

# Articles

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*The Person and the Challenges*  
Volume 14 (2024) Number 1, p. 5–18  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15633/pch.14101>

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## **Purgatory and Hell in Medieval Female Mystics' Visions**

### **Abstract**

Death and the afterlife have always evoked both fear and hope among people. Consequently, they have endeavoured to gain a deeper understanding of what lies beyond life's earthly realm. Christian teachings and the official doctrine of the Church offer a broad overview of this reality, leaving room for an expectation of a more detailed explanation of the fate that awaits individuals after death. Female mystics, particularly those who lived during the late Middle Ages, played significant roles in elucidating these destinies. Their visions and subsequent writings contain a wealth of details concerning the nature of eternal life, providing meticulous descriptions of the places and events that unfold after death. This article delves into their visions of purgatory and hell, examining their relationship with the official Catholic doctrine.

### **Keywords**

purgatory, hell, Mystics, Middle Ages, eschatology

## 1. Introduction

The concept of life after death has been a perennial mystery, one that has intrigued people from various epochs. However, during the Middle Ages, a particularly eschatological period, Christianity held a dominant sway over people's beliefs. Additionally, the people of that era lived in constant fear of death, largely due to diseases, plagues, and wars that surrounded them. This heightened awareness of mortality naturally led to questions and anxieties regarding the fate of human souls after death. Christianity provided answers to these profound inquiries. Yet, these answers did not solely emanate from the Bible and the official teachings of the Church. They also found expression in the writings of mystics who, based upon their extraordinary visions, meticulously described the realms that awaited the departed.

A distinctive group of mystics during the Middle Ages were women whose visionary experiences gained widespread popularity. These mystics often influenced preaching and visual art, thereby significantly shaping the collective consciousness of the masses. Late medieval female mystics played a particularly exceptional role in moulding eschatological beliefs. Within the realm of women's mysticism, a rich tapestry of eminent personalities emerges, spanning across the vast landscape of medieval Europe. These luminaries, each with their distinct hues, cast a mosaic of diversity upon the canvas of history.<sup>1</sup> Among them, jewels of particular fascination emerge – Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Mechthild of Magdeburg (1207–1282), Gertrude the Great (1256–1302), Angela of Foligno (1248–1309), Birgitta of Sweden (1303–1373), Catherine of Siena (1347–1380), Julian of Norwich (1342–1416), Frances of Rome (1384–1440), and Catherine of Genoa (1447–1510).

In their visionary experiences, they dedicated a significant portion to depicting the encounter between the saved individuals and Christ, often referred to as the Bridegroom.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, the mystical descriptions of death resemble hymns and antiphons, particularly those designed for the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which state that the Queen has been taken into the wedding chamber, where the Heavenly King sits upon his throne. For many

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<sup>1</sup> E. R. Obbard, *Medieval Women Mystics: Gertrude the Great, Angela of Foligno, Birgitta of Sweden, Julian of Norwich: Selected Spiritual Writings*, New York 2002, New City Press.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Gertrude D'Helfta, *Œuvres Spirituelles*, III, *L'Héraut*, Livre III, Paris 1968, Les Éditions du Cerf, p. 104; Gertruda z Helfty, *Ćwiczenia*, Tyniec 1999, Wydawnictwo Benedyktynów.

mystics, death was an event akin to the Assumption of Mary.<sup>3</sup> In one vision, for example, Gertrude witnessed the death of a nun whose soul was carried to heaven by angels. There, she received a crown from the hands of Christ the Bridegroom and then sat with Him on the throne. In another vision, Christ explained to Gertrude that after her death, she would be taken to the royal palace, where she would await her wedding day in great glory. In medieval mysticism, death thus ceased to be frightening, while the event of judgment was given a new context of meaning, namely wedding symbolism. The mystics perceived Christ more as the bridegroom than the judge, while the Judgement Day was regarded rather as the return of the bridegroom – an eternal reward for the virgins – than a terrible day of wrath and punishment. Julian of Norwich even argued that God is not only a father, but also a mother, who is full of love, compassion, and forgiveness.<sup>4</sup>

