



Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time B November 4, 2018

- **What does dying well look like?**
- **Life after death: Heaven, Purgatory, Hell**

During the month of November, our Church invites us to focus on the Last Things: death and what happens after death.

Dying Well

Unless we die suddenly, the last thing we will get to do well is to die well. What do I mean by dying well?

Dying well involves accepting my dying process once it seems certain that it is going to happen. Susan Adams, a convert and wonderful parishioner, is in the process of dying inspiringly well. Susan has Stage 4 Pancreatic Cancer.

The following are some characteristics of dying well:

- ◆ Susan has totally accepted that she is dying even though she is still up and about and able to go see her doctor.
- ◆ Susan is able to discuss her situation with family and friends. There is no denial—which sometimes happens.
- ◆ Susan has a Last Will and Testament. She is slowly getting rid of her material possessions.
- ◆ Susan is planning the readings and music for her funeral Mass which will be a celebration of a life well lived. Until this past summer, Susan had for the past 3 years been a member of our Bereavement Ministry which helps families plan funeral services.
- ◆ Susan has some physical pain which she is able to embrace as part of living a human life. She joins her suffering to the sufferings of Jesus.
- ◆ Susan is at peace with her God and the people in her life. She receives the Eucharist weekly. She has received the Sacrament of the Sick and can receive it again as her health deteriorates. Please pray for Susan Adams.

Susan's favorite Scripture is Psalm 139. I thank Susan for being a wonderful example of dying well for her family, friends and all who know her.

Dr. Ira Byock, M.D.

In 1997, Dr. Ira Byock wrote a book called *Dying Well: The Prospect of Growth at the End of Life*. Dr. Byock is a past President and currently a Fellow of the American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine. His book has many stories about people he has helped to prepare for death. Towards the end of his book, Dr. Byock responds to questions he is frequently asked. The following are some:

Q. *I have cancer, and I am not ready to talk about dying, but my family bought me this damn book. I feel like they're pushing me into the grave. Why can't they just leave me alone?*

A. I can't speak to the wisdom of them giving you this book, but as long as you asked, there are reasons why they can't just leave you alone. Even in dying you are stuck with family. Like it or not, you didn't stop being part of your family when you became ill. And belonging to your family still involves give and take. Being sick certainly changes your roles and diminishes your responsibilities with your family, but responsibilities do not simply go away.

From the tone of your question, I can almost hear your response: "Responsibilities, for Christ sakes. Just let me be!" Sorry, you're not dead yet, and while your responsibilities aren't onerous, they are real. My best advice is: Relax! It will all happen naturally if and when you can accept the fact that you are still connected to your family. For instance, you have a responsibility to tell your family what you need and what you want. Unless you do, they may well not know. If you don't want to talk about dying, tell them so. But don't do it out of bravado or in silent suffering; it just causes everyone *more* pain.

It's not dying that people need to talk with each other about, but the living they've shared and their relationships. I think people who are dying have a responsibility to help reconcile strained relations they have with family and previously close friends. In other words, if a relative or friend is open, it seems irresponsible to ignore the chance to heal wounded relationship before one's death.

Dying is fundamentally a personal experience; if it is truly your choice, it is also your right to be "left alone." Recognize, however, that your relatives and friends each have their own personal experience with regard to your dying. You can't change that fact, and it's not your fault, but you can help them with their own emotional distress. They may suffer because of the isolation from you. Acknowledging another's pain by simply offering a kind word or a hug can be an enormous gift to people who love you.

Q. *I have AIDS. Though I currently feel well physically, I know that I will eventually die of the disease. I have transferred important property, prepared my will, and assigned a durable power of attorney for health care decisions. But I still do not feel ready to die. What can I do to prepare myself emotionally?*

A. My guess is that you have already done much of the work you need to do at this point in time. Since your financial and

legal affairs sound like they are in order, ask yourself about affairs in other areas of your life. Are your relationships also “in order”? It may not be time to say goodbye, but to say “forgive me” and “I forgive you,” and to express appreciation and affection to the people closest to you, means less will need to be said later.

For some people, questions of meaning are what underlie a sense of unreadiness. These are not merely intellectual issues of philosophy or religion but rather genuine, wrenching struggles to understand why certain things turned out the way they did in your life. If you are someone for whom it is essential to get a sense of meaning about your disease, an event in your past, or life in general, honor this need and make this illness an opportunity to search for answers that make sense to you.

