of God.

The above presentation by Cardinal Cesarini is a clear defense of the Roman teaching on purgatory as it had come to be formulated in the western scholastic theology of the Middle Ages. He had accurately defined the topic under discussion and he had laid the ground rules for the debate. The Greeks were on the defensive to refute the arguments of the Latin doctrine on purgatory. The primary focus of attention will be on the scriptural arguments in II Maccabees, Matthew, and I Corinthians as well as on the tradition of the universal Church and the teaching of the holy Fathers. The singular authority of the Roman Church will be of little consequence; it is true that the Greeks recognized the Roman Church as a consistent witness to Orthodoxy during the crucial theological controversies of the early Church, but now that the Roman Church was, from the point of view of the Greeks, in schism and heresy and had separated itself from the Orthodox Faith, it had therefore relinquished its earlier prerogatives. Moreover, it was precisely this ecumenical council of the entire Church which was convened to settle its differences. The argument from theological reasoning would likewise be rejected as an arbitrary superstructure built upon the foundation of a questionable teaching in the Scriptures and the Fathers. The point of dispute will center upon whether the Scriptures, the Fathers, and the universal liturgical custom of prayer for the dead justify the doctrine of purgatory. In other words, does purification for sins take place after death, and if so, how is it accomplished?
Crucial to the entire context of the debate is the question of patristic witness to the afterlife, purification of sins, and prayer for the departed. If it is demonstrated to the Greeks that the Latin doctrine of purgatory is found in patristic writings and scriptural commentaries, then the Latins will have won their point. For this reason it is imperative to examine the patristic texts upon which much of the debate over purgatory was centered at Ferrara during the early summer months of 1438.

In our examination of the authors and their texts, we shall proceed from the Greek to the Latin Fathers, observing thereby a systematic progression which culminates in a more or less explicit teaching in Augustine and Gregory the Great.

During the Middle Ages few writers enjoyed the reputation and authority of Dionysius the Areopagite (an anonymous author of the late fifth or early sixth century who calls himself Dionysius and who evidently desires to pass for his namesake converted by Paul at the Areopagus). In the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy he speaks about the prayer for the dead which takes place at the funeral:

The divine hierarch says the prayer over the deceased. . . . The prayer beseeches the divine goodness to forgive the deceased all the sins he has committed through human frailty and to establish him in the region of the living, in the bosom of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, where there is no sickness, sorrow, or sighing.

(Pseudo-) Dionysius the Areopagite, Eccles. hier. 7,4.
PG 3:560 A,B.

Epiphanius of Cyprus (d. 413) urges that prayer should be offered for all the departed, both the just and sinners:

What is more useful, more opportune, or more admirable than to recite the names of the dead, so

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2The reference for some of these patristic texts is found in D'Alès, pp. 12-13 and are reproduced in Michel, cols. 1252-53.
that those present believe that the departed live and are not in nothingness, that they exist and live with the Master. When this most sacred doctrine is explained, there is hope in praying for brothers who happen to be absent. And prayer made for them is profitable, even if it does not eliminate all their accusations (αἰτιακομάτων). But in the world we so often transgress voluntarily and involuntarily so that what is more perfect is signified. For we should make remembrance of both the just and the sinners: imploring the mercy of God for sinners.

Epiphanius of Cyprus,  
_Adversus Haereses, 75, 8._  
PG 52:513 B.

Basil the Great (d. 379) mentions that even the sincere athletes of God, if they have blemishes of sin, are “detained” after death:

He who is near death, knowing that there is one savior and one liberator, says “In you have I hoped, save me” from infirmity “and free me” from captivity (Psalm 7:2). I think that the sincere athletes of God, who have sufficiently contended with invisible enemies throughout their whole life, after they have escaped all their pursuits and having come to life’s end, they will be examined by the leader of the age, so that, if they are discovered to have wounds from the struggles or some blemishes or vestiges of sin, they should be detained (κατασκολοχευτός); and if they are found invulnerable and without blemish, as unconquered and as free individuals they should rest in Christ.

Basil the Great,  
_In psalmos homiliae, 7, 2._  
PG 29:232.