In their visionary experiences, medieval female mystics did not exclusively focus upon those who had already attained salvation. They also devoted significant attention to individuals whose fate, following the particular judgment, led them either to purgatory or hell. This primarily served a pedagogical purpose, acting as a deterrent against sin and promoting a life of faith. The visions of these mystic women are valuable due to their uniqueness, vivid descriptions, and the profound emphasis on emotions. This helps us better understand the phenomenon of their popularity. Therefore, by examining the writings of these medieval female mystics, we aim to clarify the portrayal of purgatory and hell as revealed through their visions and explore how these mystics engaged with Catholic doctrine on this subject.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> C. McDannell, B. Lang, *Heaven. A History*, New Haven 2001, Yale University Press, p. 103.

<sup>4</sup> M. D. Burkholder, *God our Suffering Mother? Kenotic Antonement in Julian of Norwich's Revelations of Divine Love*, "Journal of Theology and Ministry" 21 (2019–2020), pp. 27–51.

<sup>5</sup> A monumental three-volume work on mysticism was written by Charles-André Bernard: *Il Dio dei mistici*, vol. 1, *Le vie dell'Interiorità*, Cinisello Balsamo 1996, San Paolo Edizioni; *Il Dio dei mistici*, vol. 2, *La conformazione a Cristo*, Cinisello Balsamo 2000, San Paolo Edizioni; *Il Dio dei mistici*, vol. 3, *Mistica e azione*, Cinisello Balsamo 2004, San Paolo Edizioni. The author describes, among others, some experiences of mystic women such as Angela da Foligno and Hildegard of Bingen; however, his primary focus is on their spirituality, not eschatology.

## 2. Purgatory: between pain and hope

Purgatory was of particular interest for mystical literature, as it is located at the crossroads of time and eternity and, through the idea of intercession, demonstrates the connection of temporality and the afterlife<sup>6</sup>. In the works of the mystics, two main strands of the doctrine of purgatory can be distinguished. The first one describes purgatory as a temporary hell, while the second presents it as an independent realm separate from hell that is the result of God's love and mercy. The first strand is well-represented by female mystics, such as Catherine of Siena,<sup>7</sup> Birgitta of Sweden,<sup>8</sup> Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Hildegard of Bingen. In her work *Liber vitae meritorum*,<sup>9</sup> Hildegard describes the purgatorial punishments, drawing from accounts of infernal torments found in visionary literature such as Drythlem's vision recorded by Bede the Venerable. The very location of purgatory was also sometimes associated with *infernum*. According to Hildegard, it is in the upper levels of hell. In her vision, the souls are subjected there to the suffering caused by fire. These torments occur in a variety of places that form the purgatorial landscape: pits, lakes, or caves. Fire is sometimes replaced by a reeking swamp cleansing sins of recklessness, pride, and inconstancy. Furthermore, purgatory is full of all kinds of vermin, snakes, and scorpions.<sup>10</sup> Purgatory is thus varied in terms of both environment and types of purifying punishments inflicted there. For instance, the unjust suffer in a place full of vermin and blazing thorns, where demons strike them with fiery whips.<sup>11</sup> All of this is reminiscent of the categorisation inherent in hell. According to Hildegard, naturalistic fire (linked by her with volcanic activity) is the

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. S. Jaśkiewicz, *L'aspetto ecclesiale dell'esistenza cristiana nella morte*, "The Person and the Challenges" 5 (2015), 1, pp. 129–132.

<sup>7</sup> Catharina Senensis, *Il dialogo della divina provvidenza ovvero libro della divina dottrina*, Roma 1968, Edizioni catheriniane, p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> Descriptions of Purgatory are included in her visions from 1346 and 1373. They were published by Alphonse of Pecha between 1329 and 1389. See. E. Colledge, *Epistola solitarii ad reges: Alphonse of Pecha as Organizer of Birgittine and Urbanist Propaganda*, "Medieval Studies" 18 (1956), pp. 19–49.

<sup>9</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *Liber vitae meritorum*, in: L. van Acker (ed.), *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis*, vol. 90, Turnhout 1995, Brepols, I, p. 77.

