



Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time November 15, 2015 B

◆ WHAT HAPPENS AFTER DEATH ◆ THE LAST THINGS

During the month of November, some of our Sunday scripture readings focus on what is often called *The Last Things*: Death, Judgment, Heaven, Hell, Purgatory and the Resurrection of the body. In this column, I will look at these realities which are dealt with more fully in Article 11 of my Catechism Articles (visit our website www.ascensioncatholic.net, click on Fr. Tobin's Writing, scroll down to Catechism Topics and click on Article 11). In my articles, the universal Catechism and the United States Catechism are referenced in the following way: "C" stands for the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and is followed by the referenced paragraph number/s (e.g. C142-184); "USC" stands for the *United States Catechism* and is followed by the referenced chapter/s or page number/s (e.g., USC Ch 1 or USC p.4).

Death and Dying Well

It has been often said that dying and death are the last things we get to do well, that is, if we don't die suddenly, or we collapse and go into a coma prior to dying. What is involved in dying well? Dying well means we accept our dying, are prepared spiritually, and have no unfinished business. We are at peace with everyone, especially our family. We are surrounded by loved ones. If there is a lack of peace, it is not our fault for we have no unforgiveness in our hearts. We have a Last Will and Testament, have made funeral plans and perhaps even prepared the scripture readings and music for our Funeral Mass. (A funeral planning guide and a book of readings are available at the church office). Ideally, medicine is able to control pain if we have it.

Particular Judgment: What Happens After Death

In death, the body separates from the soul, the human body decays, and the soul goes to meet God, while awaiting its reunion with its glorified body. (C997)
Drawing from the riches of Scripture and Tradition, Catholics affirm the following beliefs on what happens after death.

At the moment of death, the soul is separated from the body and the human person is judged. (In Catholic theology, the judgment that takes place immediately after death is called the "*Particular Judgment*.") The person continues to exist even though the body has ceased to function. At the Last Judgment, the body will be reunited to its soul. In 2Cor 5:10, Paul states that each of us "*must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil according to what he did in the body.*"

The Church's belief in the "Particular Judgment" immediately after death is based on the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31) and the words of Jesus to the repentant thief on the cross (Lk 23:43). At the Particular Judgment, there is "*no condemnation for those who die in Christ Jesus*" (Rom 8:1-2). Nevertheless, those who die in Christ but who still carry unrepented sins or selfishness in their hearts will go through some period of purification known as "purgatory." For those who have deliberately rejected God and the saving grace of Christ, there will be total separation from God, which is called "hell" (Mt. 18:7-9, Mk 9:47). We will now look a little more at the Catholic belief about heaven, purgatory and hell.

PAUSE: When judgment time comes, what do you think you will be judged on?

Heaven - Beatific Vision (C1023-1029, USC pp 153-154)

The *Catechism* states: *Those who die in God's grace and friendship and are perfectly purified live forever with Christ. They are like God forever, for they see him as he is, face to face (1023). The Church calls this contemplation of God in his heavenly glory "the beatific vision" (1028). This perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity—this communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, with the angels and all the blessed—is called "heaven." Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness (1024). Heaven is the blessed community of all who are perfectly incorporated into Christ (1026).*

The goal of our existence on earth and the reason God created us is to enjoy him forever in heaven. We have no lasting city here, but we seek the city that is to come (Heb 13:14).

What will heaven be like? Golfers wonder if there will be golf courses in heaven, and shoppers wonder if there will be ‘out of this world’ shopping malls. Jesus did not comment on either. But Jesus did describe heaven as a joyous wedding feast (Mt 22:1-14) and a great banquet (Lk 14:16-24). The Book of Revelation (21:4) states that in our heavenly glory, “*God will wipe away every tear from our eyes and there will be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain.*” We cannot begin to imagine the joys in store for us in heaven. Paul writes: “*What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who loved him*” (1Cor 2:9). We should remember that here on earth, we get a foretaste of heaven as we learn to live in Christ and love one another.

Who will attain heaven? The Book of Revelation speaks of 144,000 elect. This is a symbolic figure suggesting a perfect number. Rather than speculating on who or how many will be in heaven, we can say two things for certain:

- 1) No one just drifts into heaven. Our final eternal destiny—heaven or hell—will depend on the choices we make here on earth.
- 2) No one enters heaven without cooperating with the grace of Christ. We are saved by God’s grace through his gifts of faith and love, a self-sacrificing love that is expressed in witnessing him and in serving others.

What about good people who are not Christians and do not believe in God? For a response to this question, see Article 9, p.3, of my Catholic Catechism topics.

PAUSE: What would some ingredients of a perfect week or month be for you? What do you *hope* heaven will be like? What do you *think* it will be like?

Purgatory - Final Purification (C1030-1032, USC p.154)

The *Catechism* (1030-1031) states: *All who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. The Church gives the name purgatory to this final purification of the elect,*

which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned.

Speaking about purgatory, Saint John Paul II said: *Those who live in this state of purification after death are not separated from God but are immersed in the love of Christ. Neither are they separated from the saints in heaven...nor from us on earth. We all remain united in the Mystical Body of Christ, and we can therefore offer up prayers and good works on behalf of our brothers and sisters in purgatory* (General Audience, 08/04/99).