Gregory of Nyssa (d. about 394) was the subject of considerable controversy at Ferrara. Because he spoke of a “purifying fire” his authority here was disclaimed by the Greeks be-
cause he was tainted with the origenist theory of *apocatastasis* which had later been condemned at the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553. The Latins will press the Greeks for rejecting what they consider the explicit witness of one of their own Fathers:

For free will is godlike. As even the power remains in the nature and has no part in evil, the wisdom of God found this purpose, to permit man to be in those things which he determines for himself, so that having tasted of the evil things which he desired, and having learned from the experience, he traded them in, so that he should run again through voluntary desire to that first happiness, having cleared away every passionate and irrational burden of nature and having been purified either while in this present life through prayer and philosophy or after the migration there through the crucible of purifying fire (διὰ τῆς τοῦ καθοριστοῦ πυρὸς χωνείας).

Gregory of Nyssa, *De mortuis.*
PG 46:524 B.

and later in the same text:

If man should distinguish what is properly his own from the irrational and should regard himself through more urbane living, he will purge the present life which is mixed with wickedness, overcoming the irrational through the impetus of passions, using for the passions the skin as cooperating with irrational things, otherwise he decides after these for what is better, knowing after leaving the body difference between virtue and wickedness, for he should not be able to participate in the divinity unless the purifying fire (καθοριστοῦ πυρὸς) has purged (ἀποκαθήραντος) the filth mixed with his soul.

Gregory of Nyssa, *De mortuis.*
PG 46:525 A.
Another text of Gregory of Nyssa is somewhat less explicit about the purifying fire. It is interesting, nonetheless, that variants arose in the transmission of the text. Different manuscripts describe the fire as sleepless (ἀκοιμήτωρ), purifying (καθαρσίω), or purifying sleepless (καθαρσίω ἀκοιμήτωρ):

And just as they, purifying through fire matter which is mixed with gold, melt by fire not only what is counterfeit, but by necessity the pure is melted with the adulterated and the one remains while the other is consumed; even so as wickedness is consumed by a sleepless/purifying fire, so also it is entirely necessary that the soul which is united to wickedness be in fire until the intermingled counterfeit and material and adulterated is consumed with the eternal fire.

Gregory of Nyssa,
*De consolatione et statu animarum post mortem.*
PG 46:100 A.

An even more critical textual problem is encountered in Theodoret of Cyr (d. about 453). It is the question of an entire phrase being either genuine or interpolated. The authenticity is critical, for it is a most unusual use of purgatory as a substantive noun (hence a place or state) in Greek patristic literature. In his commentary on I Corinthians 3:15 Theodoret says:

"... but only as through fire." For this, we believe this fire is purgatory (καθαρτήριον), in which the souls are purified like gold in the smelting furnace, his work is burned through fire.

Theodoret of Cyr,
*In I Cor*, 3
PG 82:252 A and note.

The dogmatic treatise *On those who die in the faith* is attributed to John Damascene (d. about 750). Commenting on II Maccabees 12, he states very forcefully that prayer for the departed is an absolutely universal tradition of the Church:
For the interpreters and eye-witnesses of the word, the disciples of the Savior and the apostles of God, who have captured the round world, instituted that commemoration be made in the dread, pure, and life-giving mysteries for the faithful departed. The universal, apostolic, and catholic Church of Christ-God has retained this firmly and without any controversy from then until now and even to the end of the world. Nor did they institute this at all absurdly or rashly or foolishly. For the unerring religious observance of the Christians receives nothing useless and has held it forever unshakably.

(Pseudo-) Damascene,
*De his qui in fide dormiunt*, 3.
PG 95:249 B, C.

From these statements of the Greek Fathers it is clear that there is no universal opinion about purification of sin after death; much less is there any unanimity about purgatory. Dionysius, Epiphanius, and (Pseudo-) Damascene speak about prayer for the departed; Basil states that souls are “detained” after death; Gregory of Nyssa mentions a “purifying fire”; and, perhaps, Theodoret believes in “purgatory.” As we examine Ambrose, Augustine, and Gregory the Great we shall see that a much more different and a much more explicit eschatology is taking shape—the foundation of the medieval western doctrine of purgatory and the matrix of the controversy at Ferrara.

Ambrose of Milan (d. 397) in his commentary on I Corinthians 3 distinguishes between a temporary purgation by fire and the eternal punishment by fire:

For he said “but only as through fire” so that this salvation might not be without punishment, for he did not say he will be saved by fire; so that unconsumed by the fire he deserves he becomes saved having been examined through fire; but when he says “but only as through fire” he shows that he is saved in the
future though he will undergo the punishments of fire (poenas ignis); so that purged by fire he becomes saved, and he is not tortured forever in eternal fire like the unbelievers.