<sup>10</sup> S. Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen: a visionary life*, London, New York 1989, Routledge, p. 92.

<sup>11</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *Liber vitae meritorum*, IV, p. 43.

most prominent of all punishments. She displays purgatorial flames as especially effective. Contrary to prevailing views of the time, she believes that they purify sinners who have committed mortal sins, if they demonstrate repentance. It thus greatly expands the group of purgatory's residents, excluding only suicides.<sup>12</sup> In Hildegard's view, the suffering of the soul in purgatory is very tangible as it has a physical dimension.

Mechthild's Purgatory also exhibits infernal qualities. In her visions, she saw that the abyss which used to contain the Old Testament figures, currently serves as purgatory. The region inhabited by the greatest sinners is virtually the vestibule of hell. Its residents include representatives of various social groups, such as bishops and lords. This part of purgatory is directly connected to hell through the mouth of hell.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, in the visions of Birgitta of Sweden, purgatory exhibits infernal features as well. This applies especially to its lower section, which is completely dark, cold, and where souls experience various mental and physical torments affecting a variety of senses (hearing, sight, and touch). Fire is the source of the most painful physical suffering.<sup>14</sup> The souls residing there remain unsure of their salvation, which causes additional anguish. Birgitta's Purgatory consists of several regions situated one above the other, thus enabling souls to move upwards. This vertical structure and the associated ascending movement bear symbolic significance illustrating the process of the soul's posthumous refinement through suffering. Hell is located on its lowest level: it is depicted as a massive furnace. It is surrounded by an inescapable dark abyss (*limbus*). It is therefore an enclosed area excluded from the ascending movement of the afterlife. The three levels of purgatory are located above hell. Its two upper sections are the place where a soul awaits salvation, while actual purgatorial punishment takes place in the lowest one. It resembles the torments of hell, except that it does not last forever. In the uppermost region of purgatory, the only punishment is the inability to see God while longing for him. In the central region, souls suffer from spiritual weakness and deprivation of beauty. Their suffering may be shortened by the intercession of the living. Birgitta's visions provide details of specific dead people

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<sup>12</sup> S. Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen: a visionary life*, p. 91.

<sup>13</sup> Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Flowing light of the Godhead*, New York 1998, Paulist Press, 3.21.

<sup>14</sup> T. Matsuda, *Death and Purgatory in Middle English Didactic Poetry*, Cambridge 1997, Boydell and Brewer, p. 71.

residing in purgatory and the prayers that might help them.<sup>15</sup> According to her revelations, purgatory is also accessible for those who made a deathbed conversion. They end up in the lowest part of purgatory and experience torments akin to that of hell. Birgitta also mentions Mary's special role as protector of the souls in purgatory. In one of the visions, Mary even refers to herself as their mother.<sup>16</sup>

An example of the second strand in understanding the doctrine of purgatory is represented by Catherine of Genoa. Her *Trattato del purgatorio*<sup>17</sup> is significant for the development of this concept. It describes a dualistic aspect of purgatory as a place where souls experience both suffering and joy. Such an approach considerably distances purgatory from hell. It is no longer a temporary hell, full of terrible tortures, but a preparation for a reunion with God, where purifying suffering is accompanied by joy and hope. Catherine even claims that this joy is second only to the happiness of the saved in heaven and steadily increases as the purification progresses.<sup>18</sup> She understands purgatory as an advancing process in which souls become increasingly pure and God-like, thereby intensifying their joy. There are various reasons for experiencing happiness in purgatory, such as the certainty of salvation, awareness of one's inability to sin,<sup>19</sup> a conviction of the justice and mercy of God's judgments,<sup>20</sup> joyful submission to God's will,<sup>21</sup> and a deepening knowledge of God during their penance.<sup>22</sup> The joy felt in purgatory is not the only feature that distinguishes it from hell. Catherine emphasises the fact that the souls in purgatory are not malevolent and their guilt has been forgiven due to repentance. Moreover, the mystic indicates that in purgatory, despair and fear are replaced by hope. Although Catherine also speaks explicitly of suffering the separation from God, inability to see him, and awareness of a wilful transgression, all these torments are of a spiritual nature.

