

Topic 19: The Resurrection of the Body

The resurrected body will be real and material, but not earthly and mortal. The enigma of death can only be understood in the light of Christ's resurrection and our own resurrection in Him. Eternal life is what gives ultimate and permanent meaning to human life, to ethical commitment, to generous dedication, to self-sacrificing service, to the effort to communicate Christ's doctrine and love to all souls.

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At the end of the Apostles Creed the Church proclaims: “I believe in the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.” Here we find, briefly stated, the key elements of the Church’s eschatological hope, i.e. what we expect to encounter at the end of our life. The basis of Christian hope is God’s promise.

1. Faith in the resurrection

The Church has often proclaimed her faith in the resurrection of all the dead at the end of time. This is in a sense the “extension” of the Resurrection of Christ, “the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom 8:29), to all men and women, righteous and sinners, which will take place when He comes at the end of time to judge the living and the dead. At death, as

we know, the soul is separated from the body, but in the resurrection, body and soul are united again in glory forever.^[1] The dogma of the resurrection of the dead, while speaking of the fullness of immortal life to which we are destined, is a living reminder of human dignity, especially in our bodily dimension. It speaks of the goodness of the world, of the body, of the value of history lived day by day, of the eternal vocation of matter. This is why, confronting the Gnostics of the 2nd century, the Fathers of the Church insisted on the resurrection “of the flesh,” of our life in its bodily materiality.

Saint Thomas Aquinas sees that the resurrection of the dead as natural with respect to human destiny (because the immortal soul is made to be united to the body, and vice versa), but as supernatural with respect to God who brings it about.^[2]

The resurrected body will be real and material, but not earthly or mortal. Saint Paul opposes the idea of resurrection as a human transformation within history, and therefore speaks of the resurrected body as “glorious” (cf. Phil 3:21) and “spiritual” (cf. 1 Cor 15:44). The resurrection for every man and woman, like that of Christ, will take place for everyone after death, at the end of time.

The Church does not promise Christians complete success on this earth, for our earthly life is always marked by the Cross. At the same time, by the reception of Baptism and the Eucharist, the process of resurrection has already begun in some way here on earth (cf. *Catechism*, 1000). According to Saint Thomas, in the resurrected state, the soul will inform the body so deeply that all its moral and spiritual qualities will be reflected in the body.

^[3] Hence the final resurrection, which will take place with Christ's coming in glory, will make possible the definitive judgement of the living and the dead.

Four practical observations can be made concerning the doctrine of the resurrection:

1) The doctrine of the final resurrection excludes theories of reincarnation, according to which the human soul, after death, migrates to another body, repeatedly if necessary, until it is definitively purified. Each person's life is unique, and does not repeat itself; this gives great importance to everything we do on a daily basis. In this regard, the Second Vatican Council has spoken of “the unique course of our life” (*Lumen gentium*, 48).

2) A clear manifestation of the Church's faith in the resurrection of each one's body is the veneration of

the relics of the saints, so central to the piety of believers.

3) Although cremation is not illicit, unless chosen for reasons contrary to the faith,^[4] the Church strongly advises preserving the pious custom of burying bodies.^[5] The body, in its materiality, is an integral part of the person; it is resurrected at the end of time, and has had contact with the sacraments instituted by Christ and has been a temple of the Holy Spirit. Hence we can understand why at the moment of burial it should be respected in its materiality as fully as possible; the disrespect shown today for the human body as God's creature destined for resurrection makes it especially advisable to avoid cremation in our day and age.

4) The resurrection of the dead coincides with what Holy Scripture calls the coming of “the new heavens and the new earth.”^[6] Not only will

human beings be transformed in glory; the whole cosmos, in which we live and act, will be transformed. “The Church, to which we are all called in Christ Jesus, and in which we acquire sanctity through the grace of God, will attain its full perfection only in the glory of heaven, when there will come the time of the restoration of all things. (cf. Acts 3:21). At that time the human race as well as the entire world, which is intimately related to man and attains to its end through him, will be perfectly reestablished in Christ (cf. Eph 1:10; Col 1:20; 2 Pet 3:10-13).”^[7] There will certainly be continuity between this world and the new world, but there will also be an important discontinuity marked by perfection, permanence and complete happiness.

