

Afterlife and catholicism essay sample



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I am not sure exactly what heaven will be like, but I don't know that when we die and it comes time for God to judge us, he will not ask, How many good things have you done in your life? , rather he will ask, How much love did you put into what you did? -Mother Teresa Catholicism is one of the world's largest religions. It is the largest division of Christianity and has more than a billion followers across the world (Pilz).

It is for this reason that understanding such a widely known religion is important in any service profession where religious views come into play, especially for those that have to deal with death and the practices before and following a death. How a Catholic acts in life is an indicator of the afterlife they will experience. The afterlife of a Catholic can go three ways: heaven, purgatory which eventually can lead to heaven, or hell. This paper presents an in-depth look at the Catholic afterlife as well as how the afterlife affects a person during life.

Catholicism is very distinctive in certain beliefs that all have a very powerful influence over the religion as a whole. For one, Catholics believe the Pope to be nearly infallible (Thurston). Because of this, what the Pope believes is good for the religion is usually done. Another example of uniqueness is the seven sacraments of the Church, which are Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist, Matrimony, Holy Orders, Reconciliation, and Anointing of the Sick (Thurston). They also believe in the use of prayers for the dead which is innately tied to the belief in purgatory (Robinson). Many devout Catholics have a fear of dying (Robinson).

This is mostly because of the suffering they feel they will experience in purgatory. It is because of this that many feel the Catholic Church used purgatory as a motivator for not sinning (McCarthy). Salvation and moving from purgatory to heaven is a very long process after death. Few are accepted into heaven upon death. In fact, it is even presumed that Popes do not move right to heaven at death (McCarthy). On the anniversary of the death of the previous Pope, the current Pope offers a special mass for the souls of his two predecessors, both of whom are still presumed to be in purgatory (McCarthy).

The decision of where a soul will go is presumed to happen right at the time of death. The soul is judged and will go to hell, purgatory, or heaven. If the soul goes to hell, it will experience a ‘fiery furnace’ with no chance for return or alleviation (Pope John Paul II). A lot of people’s perception is that God damns people to hell, but this is not true according to Catholic beliefs. Pope John Paul II believed that God wants salvation for everyone. After all, He created us in His image. But we choose damnation based on rejecting God.

Once a soul is in Hell, it is presumed to be lost forever and can not eventually move to purgatory or heaven. Purgatory is a much more complex idea and is somewhat unique to Catholic beliefs. Contrary to many current people’s thoughts, it was not created during the Middle Ages, “it was a belief of the earliest Christians” (MacDonald). However it did not gain popularity or importance until the 16th century (MacDonald). Purgatory is a place of long lasting punishment, but the type of punishment is debatable (McCarthy). Some believe it is similar to hell in that the soul is tormented with fire and never rests.

Others believe it is a state of nothingness and the soul is left only with its sins. Whichever belief system a Catholic adheres to is irrelevant because the important thing is that if a soul goes to purgatory it is eventually guaranteed admission into heaven after proper purification (Robinson). The intensity and duration of the torment can be reduced by good works. Things like mass, prayers, and other acts of piety and devotion can affect how long the soul stays in purgatory (Robinson). A soul goes to purgatory to cleanse away its sins before entering heaven. According to the Catholic religion, there are two types of sins.

The first is a grave sin. If a person commits a grave sin they are rejecting God and the word of God. This means that even if the person wanted to be forgiven, they would not and automatically go to hell at death (MacDonald). Some example of grave sins are obvious like murder, but others are less obvious, such as using blasphemy (MacDonald). People that do not believe in God or the teachings of Jesus automatically are damned to hell (Pope John Paul II). The other type of sin is venial sin. These are the sins that are cleansed in purgatory. Venial sins occur because of attachment to worldly creatures or goods.

These must be purified before entering heaven. For an individual, purgatory ends when have been purified and can be admitted to heaven (Robinson). For the mass population, purgatory will end at the time of the first general judgment of humanity (Robinson). This means that when judgment comes, those who have been in purgatory for potentially millennia and those who may have died the day before will all be released at the same time. No

happen based on the judgment. There is no general expectation for the date of the first general judgment of humanity.

There are three ways to shorten the time of a soul in purgatory. Because all people are presumed to have sinned at some point in their life (even the Popes), almost all souls are presumed to go to purgatory. However, other than not sinning during life, the three options for shortening time is prayers for the dead, confession, and indulgences. Prayers for the dead must be performed by the living (Robinson). These can be used both toward a soul in purgatory or as a kind of pre-payment by the living. Based on the number of prayers received for a soul in purgatory, the prayers are supposed to help the soul move on toward heaven (Robinson).

