

HEAVEN, HELL AND PURGATORY

Fr. Bill McCarthy, MSA

My Father's House

On Wednesday, July 21, 1999, our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II gave a talk on *heaven*. On Wednesday, July 28, he gave a talk on *hell*. Then, on Wednesday, August 1, he gave a talk on *purgatory*.

I Am the Resurrection and the Life

When Jesus said to Martha, "*I am the resurrection and the life and anyone who puts their faith in me, even though they be dead, they shall live. And every living person who puts their faith in me shall never, never die at all,*" He was defining for all of us our eternal existence. And so the Christian who has been baptized, unites his own death to that of Jesus. Jesus' views death as a step towards everlasting life. How our hearts open wide with wonder when we hear this promise that we shall live forever and ever and ever.

When the Church for the last time speaks words of pardon and absolution over the dying Christian, and seals them for the last time with the strengthening, healing, anointing, and gives them the very body and blood, soul and divinity of the resurrected Christ, her priest speaks with gentle assurance,

"Go forth, Christian soul, from this world in the name of God the almighty Father, who created you, in the name of Jesus Christ, the son of the living God, who suffered for you; in the name of the Holy Spirit, who is poured out upon you. Go forth faithful Christian! May you live in peace this day. May your home be with God, with Mary, the virgin mother of God, with Joseph and all the angels and saints. May you return to God who formed you from the depths of the earth. May Holy Mary, the angels, and all the saints come to meet you as you go forth from this life May you see your Redeemer face to face."

Eternal Life With God

God has made us to be participators in His own divine life forever. He has designed our hearts to be "God shaped vacuums." As St. Augustine said, "Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." St. Paul reminds us that "eye has not seen nor has ear heard nor has it entered into the mind of man the glories, happiness, and bliss of those who love Him."

Beatific Vision

There in heaven, not only will we see God face to face, not only will we have complete joy, the fullness of love, and everlasting peace; but we will actually share the very Trinitarian life of the Father, Son and Spirit. We will be changed from glory into glory, into Jesus whom we now reflect. The very Holy Spirit of the Father will so imbue our spirits that the manifest presence of God will be within us in such a way that we with unveiled faces shall reflect like mirrors the brightness of the Son of God who is our glory" (cf 2 Cor 3:18).

All Grace

Everlasting life in God is not something that we could have known by natural reason for we are by nature mortal, not immortal. Only by grace will we be given everlasting life which is natural for God but supernatural for us. Thus, all hope for life after death hinge both upon the divine resurrection of Jesus and also solely upon God's grace. Christ's resurrection is the only door to heaven. That's why Jesus said, "I am the way. No one can come to the Father but through Me."

In Christ Jesus

The only way we can get to heaven is because God here on earth puts us *in* Christ by means of our baptism into His mystical body, the Church. We are literally incorporated into the body of Christ. That is why the Church is essential to salvation.

The Catholic Church – God's Master Plan

God's master plan of salvation is to incorporate us into the one, holy, universal covenanted body of God. This is because God is love diffusive of itself. Because God is one, His body is one. Because God is holy, the Church must be the spotless lamb. Because God is love diffusive of itself for everyone, His Church must be Catholic (universal).

The Need for Purgatory

The Second Vatican Council, in its Pastoral Constitution on the Modern World, stated, *"The blessings of human dignity, brotherly communion and freedom – all the good fruits on earth of man's cooperation with nature in the spirit of the Lord and according to His command – will be found again in the world to come, but purified of all stain, resplendent and transfigured, when Christ hands over to the Father an eternal and universal kingdom; a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace."*

On this earth, the kingdom is already present in sign; when the Lord comes it will reach its completion. Another way of stating this is simply to say that once Moslems, Buddhists, Jews, Protestants and Catholics have all been purified of all sin and heresy, and find themselves resplendent and transfigured in heaven, they will all be Catholic, that is, members of the eternal and universal Catholic kingdom."

Are There Only Catholics In Heaven?

The answer is similar to other questions, such as, "Are there only saints in heaven?" The answer is, "yes." Or, similar to another question, "Is there sin in heaven?" And the answer is categorically "no." Jesus says, "We are to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). And the author of Hebrews urges us to strive for that holiness without which no one can see God (cf Heb 12:14). And the book of Revelation tells us that nothing unclean can enter heaven (Rev 21:27).