2. Christian meaning of death

The enigma of death can only be understood in the light of Christ's resurrection and our resurrection in Him. Indeed, death, the separation of soul and body, is viewed as the greatest evil in the natural order. But it will be completely overcome when God in Christ will resurrect mankind at the end of time.

It is true that death is viewed as natural in the sense that the soul can be separated from the body. It marks the end of our earthly pilgrimage. After death we can no longer merit or lose merit; we will no longer have the possibility of repentance. Immediately after death the soul will go to heaven, hell or purgatory, passing through what is called the particular judgement.^[8] The inexorability of death is a warning to straighten out one's life, to make use of the time and talents God has given

us, to act uprightly, to spend ourselves in the service of others.

On the other hand, Scripture teaches that death entered the world because of sin.^[9] In this sense, death is seen as the punishment for sin. Man wanted to live apart from God and therefore must accept the consequences of breaking with Him, and the divisions in society and in himself that are the result of turning away from Him.

Nevertheless, Christ by His obedience conquered death and won resurrection and salvation for mankind. For those who live in Christ through Baptism, death is still painful and repugnant, but it is no longer a living reminder of sin but rather a precious opportunity to co-redeem with Christ, through mortification and dedication to others. “If we die with Christ, we shall also live with Him” (2 Tim 1:11). Hence, “thanks to Christ, Christian

death has a positive meaning.”^[10] The gradual death to self which Christian life entails (mortification) helps to prepare for the definitive union with Christ through death.

3. Eternal life in intimate communion with God

In creating and redeeming mankind, God has destined us for eternal communion with Him. Saint John calls this “eternal life,” which is often called “heaven.” Thus Jesus communicates the promise of the Father to his own: “Well done, good and faithful servant, because you have been faithful in a little, enter into the joy of your Lord” (Mt 25:21). And what does eternal life mean? It is not like “an unending succession of days in the calendar, but something more like the supreme moment of satisfaction, in which totality embraces us and we embrace totality – this we can only attempt. It would

be like plunging into the ocean of infinite love, a moment in which time – the before and after – no longer exists. We can only attempt to grasp the idea that such a moment is life in the full sense, a plunging ever anew into the vastness of being, in which we are simply overwhelmed with joy.”^[11]

Ultimately, eternal life is what gives complete and permanent meaning to human life, to ethical commitment, to generous dedication, to selfless service, to the effort to communicate the teaching and love of Christ to all souls. Christian hope in heaven is not individualistic, a prize “for me,” but refers to all men and women (cf. *Spe salvi*, 13-15, 28, 48). On the basis of the promise of eternal life, Christians are firmly convinced that it is “worthwhile” to struggle to live fully in accord with Christ’s teachings. “Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human

longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness.”^[12]—

Those who die in grace will forever be like God, because they will see him “as he is” (1 Jn 3:2), that is, “face to face” (1 Cor 13:12), which is called the “beatific vision.” Heaven is the highest expression of God’s gift to mankind.

At the same time, in heaven we will be able to love those we have loved in the world with a pure and perpetual love. “Do not ever forget that after death you will be welcomed by Love itself. And in the love of God you will find as well all the noble loves which you had on earth.”^[13] The joy of heaven reaches its full culmination with the resurrection of the dead.

The fact that heaven lasts eternally does not mean that there one ceases to be free. Certainly in heaven no one sins nor can sin, because those

who see God face to face never want to sin. Freely and filially, those who are saved will remain in communion with God forever, because they truly want to. In heaven, human freedom reaches its fullest realisation.