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<sup>15</sup> *The Revelations of Saint Birgitta*, Oxford 1929, Oxford University Press, p. 128.

<sup>16</sup> *The Revelations of Saint Birgitta*, Oxford 1929, pp. 50–51.

<sup>17</sup> Caterina da Genova, *Trattato del purgatorio e altri scritti*, T. Giuggia (ed), Milan 1996, Gribaudi.

<sup>18</sup> Katarzyna z Genui, *Traktat o czyściu*, Sandomierz 2013, Armoryka, 2.1; Cf. A. Zwoliński, *The Christian Understanding of Happiness*, "The Person and the Challenges" 6 (2006), 1, pp. 81–103.

<sup>19</sup> Katarzyna z Genui, *Traktat o czyściu*, 1.4.

<sup>20</sup> Katarzyna z Genui, *Traktat o czyściu*, 18, 3–4.

<sup>21</sup> Katarzyna z Genui, *Traktat o czyściu*, 1.2; 6.1.

<sup>22</sup> Katarzyna z Genui, *Traktat o czyściu*, 6.3.

The only physical aspect of purgatorial suffering is the fire which is an instrument of soul purification.<sup>23</sup> Her description lacks the elaborate punishments and tortures inflicted by demons. This image of purgatory is more optimistic, thus being a major step in doctrinal development. It was later developed by theologians, including Saint Cajetan, Johann Eck, and Francis de Sales.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. Hell: terrifying hierarchy

Hell was also the object of women's eschatological visions. It was usually depicted traditionally, paying great attention to detail. However, a certain novelty was its juxtaposition with the hierarchical structure of heaven. For the mystics, hell is the exact opposite of heaven. Like the celestial hierarchy, there is its infernal counterpart which imitates the angelic choirs. Creating such a 'copy' does not result from a lack of conception, but is theologically justified. Frances of Rome<sup>25</sup> explains this in *Tractatus de inferno*,<sup>26</sup> referring to the fall of Lucifer. During his revolt, one third of each choir rebelled. Those fallen angels form the infernal hierarchy. Most of them never leave hell, some float in the air (suspended between heaven and earth), and others remain among humans to tempt them and then lead them to hell.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Katarzyna z Genui, *Traktat o czyściści*, 10.2.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. J. Delumeau, *Grzech i strach*, Warszawa 1994, Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, p. 551.

<sup>25</sup> The visions of Francesca of Rome were recorded in Latin by her confessor. A critical study of them has been published e.g. in the following item: B. Romagnoli, *Santa Francesca Romana. Edizione critica dei trattati latini di Giovanni Mattiotti*, Città del Vaticano 1994, Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

<sup>26</sup> This treatise consists of three parts. The first describes the structure of the kingdom of darkness as well as the figure of Lucifer being its prince. The second is a detailed description of the 36 places in Hell corresponding to the categories of sinners residing there. The third is an abridged treatise on demonology and features a description of the strategy of the infernal hierarchy. Only the first and third parts have survived to date. Sainte François Romaine, *Traite de l'enfer. L'enfer existe. Texte imprimé visions de sainte Françoise Romaine, XVe siècle, sainte Thérèse d'Avila, XVIe siècle, Anne-Catherine Emmerich, XIXe siècle, enfants de Fatima, XXe siècle*, M. I. Alvira, P. de Laubier (eds), Paris 1996, P. Téqui, pp. 19–43; Cf. O. Moroni, *Le visioni di S. Francesca Romana tra medioevo e umanesimo*, "Studi Romani" 21 (1973), pp. 160–178.

<sup>27</sup> Sainte François Romaine, *Traite de l'enfer. L'enfer existe. Texte imprimé visions de sainte Françoise Romaine, XVe siècle, sainte Thérèse d'Avila, XVIe siècle, Anne-Catherine Emmerich, XIXe siècle, enfants de Fatima, XXe siècle*, p. 24.