So up in heaven, there is going to be no sin and no heresy. We shall all be like Jesus, but we shall see Him as He is; and He is the head of the body – His Church. There will be

one body that is one Church, and one spouse. Those who had been Moslems shall be Moslems no more, for they shall see the Triune God in all of His brilliance. Those who have protested against Mary being their mother will, in fact, honor her eternally as their mother. Those who previously had settled for division in the body will be divided no more. And those who have, here on earth, adopted any heresy, will have it resolved before the perfect wisdom that is God.

Technically speaking, all those who have sincerely followed the light as it was presented to them, be they Moslem, Buddhist, or Baptist can get into Purgatory. But there they shall be purified. Everything that they *saw through a glass darkly* will now be revealed in all its brilliance. They shall be transformed into perfect lovers, and their faith shall have its fullest expression. As they enter heaven, they shall be part of the one, holy, universal, covenanted body of Christ that shall share Trinitarian life with them forever. Mary will be Queen of Heaven and they shall acknowledge her. And Jesus Christ, the faithful spouse, will have one bride at the banquet eating table – His Church – His one, holy, Catholic or universal Church. Eternally, there will be one body and one God, one spouse and one bride. Division will be swallowed up in unity, heresy will be swallowed up in eternal truth, sin will be swallowed up in holiness, and death will be swallowed up in everlasting life.

Thank God For Purgatory

When St. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 3 that there are two types of people who build upon the one foundation that is Jesus, he's speaking about you and me. Some of us, he tells us, will be like Mother Theresa, who will build upon that foundation using gold, silver and precious stones – a metaphor for a lot of holiness, love and sacrifice. Others, apparently in the majority, will not be as holy, and they shall build upon the foundation using wood, stubble and straw – metaphors for a lot less sacrifice, penance, purity and love.

The fire will test each man's worth, Paul tells us. "What fire?", we might ask; the fire of hell or the fire of purgatory? It will not be the fire of hell, for St. Paul tells us that those who built with gold, silver and precious stones will receive their reward. And even those who have built with wood, stubble and straw will see their works burn up. They will be saved, he tells us, but only by passing through the fire. Matthew 12:36 tells us that we will have to give an account for every idle work on Judgement Day. And Jesus, after His death, went immediately to preach to the spirits in prison because they had not yet heard the good news of His saving death and resurrection (cf 1 Pet 3:18-20; 4:6).

I Thank God for Purgatory

Personally I thank God for purgatory because I know that here on earth I am far from perfect. God, as they say, is not finished with me yet. But some day I know that I shall be completely purified from every vestige, of selfishness, sin and lack of vision. And when I enter heaven, I shall be the perfect re-presentation of Christ according to my own personality. And I shall be perfectly like Jesus forever and ever. If it were not for purgatory, heaven would not be heaven. If every Christian, as we now see them, were not to be transformed beyond what they are today, then certainly heaven would not be

heaven. We would still be divided one from another and still guilty of all of our lack of love and our petty-mindedness. And that simply would not be heaven.

Hell

Following is Pope John Paul II's writing on Heaven, Hell and Purgatory

“Revelation teaches us that heaven is not an abstraction or a place in the clouds, but a living, personal relationship of union with the Holy Trinity.”

Heaven Is Fullness of Communion With God

When the form of this world has passed away, those who have welcomed God into their lives and have sincerely opened themselves to His love, at least at the moment of death, will enjoy that fullness of communion with God which is the goal of human life.

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, “this perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity – this communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, 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” (n. 1024).

Today we will try to understand the biblical meaning of “heaven”, in order to have a better understanding of the reality to which this expression refers.

In biblical language, “heaven”, when it is joined to the “earth”, indicated part of the universe. Scripture says about creation: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (*Gn* 1:1).