Ambrose of Milan,

_In I Cor, 3._

PL 17:211 C.

Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) likewise makes this distinction between temporary and eternal punishment:

Who cultivates this ground (cf. Genesis 3:17) inwardly and shall have arrived at his bread ever so much with labor, he is able to endure this labor even to the end of this life, but after this life it is not necessary that he suffer. But if perchance he shall not have cultivated his ground and shall have allowed it to be oppressed with thorns, he has the curse of the land in all his works in this life and after his life he shall have either the fire of purgation (ignem purgationis) or eternal punishment.

Augustine,

_De Genesi contra Manichaeos: 2, 20, 30._

PL 34:212.

Nonetheless, one should not be led to believe that this cleansing fire is at all light or insignificant:

“O Lord, rebuke me not in thy anger, nor chasten me in thy wrath.” (Psalm 37/38:2) . . . so that you may cleanse me in this life, and make me such, that I may after that stand in no need of the cleansing fire (emen-datorio igne), for those who are to be saved, “but only as through fire” (I Corinthians 3:15). . . . For it is said “he shall be saved, but only as through fire.” And because it is said “he shall be saved, “that fire is not thought lightly of. Clearly, therefore, though saved by fire, yet that fire will be more grievous (gravior)
than anything whatsoever man can suffer in this life.

Augustine,
*Enarrationes in psalmos*, 37, 2.
PL 36:397.

Augustine agrees with the Greek Fathers about the efficacy of prayers for the departed, especially when they who have died in the communion of the Body and Blood of Christ are commemorated at the Eucharistic Sacrifice:

It should not be doubted that the dead are aided by the prayers of the holy Church, by the salutary sacrifice, and by the alms which are bequeathed for their spirits, so that what their sins merited is more mercifully accomplished with them by the Lord. For the universal Church observes this handed down by the fathers, so that there is prayer for those who have died in the communion of the Body and Blood of Christ, when at that sacrifice they are commemorated in their place and it is prayed and commemorated to be offered for them also. Since the works of mercy are offered for the sake of those commemorated, who doubts that it favors them for whom the prayers are not uselessly offered to God? Let it not be doubted that this assists the departed.

Augustine,
*Sermo* 173, 2.
PL 38:936, 937.

*The Care to be taken for the Dead*, rather than teaching any explicit doctrine on purgatory, is more of a moral treatise emphasizing the need for prayer on behalf of the dead:

We read in the Book of Maccabees that sacrifice is offered for the dead (II Maccabees 12:43). But even if this were read nowhere at all in the Old Testament, not mean is the authority of the universal Church, which is clear in this practice, where in the prayers of the priest which are poured out to the
Lord God at his altar, the commemoration of the dead has its place.

Augustine,
*De cura pro mortuis gerenda*, 1. 1.
PL 40:593.

Augustine speaks about the intermediate state between man’s death and the universal resurrection. Most of the departed need the benefit of the prayers and alms of the living:

But there is a time which is set between man’s death and the final resurrection; it confines the souls in hidden receptacles, just as each one is worthy of rest or hardship, according as it is allotted while he lived in the flesh. Nor should it be denied that the souls of the departed are comforted by the piety of the living when the sacrifice of the mediator is offered for them or alms are received in the Church. These benefit them who while they lived were worthy to be able to benefit from them afterwards. For there is a certain manner of living—neither so good as not to require these after death, nor so bad as not to benefit from them after death, for such a good individual should not require them, and again such a bad individual should not be capable of being helped by them when he has gone out of this life.

Augustine,
*De fide, spe, et caritate (Enchiridion)*, 109.
PL 40:283.

The purgatorial fire will be more or less prolonged depending on the quality of one’s life on earth:

And it is not unbelievable that something of the same kind (fire) may take place even after this life. It is a matter that may be inquired into, and either ascertained or left doubtful, whether some faithful shall pass through a kind of purgatorial fire (*Ignem quem-dam purgatorium*), and how much they have more
or less loved perishable goods, so much more slowly or quickly shall they be delivered (salvari).

Augustine,
*De fide, spe, et caritate (Enchiridion)*, 69.
PL 40:265.