Now that the disease is a fact and you’re who you are, what does life hold? What matters most to you in life? Listen carefully to your answers; they will point the way to where your work lies. Of course, this sort of inquiry and introspection can have value at any time in our adult lives. Preparation for dying need not be separate from living. Do the work you are drawn to do, but keep the focus on living.

Q. *I’m not married, I have no brothers and sisters, and my parents died many years ago. Now I am terminally ill. The stories in this book stress the importance of family. Can I die well without family?*

A. The dying experience represents an opportunity for a person to achieve a sense of reconciliation, completion, and closure in relationships with family. The sense of completion is internal and can be achieved even after someone has died. If you have been previously married and have unreconciled feelings toward your former spouse, or if you feel that your relationship with your deceased parents or living relations was incomplete when they died, it is worth talking about these feelings with a member of a hospice team or a counselor.

As I have stated earlier, I think of family as a process; family is marked by feelings of mutual connection, appreciation, and caring. When I use the word *family*, I mean both relatives and loving friends. Almost certainly, you have a group of friends who qualify as family in this sense of the word. Notice who shows up and whom you miss when they don’t. In my years of hospice work, I have witnessed family dynamics emerging around even the most isolated individuals. When people have been utterly alone for years, it may be nurses or aides in a nursing home, or perhaps hospice volunteers, who become family to the person dying.

Finally, as important as family is, there are other aspects of our personhood that are equally important. In what ways might it be important for you to change or grow, as a person, during the life that lies ahead?

Q. *I’m dying of lung and brain cancer and can’t do anything I used to enjoy. I’m feeling hopeless, and every day feels like an ordeal. Why should I go on living?*

A. Your question resounds with pain. It is awful to feel this bad. I don’t know specifically why you should go on living, but I know that while you are living, there is relief to be had from your despair. It is normal to be sad and have a sense of loss at this time, but feelings of hopelessness and unworthiness are not inevitable—although it may feel that way at present—and are often markers of clinical depression. Effective medications and counseling exist. There is a way through. Don’t give up; get help. (For more on Dr. Byock and his writings, google him on the internet.)

Church Teaching on Heaven, Purgatory and Hell

Following are some excerpts from my Catechism Article (No.11) on *What Happens After Death: The Last Things*. (“C” stands for *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and “USC” for *United States Catholic Catechism*—followed by para. nos.)

Particular Judgment: What Happens After Death (C 1021-1022)

“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” (C 997).

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

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 with some remaining unrepented sin or with 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.

Heaven—Beatific Vision (C 1023-1029, USC pp 153-154)

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.*” But in the end, we must say that 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). Finally, 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 about 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—depends on the choices we make here on earth, choices that will lead us to either heaven or hell.
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 serving others.

Purgatory: Final Purification (C 1030-1032, USC p.154)

Speaking about purgatory, St. 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, August 4, 1999).

The Church’s belief in purgatory is one not shared by most other Christians who say that it has no basis in Scripture. Indeed there is no mention of purgatory in the Bible. But neither will one find the word ‘Incarnation’ or ‘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 like 2Mac 12:42-46, 1Cor 3:11-15 and 1Pet 1:17. In Maccabees, people are urged to pray for the dead. Prayers for the dead only make sense if our prayers benefit the dead in some way. If the dead have reached their final destination, praying for them makes no sense. The Christian text 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. As we saw in Article 2, Sacred Tradition, along with Sacred Scripture, is, for Catholics, 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 stated earlier, such prayers would make no sense if souls had already reached their final destination.

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 sense of horror we will feel as we become fully aware of the ugliness of sin. The joy of purgatory will be the joy 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.

The Church does urge 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 (C 1033-1037, USC p. 154)

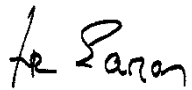
The *Catechism* states: “*To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God’s merciful love means remaining separated from him forever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called ‘hell’*” (1033). *The chief punishment of hell 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 note that God does not send anyone to hell. Rather, he allows persons to live forever with their 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; unrepentant 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 (C 1036). Awareness of our eternal destiny should motivate us to cooperate with God's saving grace to avoid sin and do good.

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Sean". The letters are cursive and slightly slanted to the right.