

¿Qué hace falta para salir del Purgatorio?

What does it take to get out of Purgatory?

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Resumen: La religión desempeña un papel fundamental para el ser humano, no hay sociedad humana que carezca de algo que los científicos sociales llamarían religión. Ésta juega un papel importante en la vida de muchas personas en cuestiones como la existencia del alma o su destino. Por su parte, la tradición católica considera que uno de los destinos del alma es el Purgatorio e indica que es posible rezar por las almas que se encuentran aquí para que puedan llegar al Cielo. En este artículo se ha calculado la viabilidad de salvar a todas las almas del Purgatorio, mediante razonamientos matemáticos y considerando aspectos de la condición humana.

Palabras clave: alma; catolicismo; oración; salvación; Santa Gertrudis; ser humano.

Abstract: Religion plays a fundamental role for human beings, there is no human society that lacks something that social scientists would call religion. This plays an important role in the lives of many people in issues such as the existence of the soul or its destiny. For its part, Catholic tradition considers that one of the destinations of the soul is Purgatory and indicates that it is possible to pray for the souls found here so that they can reach Heaven. In this article, the feasibility of saving all souls from Purgatory has been calculated, through mathematical reasoning and considering aspects of the human condition.

Keywords: soul; Catholicism; prayer; salvation; Saint Gertrude; human being.

1. HOW MANY HUMAN BEINGS INHABIT THE EARTH?

You have probably wondered how many human beings inhabit the Earth. The answer may vary depending on the sources consulted, but it is around 8,000,000,000 inhabitants in 2024 (Our World in Data 2024a; 2024b).

What seems more complicated is knowing the number of people who have ever set foot on our planet. Any estimate depends on three factors: the time that humans have inhabited the Earth, the average size of the population in the different periods, and the number of births per 1,000 inhabitants during each of those periods, which is not an easy task. Assuming that modern *Homo sapiens* appeared around 190,000 BC and making various assumptions that transcend the purpose of this article, it is obtained that about 117,000,000,000 people have ever existed on planet Earth (Population Reference Bureau 2022). A simple mathematical calculation indicates that about 109,000,000,000 people would have died in this period.

2. WHAT ROLE DOES RELIGION PLAY IN HUMAN BEINGS?

Religion constitutes a fundamental part of human existence, whose influence dates back to prehistoric times (Jensen 2019). So much so that the sociologist Talcott Parsons, in his introduction to the work *The Sociology of Religion* by Max Weber, indicates and agrees with the latter that there is no known human society without something that modern social scientists would classify as religion (Weber [1920] 1965).

From a biological point of view, where the souls of these people have ended up, if such a place exists and if the soul exists, is a mystery. However, on the religious level, the spiritual facet plays an important role. For example, Catholic doctrine does consider that the human being is endowed with a rational soul (Holy See, HS 1997a) and that, when a person dies in a biological sense, their soul can go to Heaven, Hell or remain in a stage of purification to obtain the holiness that allows them to enter Heaven: Purgatory (HS 1997b). Likewise, there is talk of prayer for these deceased so that, purified, they can reach a beatific vision of God (HS 1997c).

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF TRADITION FOR HUMAN BEINGS

Tradition can be considered as the awareness of a human group that the same principle of identity links one generation to another. In the case of religious tradition, its content is a complex mixture of symbolic values, myths, and rituals whose meaning must be revealed, constituting a principle of identity and a model of action through which individuals can

recognize each other (Meslin 1990). In this way, the importance of religious tradition in modern *Homo Sapiens* groups is revealed.

4. ENCOUNTER BETWEEN ANTHROPOLOGY, RELIGION AND TRADITION

Concerning the above, the Catholic Church considers Saint Gertrude, a Benedictine nun and German mystical writer of the 13th and 14th centuries, as an example of sympathy towards the souls in Purgatory (The Catholic Encyclopedia 1909; Rubial-García & Bieńko de Peralta 2003). There is a tradition according to which the Lord told Saint Gertrude that every time a certain prayer was prayed, a thousand souls could be saved from Purgatory (O'Sullivan 1936; Catolicidad 2013; Roman Catholic Man 2017; Mater Mundi 2022; Aciprensa 2024). The prayer can be written as follows:

Eternal Father, I offer You the most precious Blood of Your Divine Son, Jesus, in union with the Masses said throughout the world today, for all the Holy Souls in Purgatory, for sinners in the Universal Church, those in my own home, and within my family. Amen.

Let us assume that it is true and that, as mentioned above, there are about 109,000,000,000 modern human beings who have died to date. Assuming that everyone had a soul and that some could have gone to Purgatory, one could calculate the number of prayers necessary to save them all, assuming that none have been saved yet and that one begins praying at the present moment.

To do this, it is necessary to know the number of souls present in Purgatory, although there are no official figures in this regard provided by the Catholic Church. There is also no consensus, so the sources consulted consider that it is 20 % (The Catholic Kingdom 2024), a large number (Uniquely Mary 2024), and the majority (Her School of Love 2010). Consequently and to simplify the calculations, we will assume that 50 % of the souls go to Purgatory so that about 55,000,000,000 souls would have been in Purgatory at some point. If a single prayer were capable of freeing 1,000 souls from Purgatory, then 55,000,000 prayers would be needed. To facilitate the task, each person will only have to pray the prayer in question once, so it would be necessary for about 55,000,000 Catholics to pray it to achieve the salvation of all those souls. If in 2024 it is estimated that there

are about 1,300,000,000 people baptized by the Catholic Church throughout the world (Center for the Study of Global Christianity 2024; L'Osservatore Romano 2024; Encyclopedia Britannica 2024), it would be enough for 4 % of them to pray this prayer just once to save all those souls, something that seems achievable.

Unfortunately, not everything is as simple as it seems. The Catholic Church itself does not seem to agree that the mere recitation of one or another prayer allows the *ad libitum* liberation of one or more souls from Purgatory (HS 1899), but rather recommends alms, indulgences and works of penance in favor of the deceased (HS 1997c).

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