In the *City of God*, Augustine speaks about the future age in which there will be temporary punishments for sins which have not been already remitted:

But some suffer temporary punishments only in this life, others after death, others both now and then, but still before that most severe and final judgment. But not all come into eternal punishments, which are to follow that judgment, who undergo temporary punishments after death. For to certain ones what is not remitted in this age is remitted in the future age (Matthew 12:32), lest they be punished with the eternal torture (*supplicio*) of the future age, as we have said above.

Augustine,
*De Civitate Dei*, 21, 13.
PL 41:728.

Not all sins, however, are forgiven after death:

Therefore it is the same reason why there is no prayer for men punished by eternal fire, such is the reason that neither now nor then is there prayer for the wicked angels: such is the same reason that even so for men neither is there now prayer for the unfaithful and impious departed. For the prayer either of the Church or of certain devout individuals is heard for some of the dead: but for those Christians reborn in Christ and their life in the body did not carry on in an evil way so that they are judged to be unworthy of such mercy nor did it carry on in a good way that they are found not to have need of such mercy. And so, once the resurrection of the dead is
accomplished, there will be no scarcity of those to whom mercy is imparted after the punishments which the spirits of the dead endure, so that they will not be cast into everlasting fire. For it would not have been correctly said about certain sins that it would not be forgiven them either in this age or in the future age (Matthew 12:32), unless there would be some to whom it would be forgiven if not in this, then in the future age.

Augustine,
_De Civitate Dei_, 21, 24.
PL 41:737, 738.

A work attributed to Augustine shows a further elaboration and development of his thought. Sins committed after baptism are purged by fire in purgatory; even though mortal sins are forgiven through repentance here on earth, still the debt for these sins requires temporary punishment:

For the thief was permitted to have merited in the end pardon of his every offense, but he did not give the power of sinning and persevering to those who are baptized, for he was then baptized who then for the first time confessed Christ on the cross (Luke 23:43). For even if repentance arrives at the last yawning of life, it cleanses and liberates in the washing of baptism: so neither do they who are baptized in the end undergo purgatory, but they are enriched with the goods of holy mother Church, and they are to received manifold good in true blessedness.

(Pseudo-) Augustine,
_De vera et falsa poenitentia_, 17.
PL 40:1127.

and later in the same text:

But even though once he is converted he lives and does not die, still we do not promise that he should evade all punishment, for he ought to be purified first
by the fire of purgation if he delays the fruit of conversion for another age. But here the fire is not everlasting, but is serious (gravis) in a wonderful manner, for it surpasses any punishment which anyone has ever endured in this life. In no way is such a punishment found in the flesh; the martyrs were permitted to endure wonderful torments and many evil people worthlessly, how great tortures they often endured. Thus let anyone so take care to correct faults so that he should not endure punishment after death. For there are certain sins which are mortal and in repentance become venial, but are not immediately cleansed.

(Pseudo-) Augustine, De vera et falsa poenitentia, 18.
PL 40:1128:

Another treatise attributed to Augustine, but more likely from the pen of Caesarius of Arles (d. 543), warns that only small sins, not capital offenses, can be purified by fire before entering into eternal life. Herein are contained the seeds of a theology of penitence which will blossom into a thoroughly elaborated system of alms and retribution and even preparing for the development of the teaching on indulgences:

In the epistle reading, dear brothers, we have heard the Apostle saying: (I Corinthians 3:11-15). Many incorrectly understand this reading and are deceived by a false security, while they believe that if capital offenses (capitalia criminia) build upon the foundation of Christ, these sins are able to be purified through transitory fire, and afterwards they can enter upon eternal life. That understanding, dear brothers, should be corrected, because they who so flatter themselves deceive themselves. For by that transitory fire, about which the Apostle spoke “though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire” are purified not of the capital, but of the small sins. And even so, what is worse, not only the major, but also the minute sins, if they are very many, are immersed. About
those greater, or even the lesser sins, even if not all, or some are remembered, so that someone should not vainly try to excuse himself and say that he does not know which are small sins and which are capital offenses.

And just as the Apostle has called to mind many capital sins, lest we appear to despair we mention briefly which they are: sacrilege, homicide, adultery, false testimony, stealing, robbery, pride, envy, avarice, and wrath if it is prolonged, and drunkenness if it is continual should be numbered among them. For whoever knows that any of these seeds are dominant in him, unless he worthily corrects himself, and, if he has time, performs prolonged penitence, and bequeaths plentiful alms, and abstains from these sins, he will not be able to be purged by that transitory fire of which the Apostle speaks, but eternal flame will torture him without any remedy.