The infernal hierarchy thus consists of nine orders, divided into three hierarchies of three orders each. Furthermore, each of them consists of nine ranks. Lucifer occupies the very top of the hierarchy. Below him are the princes – three demons, each of whom once belonged to a different of the highest order: Asmodeus once belonged to Cherubim, Mammon to Thrones, and Beelzebub to Dominions. Each reign over a different kind of sin: Asmodeus rules bodily temptations, Mammon governs avarice, and Beelzebub is the prince of idolatry (including sorcery and divination). The princes reside at the bottom of hell and never leave it, but send other demons to tempt mankind. Demons originating from the three highest orders are tasked with torturing the worst sinners.<sup>28</sup> Demons from lower orders are found in the middle (demons from the choirs of Dominions, Virtues, and Powers) and upper hell (Archangels and Angels).<sup>29</sup>

The infernal hierarchy has an organised structure; its lower ranks are subject to the higher ones, whilst all of them obey Lucifer's will. Therefore, hierarchy is an ontological principle. Frances of Rome thus emphasises that both celestial and infernal hierarchies are subject to God's will. Even the very existence of hell is an expression of divine justice.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the mystics perceived hell not as shapeless chaos, but as a place with a well-organised central structure. The individual demons are assigned specific tasks. Each is responsible for a different kind of sin and an assigned sinner whom he oversees and torments. In this division, demonic tempters make up a special category. They leave hell with the aim of tempting humans and then taking their souls after death. The mystic provides some interesting details about their activity. Immediately after death, any soul that succumbed to demons' wiles is shackled and cast into hell. Its guardian angel accompanies it to the threshold of hell and then returns to heaven. In the case where a soul is sent to purgatory, it is the demon who escorts it away; but he stops at its gateway, for he cannot enter there. However, there is a special case when a soul has barely escaped hell and ends up at the bottom level of purgatory. There, it beholds their tempter being tortured for failing his task and hears insults thrown by him. It causes additional suffering for the soul, as seeing a demon is always a torment.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Sainte François Romaine, *Traite de lenfer. Lenfer existe*, pp. 24–25.

<sup>29</sup> Sainte François Romaine, *Traite de lenfer. Lenfer existe*, pp. 26–27.

<sup>30</sup> Sainte François Romaine, *Traite de lenfer. Lenfer existe*, p. 31.

<sup>31</sup> Sainte François Romaine, *Traite de lenfer. Lenfer existe*, pp. 37–38.



Frances' visions also contain detailed accounts of the fate of the damned. They are described step by step, beginning with the moment of temptation and ending with an assignment to a proper place in hell. In one vision, Frances saw the demon-tempter standing on the left side of the sinner – as opposed to the right, the left side is reserved for hell. After capturing a soul, he drags it like a slave to the infernal gates and then throws it into the open mouth of hell. Once the sinner gets inside, he is unable to escape. Then, specially appointed demons lead him before fire-breathing Lucifer. The flames immediately engulf his entire body and the wicked, who is then judged by Lucifer and assigned the appropriate spot in hell, according to the sins committed. A shackled soul cannot move on its own, so it is dragged there by specially appointed demons.<sup>32</sup>

The women mystics perceive hell through the prism of the spiritual entities that inhabit it. They are hierarchically organised and operate according to a strict strategy. Their definition of hell is ontological rather than spatial. According to Hildegard, demons, being ontologically dark as they lost an ability to reflect the divine light, constitute the essence of hell more than physical darkness and torture.<sup>33</sup> Yet, as its spatial characteristics are featured in mystical literature, hell may be considered a place too. According to Frances of Rome, it is composed of three parts: upper, middle, and lower. Sinners are placed there according to the gravity of their guilt and the corresponding punishment; the lower they are, the darker it gets, and their torment is greater. The individual sections of hell are not clearly separated from each other, so their boundaries remain rather fluid. The ternary division of *infernum*, with cruelty and severity of punishments increasing with moving downwards, can be also found in the works of other mystics, such as Mechthild. The differences mainly depend upon the criterion used to allocate sinners. For Mechthild, this criterion is confessional. In the lower hell reside Christians, Jews in the middle, and pagans in the upper one. The sinners are arranged according to the category of their sins, which was a revolutionary idea at the time. It is an expression of the principle of retribution depending on the value of the received gift.