Heaven is the transcendent dwelling-place of the living God

Metaphorically speaking, heaven is understood as the dwelling-place of God, who is thus distinguished from human beings (cf. Ps 104:2f.; 115-16; Is 66:1). He sees and judges from the heights of heaven (cf. Ps 113:4-9) and comes down when he is called upon (cf. Ps 18:9, 10; 144-5). However the biblical metaphor makes it clear that God does not identify himself with heaven, nor can he be contained in it (cf. 1 Kgs 8:27); and this is true, even though in some passages of the first Book of the Maccabees “Heaven” is simply one of God’s names (1 Mc 3:18, 19, 50, 60; 4:24, 55).

The depiction of heaven as the transcendent dwelling-place of the living god is joined with that of the place to which believers, through grace, can also ascend, as we see in the Old Testament accounts of Enoch (cf. Gn 5:24) and Elijah (cf. 2 Kgs 2:11). Thus heaven

becomes an image of life in god. In this sense Jesus speaks of a “reward in heaven” (Mt 5:12) and urges people to “lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (ibid., 6:20; cf. 19-21).

The New Testament amplifies the idea of heaven in relation to the mystery of Christ. To show that the Redeemer’s sacrifice acquires perfect and definitive value, the Letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus “passed through the heavens” (Heb 4:14), and “entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself” (ibid., 9:24). Since believers are loved in a special way by the father, they are raised with Christ and made citizens of heaven. It is worthwhile listening to what the apostle Paul tells us about this in a very powerful text; “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with Him in the heavenly place in Christ Jesus, that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:4-7). The fatherhood of God, who is rich in mercy, is experienced by creatures through the love of God’s crucified and risen Son, who sits in heaven on the right hand of the Father as Lord.

After the course of our earthly life, participation in complete intimacy with the Father thus comes through our insertion into Christ” Pascal mystery. St. Paul emphasizes our meeting with Christ in heaven at the end of time with a vivid spatial image: “The we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore, comfort one another with these words” (1 Thes 4:17-18).

Sacramental Life Is Anticipation of Heaven

In the context of Revelation, we know that the “heaven” or “happiness” in which we will find ourselves is neither an abstraction nor a physical place in the clouds, but a living, personal relationship with the Holy Trinity. It is our meeting with the Father which takes place in the risen Christ through the communion of the Holy Spirit.

It is always necessary to maintain a certain restraint in describing these “ultimate realities” since their depiction is always unsatisfactory. Today, personalist language is better suited to describing the state of happiness and peace we will enjoy in our definitive communion with God.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* sums up the Church’s teaching on this truth: “By his death and Resurrection, Jesus Christ has ‘opened’ heaven to us. The life of the blessed consists in the full and perfect possession of the fruits of the redemption accomplished by Christ. He makes partners in his heavenly glorification those who have believed in him and remained faithful to his will. Heaven is the blessed community of all who are perfectly incorporated into Christ” (n. 1026).

This final state, however, can be anticipated in some way today in sacramental life, whose center is the Eucharist, and in the gift of self through fraternal charity. If we are able to enjoy properly the good things that the Lord showers upon us every day, we will

already have begun to experience that joy and peace which one day will be completely ours. We know that on this earth everything is subject to limits, but the thought of the “ultimate” realities helps us to live better the “penultimate” realities. We know that as we pass through this world we are called to seek “the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God” (Col 3:1), in order to be with him in the eschatological fulfilment, when the Spirit will fully reconcile with the Father “all things, whether on earth or in heaven” (Col 1:20).

Hell Is The State of Those Who Reject God

The thought of hell must not create anxiety but is a healthy reminder of freedom within the proclamation that Christ has conquered Satan.

God is the infinitely good and merciful Father. But man, called to respond to him freely, can unfortunately choose to reject his love and forgiveness once and for all, thus separating himself forever from joyful communion with him. It is precisely this tragic situation that Christian doctrine explains when it speaks of eternal damnation or hell. It is not a punishment imposed externally by God but a development of premises already set by people in this life. The very dimension of unhappiness which this obscure condition brings can in a certain way be sensed in the light of some of the terrible experiences we have suffered which, as is commonly said, make life “hell”.

In a theological sense, however, hell is something else: it is the ultimate consequence of sin itself, which turns against the person who committed it. It is the state of those who definitively reject the Father’s mercy, even at the last moment of their life.

Hell is a state of eternal dam