But there are certain small sins which can be known by all, and although it is lengthy to relate all of them it is proper that we should mention some. . . . By these sins we should not believe that the soul is killed. . . .

If we do not give thanks to God in tribulation nor redeem the sins by good works, we ourselves will have a long delay in that purgatorial fire. . . . That purgatorial fire will be more harsh than whatever can be thought of, or seen, or felt in this painful age.

(Pseudo-) Augustine,
Sermo 104, 1-5.

The fourth book of the Dialogues of Gregory the Great (d. 604) presents many miracles which prove the survival of the soul after death. Gregory also holds that there is a fire of purgation in the future life for minor, but not for major, sins:
From these quotations (John 12:35; Isaiah 49:8; Corinthians 6:2; Ecclesiastes 9:10; Psalm 117/118:1) it is clear that each one is presented in judgment just as he is when he departs from here. Nevertheless, we should believe that there is a purgatorial fire (*purgatorius ignis*) for certain minor faults, for the Truth says that if anyone should have blasphemed against the Holy Spirit, it will be forgiven him neither in this age nor in the future (Matthew 12:32). In such a statement one is given to believe that some faults are forgiven (*laxari*) in this age and some in the future. For if it is denied for one then it logically follows that it is granted for others. As I have said, this must be believed to be a possibility for small and slight sins such as persistent idle talking, immoderate laughter, sinful care of property, which can hardly be administered without fault even by those who know the fault to be avoided, or the error of ignorance in non-important matters. For all these are burdensome after death if they are not forgiven while still in this life. For when Paul says that Christ is the foundation he adds: (1 Corinthians 3:12-15). Although this may be understood as the fire of suffering (*igne tribulationis*) applied to us in this life, yet if one may also take this as the fire of future purgation (*igne futurae purgationis*) it should be pondered carefully that Paul said that one can be saved through fire—not he who builds on this foundation in iron, bronze, or lead, that is, major sins which are more burdensome and therefore indestructible—but he who builds in wood, hay, or straw, which are the little and small sins, which fire easily consumes. Therefore we should know that no one will obtain purgation of even the smallest sins there unless through good works while here in this life he should merit to obtain it there.

Gregory the Great,  
*Dial.*, 4, 39.  
PL 77: 396.
From these texts of the Greek and Latin Fathers it is clear that there is no systematic formulation of a theology of the intermediate state. Although the Greek Fathers basically preserved the irresolution of the Scriptures on this question, Ambrose, Augustine, and Gregory laid the foundation for the development of a theology of purgatory and purifying fire.

After the initial presentation by Cardinal Cesarini of the Latin position on purgatory, Mark of Ephesus replied to his arguments from Scripture and tradition. The official Greek response, however, was later presented by Metropolitan Bessarion on June 14. The Greeks have not found among any of their doctors a belief in temporary expiation accomplished by fire after this life; they teach only that the prayers of the living are useful and profitable for the departed. The belief in a temporary and material fire relaxes the vigilance of the faithful and favors the origenist heresy of apocatastasis, which denies the eternity of hell and of eternal punishments for the wicked. Although the Greek Fathers speak about the remission of small sins after this life, there is no teaching or knowledge about how this is accomplished in the intermediate state.

Concerning the patristic texts which the Latins offer in support of their position, none of the Greeks contest the view of Dionysius, Epiphanius, and John Damascene that the prayers of the Church aid the departed in the remission of certain sins. The phrase attributed to Theodoret, however, is not found in any editions of his writings which the Greeks possess, so they conclude that it must be an interpolation. Thus, only Gregory of Nyssa appears to favor the Latins’ position. Out of respect for this Father, who is renowned for his holiness and learning, the Greeks would prefer to avoid speaking about him, but since the Latins propose him in testimony for their position, it must be pointed out that he favors the apocatastasis of sinners—that God who “may be everything to everyone” (I Corinthians 15:28) will eventually offer the grace of salvation to everyone—to all men and even to the demons, and thus hell and its fire are not eternal. This is clearly an origenist teaching. Like Origen, many revered Fathers of the Church were inclined to this position: Irenaeus of Lyons, Dionysius of Alexandria, and even Gregory Nazianzen. Since the doctrine was not condemned
until the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553), this does not impune the character of these Fathers. If these texts of Gregory of Nyssa are authentic, then he is in error, for he introduces the doctrine of total purification and of the universal *apocatastasis*. The Greeks would prefer to abide by the common teaching of the Church and the rule of the Scriptures rather than by the particular assertion of this or that doctor. Moreover, the distinction of two punishments and two fires conforms to the teachings neither of the Scriptures nor of the Fifth Ecumenical Council.