This is confirmed by the lament of the damned heard by the mystic. Pagans complain that if they had kept the Law, they would not suffer forever; Jews lament that if they had followed the Law of Moses, they would not be condemned; finally,

<sup>32</sup> Sainte François Romaine, *Traite de l'enfer. L'enfer existe*, p. 23.

<sup>33</sup> F. Beer, *Women an mystical experience in the Middle Age*, Woodbridge 1992, Boydell Press, pp. 46–55.

Christians weep, as they have received the supreme honour of being the children of God, but rejected it and chose Lucifer, hence they must stand naked before him while he mocks them and laughs at their foolishness. Infernal punishments are assigned to categories of sins and represent them symbolically. Mechthild provides whole catalogue of tortures describing the torments of the damned with meticulous detail. Most punishments are inflicted directly by Lucifer, or somehow related to him. Thus, the mystic mentions the sodomites who are kept in the bowels of the beast (the personification of Lucifer) – it consumes them, then regurgitates, and swallows again. The hypocrites are tormented by being in Lucifer's proximity, as they are placed on the lap of the beast. The unbelieving teachers of the faith are forced to stay at Lucifer's feet and look him in his face, the avaricious are being devoured and excreted by Lucifer, murderers are torn to pieces with Lucifer's fiery sword, and finally, the gluttons and drunkards are fed by Lucifer with stones, fire, and brimstone.<sup>34</sup> The list of elaborate punishments is lengthy; all of them reflect the type of sins committed. Mechthild also evokes the image of an 'infernal kitchen' where demons prepare a huge stew using sinners as ingredients. In her vision, hell is a realm of madness, insanity, and all kinds of vermin, where demons eternally struggle with the damned and each other.

The hell of the mystics is filled with terrifying zoomorphic beasts and all sorts of horrible monstrosities that have no counterparts on earth. In Frances' vision, hell has the form of a great dragon with its head located in the upper level, its body in the middle one, and its tail in the lower part.<sup>35</sup> It has an open maw breathing fierce flames, emits a terrible reek, and a foul smell of burning comes from its ears and nostrils.<sup>36</sup> The gates of hell are situated in the dragon's maw; the sinners who walk inside can move only in one direction, towards the inside. An inscription on the threshold reads: "This is Hell, without hope or respite, where no one shall find peace."

The motif of the beast and the maw of hell also appears in Mechthild's works. She sees it constantly open and ready to swallow up sinners.<sup>37</sup> Lucifer, the Prince of Darkness, has his throne in the very centre of hell. In her treatise on the subject, Frances provides a frightening description of the infernal ruler. He sits

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<sup>34</sup> Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Flowing light*, 3.15.

<sup>35</sup> Sainte François Romaine, *Traite de l'enfer*, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Sainte François Romaine, *Traite de l'enfer*, 21.

<sup>37</sup> Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Flowing light*, 3.21.

in the middle of hell, engulfed by a monstrous whirlwind, at the same time being present in every corner of the infernal realm. He has a crown of antlers, flames erupt from his horrific countenance, and his body is entwined with burning chains that reach into all regions of hell forming a spider web that prevents the damned from escaping or moving freely.<sup>38</sup> Mechthild described Lucifer as a beast with numerous fiery eyes and a large open maw that swallows the damned. According to this mystic, after the Final Judgement, Lucifer will cover himself with a cloak made of mud from the sins of the whole world which will intensify his rage and cruelty.<sup>39</sup> Mechthild expands the idea that is present in medieval theology. It says that the suffering inflicted by Lucifer on sinners will intensify after the Final Judgement. The image of Lucifer as the beast who dominates hell with his power and size, and who devours and excretes sinners, has become a permanent feature of mystical visions of hell.

Summarising the mystics' view on hell, following Georges Minos, it may be concluded that hell is full of dread stemming from ontology (the infernal hierarchy), rather than being a place of punishment.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, hell is terrifying as a sphere where personal evil and spiritual entities of angelic origin reign. Simultaneously, mysticism provides vivid images which symbolise elusive spiritual reality. In this case, images seem to be more useful than abstract concepts, hence the mystics' hell is full of fantastical monsters and beasts. Despite grotesque descriptions, these monstrosities do not trivialize hell as they visualize the spiritual powers that reside there. Infernal punishments are presented symbolically as well. Lucifer's tortures draw from various fields (gastronomy, medicine, criminology) and constitute a genuine treasury of visual motifs, with the infernal kitchen being one of the most noteworthy.