Confession is another form of reducing time in purgatory. A person must go to a priest and confess their sins. Through the grace of Jesus, the priest can grant the person forgiveness provided that the sin committed was not a grave sin (MacDonald). Although forgiveness is granted, confession does not totally remove the sin and a soul will still spend time in purgatory for that sin (MacDonald). Once a person has been forgiven for their sin, it is suggested that they pay penance and amends in order to make things as right as possible. Penance means that after a sinner has been forgiven, they need to recover, and they do this by making amends.

Amends are doing what is possible in order to make things right. An example would be, for instance, if a Catholic stole money from an employer, they could be forgiven through an apology, and that would be acceptable. However, the best possible thing to do would be to have the apology and

return the money. Returning the money would be doing what the person could to make the situation right. Indulgences are the third way a person can shorten their time in purgatory. Originally they were used as monetary gain by the church, and helped fund many things, such as missions and the massive cathedrals and churches that still stand today.

There are two types of indulgences: partial and plenary. Partial indulgences only will shorten time in purgatory some and will not guarantee admission to heaven immediately upon death. An example of a partial indulgence would be God will grant 100 to 300 days or more indulgence for a single recitation of a simple short prayer. Repeating it 1000 times in a single day would gain 300. 000 days indulgence. A single Hail Mary of the Rosary will get a person more than 2000 days indulgence (Robinson).

Like prayers for the dead, these can be applied to a person's own credit or to the credit of someone already in purgatory (Robinson). Plenary indulgences grant those who are living a bypass to purgatory. Although this sounds like the perfect solution, it is practically impossible for a person to remember and confess all of their sins, so obtaining a plenary indulgence is impractical (Robinson). An important detail of shortening time in purgatory is to remember that all of these things are for someone who feels they have not or their loved one did not commit a grave sin.

If they or the person in question had committed a grave sin, their soul would already be in hell and the attempt would be lost. Because of the uniqueness of an idea such as purgatory, it is questioned often. However, during the last three ecumenical councils (Trent, Vatican I and Vatican II), the church has

confirmed the existence of purgatory (McCarthy). At Vatican II, purgatory was described as a place where souls were purified through “ fire and torments or other purifying punishments” (McCarthy).

Regarding the existence of purgatory, Vatican II documents state The doctrine of purgatory clearly demonstrates the even when the guilt of sin has been taken away, punishment for it or the consequences of it may remain to be expiated or cleansed. They often are. In fact, in purgatory the souls of those who died in the charity of God and truly repentant, but who had not made satisfaction with adequate penance for their sins and omissions are cleansed after death with punishments designed to purge away their debts (Robinson).

This opinion clearly confirms that purgatory is alive and well within the belief system of the Catholic Church and that sins are purged there in order to gain entrance to heaven. However difficult it would be, Catholics still believe in the possibility of dying and going to heaven, or at the least going to purgatory and then heaven. Heaven is thought to be the place of angels (Hontheim). These souls get to see God’s face all the time which is the reward for living a life of piety and by Jesus’ teachings (Hontheim).

Regarding the location of heaven Some are of opinion that heaven is everywhere, as God is everywhere. According to this view the blessed can move about freely in every part of the universe, and still remain with God and see everywhere. Everywhere, too, they remain with Christ (in His sacred Humanity) and with the saints and the angels. For, according to the

advocates of this opinion, the spatial distances of this world must no longer impede the mutual intercourse of blessed (Hontheim).

This goes along with the popular opinion that God is everywhere and thus He can see all actions and sins as well as the view that the place of heaven is within the sky. Because of the supposed glory of heaven, it is the motivator of Catholics to act in accordance with the beliefs of the church. The afterlife of a Catholic to many would seem overbearing because of the fact that Catholics pay for all of their worldly sins in purgatory and many spend millennia there. However, the important thing is that as long as the person embraces God and Jesus, they are pretty much guaranteed admission to Heaven eventually.

This is a huge motivator for Catholics during life. Although the system of hell, purgatory to heaven, or heaven at death may be different than other religions, it is for this reason that it needs to be clarified and understood. If it is not properly understood, we (as a helping profession) can not help Catholics with their own unique needs such as confession. Being that Catholicism is one of the world's most followed religions we needs to be understanding and respectful of the distinctive needs of Catholics regarding their afterlife.