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“Dying to Live”: New book reflects on the existence and joy of the afterlife

Fr John Flader, a priest of Opus Dei, dedicated his new book on the afterlife to an inspiring young woman who passed away on the very day he finished writing it.

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In October 2016, Fr John Flader was told that Ellie, a 15-year old girl who attended the school where he is

chaplain, had been diagnosed with a very aggressive tumour in the brain stem. With this tumour, which was inoperable and incurable, she was given nine months to live at best. But amazingly Ellie lived for over five more years, during which Fr Flader accompanied her as she journeyed towards death.

“At first she went through various stages of fear, of anger and who knows what else. But through the help of her mother...she accepted that this was the will of God,” says Fr Flader. “And in the end, she was really looking forward to dying.”

In her last weeks, Ellie’s only form of communication was her eyes, moving them up and down to say “yes”. Some hours before she passed, her mother told her that Our Lady was coming to take her to heaven, and she added: “I bet you can’t wait”. “Ellie’s eyes went up and down in the

most emphatic way!” said Fr Flader. “It was a beautiful death of somebody who was really looking forward to it. Let us all pray that we can look forward to it too when the time comes and not be afraid.”

Ellie passed away in early 2022, on the very day that Fr Flader finished writing his book *Dying to Live: Reflections on Life after Death*. Hence the book is dedicated to her. Death might seem an interesting, even somewhat frightening, subject matter for a book, but for Fr Flader, death is less about dying and more about living.

“When all is said and done, we're all going to die,” says Fr Flader. “That applies to everybody. But what happens after that is the big question. Many don't believe in life after death, or they wonder if there just might be something on the other side. This book is for them. It leads

the reader gently and logically along a path of inquiry into this vital question, arguing from reason and experience.”

“We can all have our opinions, but what awaits us after death does not depend on what we think is going to happen. There is reality, and this book shows that the reality is eminently positive, and it fills us with hope.”

Why a book on death?

“This book was not my idea,” says Fr Flader. It came about as a suggestion from a friend, and a valuable suggestion, he thought, since most people will wonder in their lifetime about the possibility of life after death.

With Covid lockdowns in place in Sydney, Australia, Fr Flader was able to write the book in record time. He kept the book short (considering that

people reading it might be sick or nearing the end of their lives) as well as light in tone, with short chapters. The first half of the book is apologetics – arguing from reason to show that there is life after death – followed by the Catholic view on the afterlife: death itself, judgment, heaven, purgatory and hell. As for authorship, he intentionally went by John Flader rather than Fr John Flader, so as not to scare away any readers who might not want to read a book written by a priest.

Fr Flader spoke about how the notion of an afterlife is intrinsically linked to belief in God. “You put the two together always,” says Fr Flader. “And if there's no God, then we have to ask the question, ‘How did the universe begin?’”

“The chapter on the existence of God argues from scientific evidence, beginning with the origin of the

universe. How did it begin? Scientists are now convinced that before this universe, before the big bang 13.8 billion years ago, there was nothing. And now there's something - lots of it; hundreds of billions of galaxies of it. How did that happen? It seems clear that there has to be a God.”

And, “How did life begin 3.5 billion years ago – life? Just the complexity of the simplest single-cell organism, the complexity of DNA, and other arguments from science show that there has to be a God. Even a non-believer like Sir Frederick Hoyle realised that life could not have arisen by the chance collision of molecules, and that there had to be a creator.”

“And God made human beings with a spiritual soul. We know this from the very fact that we can think about God, that we can think about life after death. Animals can't do this.

The universe is not just composed of matter. There are human beings, and angels for that matter, with spirit. Where did spirit come from? It had to come from some other spiritual being and this could only be God. And it's only because we are spiritual that there is life after death.”

Near-death experiences

But logic and scientific thought aren't the only convincing parts of this book. Perhaps one of the most fascinating chapters is the one on near-death experiences. Fr Flader recounts multiple real-life stories of people who, generally in some sort of medical emergency that saw them clinically dead, experienced their soul separate from their body. They were able to observe what was happening to their physical body; or they proceeded to have an experience of heaven or hell.

While cynics would say that these stories aren't believable, Fr Flader challenges them to look up the sources quoted in the book and hear these people tell their stories. "It is so genuine... When you look at some of these accounts of near-death experiences on the net, listen to what these people have to say, see how the near-death experience has changed their life for the better (which is invariably the case) - then you can't help being convinced."

"The near-death experiences point to the reality of what happens in life after death. And it happens to coincide perfectly with the Christian, and better, Catholic doctrine on those realities. There is the separation of the soul. There is a judgment... There's heaven, with all its beauty – just overwhelming joy. There is purgatory... And there's hell. A number of people, including one whom I know here in Sydney, have

experienced being judged as deserving of hell... So there's compelling evidence for life after death.”

So why does God allow these near-death experiences? “I think God allows it... so that these people, some of whom might not have been saved, will be saved,” says Fr Flader. “And all of them change their life for the better and they can talk about it to other people... The books they write and the talks they give, the organisations they form, help others to believe in life after death... I think God allows it so that they, first of all, will change their lives... and in turn they will be able to help many other people change their lives.”

As for those who go through a near-death experience, does it impact their freedom in terms of belief in God? “I would like to put it in a way that perhaps you weren't expecting,”

says Fr Flader, “but I think a person who has had a near-death experience is more free than the rest of us to live their life in a good way. Because if we could only see God, if everybody had a near-death experience, we'd realise there is a heaven and God is a God of love... Then I think more people would live their lives in a different way and get to heaven. They are more free to live out the purpose of their existence.”

Fear of death

Although many believe in the existence of heaven, they can still fear death. Fr Flader says that this is quite a natural sentiment. “I think many believers...have a certain apprehension because they think: when I die, I'm going to close my eyes, and my soul is going to leave my body. Am I going to be conscious as I go through the stages of the judgment and the tunnel - if there's a

tunnel - and experience heaven, or maybe will I go to purgatory...?”

“I suspect that as the average person nears death, they might become somewhat apprehensive and say, ‘Is this all for real?’ But we should not be scared of death. We can’t be scared of heaven. We can’t be scared even of purgatory, because the souls there are so happy, even though they also suffer. But I think that the uncertainty of what happens might lead to a certain degree - not necessarily of fear - but of apprehension and uncertainty. So this book hopefully can put people’s fears at rest and fill them more with hope. But I dare say, as so many have said, that when all is said and done, we die alone. We can be surrounded by loved ones, but in the end, that soul is yours and *you’re* going to face God.”

Hopes for the book

More than selling copies or adding to the number of books he's written, Fr Flader had one main goal in writing this book: to help save souls. "My hope is that first of all, it will help many people get to heaven, who might not otherwise have got there," he says.

He also wants people to realise that life after death is eminently positive. "We don't present God as the god of wrath, the god of judgment, the god of punishment, but the God of mercy, the God of love, which is what He is, and He wants all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. Hopefully this book will help many people come to the knowledge of the truth, be forgiven by God no matter how many sins they've committed, and be saved."

Watch the whole interview with Fr John Flader [here](#).

Tamara El-Rahi Interview.

Videography by Jonty Gardner

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