#### 4. Conclusions

The visions described by medieval female mystics largely align with the official teachings of the Church, although they often provide additional details not found in official doctrine. It is important to note that the Church typically proclaims only what originates from the Bible and Tradition, understood as the living

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<sup>38</sup> Sainte François Romaine, *Traite de l'enfer*, 22.

<sup>39</sup> Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Flowing light*, 3.21.

<sup>40</sup> G. Minos, *Historia piekła*, Warszawa 1998, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, pp. 222–224.

transmission of faith. However, mystics, unbound by such limitations, were able to convey their subjective experiences.

One of the most intriguing aspects addressed in these visions is the concept of purgatory. It is worth noting that the doctrine of purgatory was a relatively new concept at the time, emerging during the Second Council of Lyon in the year 1274. One of the key figures behind the convening of this Council was Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos of Constantinople. The Creed of Faith he prepared was officially incorporated into the Council's proceedings and became the authoritative document for the Latin Church.<sup>41</sup> This marked the first official pronouncement by the Church on the subject of purgatory. The formal declaration of the teaching on purgatory as a dogma occurred later, specifically during the Council of Florence in 1439<sup>42</sup>, where the essential points raised by Michael VIII Palaiologos were reaffirmed.

Purgatory was believed to be the destination for individuals who had passed away in a state of God's grace, but had not yet fully atoned for their sins and made amends. Therefore, purgatory was seen as a process of purification (derived from the Latin word "purgari"), during which souls undergo purifying punishments referred to as 'poenae purgatoriae'.<sup>43</sup> The Council clarified that purgatory is not so much a physical place as it is a spiritual process.

Additionally, the Council asserted the necessity of intercession for the souls in purgatory through Mass, prayer, and almsgiving.<sup>44</sup> Notably, the Council did not explicitly mention the concept of purgatorial fire, as this idea faced opposition from the Eastern Orthodox Church.<sup>45</sup> Due to this disagreement, indulgences were also not included as a means of assistance for the souls in purgatory.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> H. Denzinger, A. Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, Freiburg 1965, Herder, no. 851–861; Cf. *Breviarium fidei. Wybór doktrynalnych wypowiedzi Kościoła*, I. Bokwa (ed.), Poznań 2007, Wydawnictwo św. Wojciecha, VII, p. 106.

<sup>42</sup> The content of the Council of Florence's teaching on Purgatory we can find in: *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, no. 1304; Cf. B. Hamilton, *Religion in the Medieval West*, London 1986, Cambridge University Press, pp. 46–47.

<sup>43</sup> P. Mąkosa, *The Roman Catholic Church's Late Medieval Teaching on Eschatology as the Basis for Visual Catechesis*, "Rocznik Teologii Katolickiej" 18 (2019), p. 148.

<sup>44</sup> L.F. Ladaria, *Kres człowieka i kres czasów*, in: B. Susboüé (ed.), *Człowiek i jego zbawienie. Historia dogmatów*, Kraków 2001, Wydawnictwo M, p. 401.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. A. Nichols, *Rome and the Eastern Churches. A Study in Schism*, San Francisco 2010, Ignatius Press, p. 293; J. Le Goff, *Narodziny czyszcza*, Warszawa 1997, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, p. 288.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. J. Finkeneller, *Eschatologia*, Kraków 2000, Wydawnictwo M, p. 133.

It can be observed, therefore, that the visions of female mystics occurred during the development of the doctrine of purgatory. It could be argued that, on one hand, they were influenced by the evolving teachings of the Church, and on the other hand, they played a role in disseminating the concept of purgatory among the faithful. They did so not only through their writings, but also indirectly through preaching and sacred art, such as depictions of the Last Judgment. For these reasons, a more in-depth study of their contributions is warranted.

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