The Church’s belief in purgatory is one not shared by most other Christians who claim that it has no basis in Scripture. Surely, there is no mention of purgatory in the Bible, but neither do we find therein the words “incarnation” and “trinity”—two central doctrines of the Christian faith.

Catholic belief in purgatory is rooted in *Sacred Tradition* and *reason*. It is implied in Scripture. Let’s look briefly at all three.

Scripture. Catholics believe that the reality we call purgatory is hinted at in Scripture passages such as 2Mac 12:42-46, 1Cor 3:11-15 and 1Pet 1:17. In 2Maccabees, people are urged to pray for the dead. Prayers for the dead only make sense if they benefit the dead in some way. Prayers serve no purpose if the soul of the dead had already reached its final destination. The Letter to the Corinthians speaks of a purifying fire that the saved will experience. Those early Christians believed that Christians who died in an imperfect state would undergo a purification process before entering heaven.

Sacred Tradition. For Catholics, Sacred Tradition, along with Sacred Scripture, is their source of Divine Revelation. Catholics believe that Sacred Tradition affirms our belief in purgatory. Around 211 AD, Tertullian wrote that Christians offered prayers and mass for deceased loved ones. Sainly and scholarly pastors in the early church urged their people to pray for the dead. As I stated earlier, such prayers would make no sense if a soul had already reached its final destination. (For more on the very important role Sacred Tradition plays in Catholic theology and beliefs, see Article 2 of my Catechism topics.)

Reason. The Book of Revelation (21:27) tells us that “*nothing unclean will enter heaven.*” Most of us will die with some imperfection, making us unworthy of heaven; hence, the need for final purification which the Church calls purgatory. Purgatory is God’s way of purifying us from all sin, from the effects or wounds of sin and any attachment we may have to particular sins.

Purgatory is God's way of cleansing us of imperfections that would hinder us from fully enjoying heaven.

The pain and joy of purgatory. The pain of purgatory will probably involve the horror we will feel as we become fully aware of the ugliness of sin. The joy of purgatory will be the solace we will feel as we get closer to God. St. Catherine of Genoa, a fifteenth century mystic, wrote that the "fire" of purgatory is God's love "burning" the soul so that, at last, the soul is wholly aflame. She also said that the only joy greater than the joy of purgatory is the joy of heaven—purifier of all that would hinder us from fully enjoying heaven. As we know, none of us *fully* enjoy the joys and beauty of this life because of the garbage we carry in our heart.

The Church urges us to pray for the souls in purgatory. The Church prays for them at every Mass. Nov. 2 is the *Feast of All Souls* when we pray for *all the faithful departed*. In summary, we can say that Catholic teaching on purgatory is twofold: (a) purgatory exists and (b) our prayers can help the souls in purgatory move through their purification process.

Hell - Eternal Separation from God (C1033-1037, USC p.154)

The *Catechism* states: *To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from him forever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called "hell" (1033). The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs (1035).*

Many people have a difficult time reconciling the existence of hell with the all-loving and merciful God. How could our all-loving God send someone to a place of endless torment and unhappiness? Jesus could not be clearer about this issue. The reality of hell, of eternal separation from God, is mentioned many times in Scripture (Lk 16:19-31, Mt 5:30, Mk 9:43-48). The best known Scripture passage is probably Mt 25:31-46 dealing with the Last Judgment, in which the just are taken to heaven and the wicked are sent to hell.

It is important to keep in mind that God does not send anyone to hell. Rather, he allows us to live forever with our free choice to reject God. God's will is that *all* be saved, but he is not going to force anyone to accept his offer. In Jn 3:19, Jesus says: *"The verdict is this, the light came into the world but people preferred darkness to light because their works were evil."* God does not send us to hell; unrepented mortal sin does.

The Church's teaching on the existence of heaven and hell is a call to responsibility and to ongoing conversion of heart (C1036). Awareness of our eternal destiny should motivate us to cooperate with God's saving grace to avoid sin and do good.

PAUSE: What are your thoughts on this aspect of Christian belief? In your opinion, what type of person will end up in hell?

Resurrection of the Body (C 988-1004, USC pp.155-156)

The *U.S. Catechism* (p.155) states: *Faith in the resurrection of our bodies is inseparable from our faith in the resurrection of Christ's body from the dead. He rose as our head, as the pattern of our rising, and as the life-giving source of our new life.*

At the moment of death, our soul will separate from our body, and our body will begin its process of decay. *"You are dust and unto dust you shall return"* (Gen 3:19). The soul will go to meet God at the *Particular Judgment*. When Christ comes again, God will "grant incorruptible life to our bodies by reuniting them with our souls through the power of Jesus' Resurrection" (C 997).

What will the resurrected body be like? We can assume we will be like Jesus, who is "the first fruits" of the Resurrection. Jesus was raised with his own body (*"See my hands and my feet"* [Lk 24:39]), yet he had a *glorified* body that could walk through closed doors (Jn 20:19) or appear out of nowhere, as on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:15). The new and unimaginable life that we will enjoy in the age to come has begun in seed form in the sacrament of Baptism.

Meditation

*The souls of the just are in the hands of God,
and no torment shall touch them.
They seemed, in the view of the foolish, to be dead;
and their passing away was thought an affliction
and their going forth from us, utter destruction.
But they are in peace.*

(Wisdom 3:1-7)

Have a blessed week,

Le Saran