Although Ambrose, Augustine, and Gregory Dialogus express a doctrine of purification by fire, they are developing their particular views, and still they are not absolutely clear on this point. In their writings which are known in the East, only their belief in the usefulness of prayers for the dead is evident. After all, we should interpret the language of Augustine and Gregory mildly. They are not trying to teach this with authority, rather they are trying to deal with a particular circumstance and it is their desire to eradicate a very pernicious error—the final remission of all sins. We should not imitate their expediency.

As for the witness of Gregory Dialogus proposed by the Latins, are not the numerous miracles and revelations in the Four Dialogues, including the reality of purification by fire before the last judgment, to be understood more in the way of allegories? In every case, the texts of Scripture which he cites in his support are far from proving what he affirms. Far from establishing his thesis, he ruins it by saying that the slight faults of the just can be either compensated for in this life by good works or expiated at death by fear, or finally after death be remitted by the prayers which are offered for them. Having made these rebuttals, Bessarion then addressed himself at length to the Latin arguments other than those from patristic witness.

John of Torquemada presented the Latin rejoinder to the Greek position related by Bessarion. He notes that Bessarion's arguments were mostly negative in their rejection of the Latin propositions. He asks a series of questions to gain some clarification of the Greek position: in particular, is there punishment in the intermediate state? If so, what is its nature?

Torquemada then proceeds to the question of purification by fire. The Greeks declared that it is not found in their holy
doctors and they fear that belief in this temporary fire will revive among Christians the origenist doctrine of *apocatastasis* so that a slackening in fervor will result if the faithful come to think that the fire prepared for Satan and his angels will have an end. The Latins are amazed that this fear can justify a rejection by the Greeks of so authoritative a tradition. It puts them in conflict with the clear and decisive teaching of the saints and with the custom of the ancient catholic Church. The holy Fathers have found this teaching in the Scriptures and they have not seen it to be so inconvenient. They have affirmed the temporary fire, without detriment to the eternal fire: the temporary fire is for slight blemishes and the eternal fire is for grave faults which the sinner carries with him to the grave. The proof that this teaching does not place the Church in danger is that the Roman Church has constantly taught this without being inclined to the origenist doctrine of *apocatastasis*, which it has always abhorred; it is a slightly feared doctrine in the West, where much of the Church has never known it. The belief in purification by fire, far from effecting a decline in morals, is actually an incentive to fervor. This is clearer than day. For the view of a fire, even temporary, after this life provokes within the faithful a salutary fear; Gregory, as a man, could have erred. One could say this about St Peter, St Paul, the other apostles, the four evangelists, and even Athanasius, Basil, Ambrose, Hilary, and all of the other holy persons of the Church. Such a thing shakes the whole foundation of the faith, beginning with the Old and New Testaments which have been transmitted by men. The Latins are well aware that men, as such, can err; but in as much as they are inspired by the Spirit of God and authenticated by the Church in matters concerning the common faith, their testimony offers a total guarantee of truth. This is why the Latins can not easily accept the rejection of a man who was the brother of St Basil and of St Macrina and a friend of St Gregory the Theologian. Moreover, the Fifth Ecumenical Council was convened precisely to combat the errors of Origen; it examined the writings of Gregory of Nyssa and found them entirely beyond suspicion. As a result, Gregory rightly believed in both a temporary and an eternal fire; when the writings of Origen were being burned, those of Gregory were preserved,
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proving that they did not contain the errors that the Greeks suppose. The Greeks speak of origenist interpolations, but this can not be maintained. If these interpolations had been made before the council, they would have been uncovered and condemned. After the council, these writings could not have been interpolated by origenists or for the purposes of origenism. In fact, the Latin doctrine on the fire of purgatory is found there. Would they be enemies of this fire who, for the pleasure of disputation, would have introduced this doctrine in the text of Gregory?