Finally, according to Saint Thomas, eternal life depends on the level of charity that each person has attained in this life: “A person who has more charity will share more fully in the light of glory, and see God more perfectly and hence be happy.”^[14]

4. Hell as the definitive rejection of God

Holy Scripture teaches that those who refuse to repent of their grievous sins will lose the eternal reward of communion with God, suffering instead perpetual disgrace. “To die in mortal sin without repentance and without accepting God’s merciful love, means

remaining separated from him for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called ‘hell.’”^[15] It is not that God predestines anyone to perpetual damnation. Rather those who seek their ultimate end apart from God and his will, build for themselves an isolated world into which God’s light and love cannot penetrate. Hell is a mystery, the mystery of Love rejected; it is a sign of the destructive power of human freedom when one turns away from God. Hell is “turning away from love forever.”

The doctrine of hell in the New Testament is presented as a call to responsibility in the use of the gifts and talents received, and to conversion. Its existence stresses the seriousness of mortal sin, and the need to avoid it by every means possible, above all by trusting and

humble prayer. The possibility of perpetual damnation also reminds Christians of the need to live a life wholly dedicated to others in striving to spread Christ's truth.

5. Purifying oneself in order to meet God

“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.”^[16] It seems reasonable that many people, even if they have not lived a holy life on earth, have also not imprisoned themselves definitively in sin. The possibility of being cleansed after death of the impurities and imperfections of a life that is not totally evil, is thus seen as a new sign of God's goodness. “Purgatory shows God's great mercy and washes away

the defects of those who long to become one with Him.”^[17]

The Old Testament speaks of purification after this life (cf. 2 Mac 12:40-45). Saint Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 3:10-15) speaks of Christian purification in this life and in the life to come, using the image of fire – fire that in some way emanates from Christ, Saviour, Judge, and Foundation of Christian life. Although the doctrine of Purgatory was not formally defined until the Middle Ages (cf. DH 856, 1304), the ancient and unanimous practice of offering suffrages for the dead, especially through the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, is a clear indication of the Church’s faith in purification beyond death. There would be no point in praying for the dead if these souls could not be helped.

Purgatory can therefore be considered as a state of temporary and painful distancing from God, in which venial sins are forgiven, the inclination to evil that sin leaves in the soul is purified, and the “temporal punishment” due to sin is overcome. Indeed, sin not only offends God and harms the sinner, but through the communion of saints harms the Church, the world, the whole of humanity. But the Church’s prayer for the dead somehow restores order and justice and reconciles us definitively with God.

Purgatory contains great suffering, depending on one’s situation. But it is a pain with great meaning, “a blessed pain.”^[18] Christians are invited to seek to purify themselves from sin in the present life through contrition, mortification, reparation and a holy life.

Basic bibliography

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 988-1050.

Recommended reading

Saint John Paul II, *Catechesis on the Creed* IV (audiences from 25 April 1999 to 4 August 1999).

Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, 30 November 2007.

Saint Josemaría Escrivá, Homily *The Hope of the Christian*, in *Friends of God*, 205-221.

^[1] Cf. *Catechism*, 997.

^[2] *Summa Contra Gentes*, IV, 81.

^[3] *S.Th*, III. Suppl., qq. 78-86.

^[4] *Catechism*, 1176.

^[5] Cf. Instruction *Ad Resurgendum cum Christo*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (2016), on the burial of the deceased and the preservation of ashes in the case of cremation.

^[6] *Catechism*, 1042; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1.

^[7] *Lumen gentium*, 48.

^[8] Cf. *Catechism*, 1021-1022.

^[9] Cf. Gen 3:17-19; Wis 1:13-14; 2:23-24; Rom 5:12; 6:23; Jas 1:15; *Catechism*, 1007.

^[10] *Catechism*, 1010.

^[11] Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, 12.

^[12] *Catechism*, 1024.

[¹³] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 221.

[¹⁴] *S.Th*, I, q. 12, a. 6, c.

[¹⁵] *Catechism*, 1033.

[¹⁶] *Catechism*, 1030.

[¹⁷] Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, 889.

[¹⁸] Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, 47.

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