As for the Latin Fathers, the Greeks do not have the right to ignore their teaching on the fire of purgatory. Augustine is a doctor of universal acclaim; many ecumenical councils have praised him and his writings have always been venerated as a faithful expression of dogma. If this teaching contained a menace to the faith, it would have been long ago denounced by the holy Fathers. But the Roman Church, taught by the chiefs of the apostles, founded on the rock, has always followed a middle course between two opposite and extreme errors: between Sabellius and Arius, between Eutyches and Nestorius, and in the present question it has rejected the origenist apocatastasis and the denial of eternal punishments without failing to recognize the reality of temporary punishments. As for Gregory, the pontiff of ancient Rome, his writings were translated into Greek before the schism by Zacharius, another Roman pontiff. In the book of the Dialogues, he expresses himself about the fire of purgatory with a clarity by which the Greeks are not able to deceive themselves. The Latins conclude that a dogma so authoritative, so ancient in the catholic Church, can not be put in question; otherwise, the entire faith of the Church is endangered.

The rest of Torquemada’s defense of the Latin doctrine of purgatory primarily concerns: 1) the distinction between the guilt and the temporal punishment due to sin; 2) the justification of the Latin exegesis of I Corinthians 3:15, that “will be saved” (σωθήσεται) concerns eternal salvation and not, as the Greeks hold following the interpretation of John Chrysostom, continued existence; 3) the authority of the Roman Church; and 4) the argument taken from divine justice.
To this presentation by Torquemada, Mark of Ephesus replied with a more precise statement on eschatology. He elaborated at length upon the position that there is no need of a temporary punishment by fire because neither the just nor the wicked enter their final state of heaven or hell until after the last judgment. In support, Mark quotes Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzen, and John Chrysostom. 8

Mark then returned to the subject of Gregory of Nyssa. The Latins are astonished and indignant to hear it said that as a man he can err, and they perceive that this principle compromises all the dogmas and all the Scriptures. The Greeks respond that there is a great difference between the assertions of the canonical Scriptures, entrusted to the Church, and the writings or the teachings of any one particular doctor. The former are doctrines revealed by God; the latter do not impose themselves on the faith and should not be received without examination. One particular doctor can err; otherwise, what is the purpose of ecumenical councils, if not to straighten out particular opinions? Also, Dionysius of Alexandria and Gregory Thaumaturgus have erred; yet the first received the crown of a martyr and the second carries a name ("Wonderworker") which accounts for his veneration. Basil, writing to Maximus, expresses reservation about the doctrine of Dionysius which involves a reaction against Sabellius in ways which are scarcely trustworthy. Writing to his brother, Gregory, he notes that Gregory Thaumaturgus in his zeal to convince the Gentiles employs a language which favors heresy. Inerrancy, therefore, is a privilege of the canonical Scriptures, according to the teaching of Augustine when he writes to Jerome and Fortunatus.

What is there to prevent us from saying that Gregory of Nyssa, as a man, has erred, especially since the dogma had not yet been decided? The Latins affirm that he has confessed the

8D’Alès, p. 33, notes 1, 2, 3:
Pseudo-Athanasius, Quaestiones ad Antiochum ducem, q. 20, 21
PG 28:609.
Gregory of Nazianzen, Oratio 7, PG 35:781-84.
Oratio 16, PG 35:945 C.
Oratio 40, PG 36:424 C.
eternal fire, resulting clearly from his *Catechesis* and his discourse on infants who have died prematurely. The Greeks will be very grateful if someone shows them this text or this doctrine among the writings of Gregory, for they have never encountered the eternal fire or the endless punishments. To believe in this, it is not only the little faults, but all the faults which can be purified by this fire; it is each punishment which should cease and have an end, for the punishment is nothing other than a purification destined not only for the impious and perverse men, but also for demons, and it leads to their restoration. This is what one realizes from his *Catechesis* and his discourse on the dead, and from his other discourse on infants who have died prematurely. He speaks of all sorts of sins, of all sinners, and even of the demons. He places the *apocatastasis* after the resurrection and judgment; this is what results from the same discourse on infants. What is there in common between this discourse and the doctrine of the Latins on purgatory? Without distinction, Gregory delivers all sinners and every sin to this purifying fire. The Latins deliver there only certain sins, those of the less guilty souls, Gregory places it after the last judgment, while the Latins place it immediately after the separation of the soul from the body. Do the Greeks not have reason to hold their reservations on such discourses—whether to reject them as apocryphal, or, supposing their authenticity, to reject them as contrary to the Scriptures and to the common doctrine of the Church?

The Greeks have cited Gregory of Nyssa largely in order that they might not be accused of wholly calumniating him when they call attention to his origenist tendencies. But in order to justify a certain new direction, the Latins have said that Gregory is a doctor for the Greeks as well as for the Latins. This is why one is able to explain how he was able to profess this doctrine and to escape the anathemas of the Fifth Ecumenical Council. To maintain that his writings were falsified after the council by other hands and for some other purpose is entirely fruitless. His origenism, incidentally, should not necessarily involve the suppression of his writings and their destruction by fire. Even the writings of Origen have survived in part, beginning with the *Philokalia* compiled by Gregory the Theologian.
and Basil, and full of improper assertions—the preservation of which is explained by the imprecision of doctrine at that time. Mark is astonished that the Latins can present the doctrine of purification by fire as an ancient doctrine within the Church and hold the middle between two views, whereas the most numerous and the most illustrious of the Fathers have believed that they ought to explain the eternal fire and the endless punishments in an allegorical sense. In effect, they teach that there is neither material fire nor exterior darkness other than the ignorance of God. If the doctors so teach about the pains which follow the resurrection and the judgment, how much more so about the pains which precede it.

These debates over patristic witness clearly indicate that both sides held to their particular views. The discussions on purgatory lasted for six weeks, and no real unanimity was reached. The Latins, of course, had the advantage of entering upon the debates with views which were already precise and formulated. The Greeks, on the other hand, once this clear Latin teaching was presented to them with such vigor and conviction, were thrust into a situation in which they struggled to arrive at a position within a short period of time concerning a doctrine which was basically foreign to their tradition. The Latin arguments were mostly drawn from a tradition which had developed independently from that with which the Greeks were familiar. The Greeks were looking for a consensus from Scripture and tradition, and, given the paucity and the vagaries of the sources concerning the issues upon which the debates were centered, this consensus was naturally difficult to find. The Latins, however, were confident that their position, based heavily on western sources, scholastic theology, and the authority of the Roman teaching office, was one which was quite consistent with what is implicitly found in the Scriptures and patristic tradition. Not only did both sides engage in controversies over texts and interpretations, but they also exhibited misunderstandings of each others’ perspectives and intentions. It is no wonder, therefore, that harmony could not be achieved on so complex an issue in such a short period of time.
Particular attention has been focused on Gregory of Nyssa because the debates over his texts present two different approaches to tradition. Although the Greeks were actually unimpressed by the testimony of the Latin Fathers, Gregory presented a difficulty within their own more immediate tradition. The Latins perceived that they had a foothold in Greek patristic theology through the witness of Gregory of Nyssa to purifying fire. They in effect pressed the Greeks for not admitting what one of their own Fathers taught. Thus was broached the much broader question of the importance and authority of patristic witness. What are the criteria for interpreting the thoughts and the writings of the Fathers? May isolated passages and phrases in the Fathers be adduced in support of a theological position, or must consistency and consensus be sought in patristic witness? How much or how many constitute consistency and consensus? When do we pass from theologoumena of particular Fathers into the realm of dogmas of faith which are binding on the entire Church?

None of these questions were definitively settled at Ferrara-Florence. Neither the Latins nor the Greeks were ultimately victorious in the debates over purgatory. However, after the council had later adjourned to Florence, an agreement was reached involving a statement of faith which was in fact a diluted version of the Latin doctrine of purgatory. Yet it must be pointed out that the two concepts to which the Greeks had made the most strenuous objections were purposely avoided in the doctrinal definition: purgatory as the name and place or state of purification and fire as the means whereby this purification from sin is accomplished. In this respect the definition read: “their souls are cleansed after death by purgatorial punishments” (eorum animas poenis purgatoriis post mortem purgari).

Reading about the deliberations and seeing the results of the Council of Florence, one senses the tragedy of the encounter. It is the meeting of two brothers who had lived together and grown up together, and then moved apart and went their separate way. When after many years they met again, they neither recognized each other nor could they agree upon the manner of their former life together. Although they had met and had determined to resume fraternal relations, they separated...
and found themselves even greater strangers than before. The reunion Council of Florence, unusual as an “ecumenical council” which had been convened not to settle problems within one Church but to reunite two separate Churches, achieved an agreement which failed; and, ultimately, rather than healing the schism, it intensified the estrangement between these two brothers.