

TOPIC 16: I BELIEVE IN THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY AND LIFE EVERLASTING

At the end of the Apostles Creed the Church proclaims ‘I believe in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.’ This formula contains in brief the fundamental elements of the Church’s hope about the last things.

1. The resurrection of the body

The Church has frequently proclaimed her faith in the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. It forms, as it were, the “continuation” of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the *firstborn of many brethren* (Rom 8:29), extended to all men and women, living and dead, just and sinners, that will take place when He comes at the end of time. At death the soul is separated from the body; with the resurrection, body and soul are reunited again for ever (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 997). The dogma of the resurrection of the dead refers to the fullness of immortality to which mankind is destined, but at the same time it is a vivid reminder of our dignity, and in particular of the dignity of the body. It speaks to us of the goodness of the world, of the body, of the value of a life lived out day by day, of the eternal vocation of matter. That is why in the second century when writing against the Gnostics, the phrase resurrection “of the flesh” was used—that is to say, human life in its most material aspect, temporal, changeable, apparently fleeting.

St Thomas Aquinas considered the doctrine of the resurrection to be natural in respect to its final cause (because the soul is made to be united to the body and vice versa), but supernatural in respect to its efficient cause (that is, God).¹

The risen body will be real and material, but not earthly or mortal. St Paul rejected the idea of resurrection as a transformation happening within human history, and spoke of the resurrected body as “glorious” (cf. *Phil* 3:21) and “spiritual” (cf. *Col* 15:44). The resurrection of every man and woman, as happened with Christ, will take place after death.

The Church in the name of Christian faith does not promise us a successful life on this earth. She does not talk of a “utopia,” since our earthly life will always be marked by the Cross. However, through the reception of Baptism and the Eucharist, the process of resurrection has in some way already begun (cf. *CCC*, 1000). According to St Thomas, at the resurrection the soul will inform the body so deeply that it will reflect the soul’s moral and spiritual qualities.² Thus the final resurrection, which will take place when Christ comes in glory, will make possible the definitive judgement of the living and the dead.

With respect to the doctrine of the resurrection four points can be made:

—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,

¹ Cf. St Thomas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV,81

² Cf. St Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, III. Suppl., qq 78-86

until it is finally purified. In this regard, Vatican Council II referred to “the one life we live,”³ for *it is established that men die only once (Heb 9:27)*;

—the veneration of relics of the saints is a clear manifestation of the Church’s faith in the resurrection of the body;

—although cremation of the human body is not illicit, unless it has been chosen for reasons that go against faith (cf. CCC, 1176), the Church strongly advises maintaining the pious custom of burying the dead. “The bodies of the dead must be treated with respect and charity, in the faith and hope of the resurrection. The burial of the dead is a corporal work of mercy: it honours the children of God, who are temples of the Holy Spirit.” (CCC 2300);

— the resurrection of the dead accords with what Holy Scripture calls the coming of “the new heavens and the new earth” (cf. CCC, 1042; *2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1*) Not only will mankind attain glory, but the entire cosmos in which we live and move will be transformed. “The Church to which all have been called in Christ Jesus and in which, by the grace of God, we achieve sanctity,” we read in *Lumen Gentium* (no. 48), “will not achieve its full perfection until ‘the time comes for the restoration of all things’ (*Acts 3:21*), and when along with human kind the whole universe, so intimately united with man and through him achieving its end, will be perfectly renewed.” There will certainly be continuity between this world and the new world, but also an important discontinuity. The hope of the definitive installation of Christ’s kingdom shouldn’t weaken but rather strengthen, with the theological virtue of hope, our effort to achieve progress on earth (CCC 1049).

2. The Christian meaning of death

The enigma of death can only be understood in the light of Christ’s resurrection. In fact, death, the loss of human life, seems to be the greatest possible evil in the natural order, precisely because it is something so definitive that it can only be overcome completely when God in Christ raises all men and women.

On the one hand, *death is natural* in the sense that the soul can separate itself from the body. From this point of view, death marks the end of our earthy pilgrimage. After death a person can no longer merit or offend God. “Man’s choice in life is made definitive at death.”⁴ It is no longer possible to repent. Immediately after death the person goes to heaven, hell or purgatory. For this to happen there exists what the Church calls the *particular judgement* (cf. CCC 1021-1022). The fact that death marks the limit of the period of trial gives us the opportunity to put our life in order, to make good use of our time and talents, to act uprightly and serve others.

On the other hand, Holy Scripture teaches us that death has come into the world through original sin (cf. *Gen 3:17-19; Wis 1:13-14; 2:23-24; Rom 5:12; 6:23; CCC, 1007*). In this sense it must be regarded as a punishment for sin: someone who wants to live separated from God must accept the disagreeable consequences of rupture with society and with oneself. However, Christ “faced death in an act of complete and free

³ Vatican Council II Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 48

⁴ Benedict XVI, Ency. *Spe Salvi*, 30-XI-2007, 45

submission to his Father's will" (CCC 1009). By his obedience he conquered death and won resurrection for humanity. For the one who lives in Christ through Baptism, death continues to be painful and abhorrent, but it is no longer a vivid reminder of sin, for it becomes a valuable opportunity to co-redeem with Christ, through mortification and self-giving to others. *If we die with Christ we shall also live with him* (2 Tim 2:11).

3. Eternal life in intimate communion with God

In creating and redeeming us God has destined us to eternal communion with himself, to what St John calls 'eternal life' or what is commonly called "heaven." Jesus communicated the Father's promise to his followers in these words: *well done, good and faithful servant. Because you have been good and faithful over small things enter into the joy of your Lord* (Mt 25:21). Eternal life should not be seen as a "continuous succession of days of the calendar, but rather as a moment full of satisfaction, in which totality embraces us and we embrace totality. It will be the moment to submerge ourselves in oceans of limitless love, in which time—the before and after—no longer exists. We can only try to think that this moment is life in its fullest sense, submerging ourselves ever anew in immeasurable being at the same time as we are simply overwhelmed with joy."⁵

Eternal life is what gives meaning to human life, to observing ethical norms, to generous self-giving and unselfish service, and to the effort to communicate Christ's teaching and love to all men and women. A Christian's hope in reaching heaven is not individualist, but encompasses every other person.⁶ Thus a Christian can be totally convinced that it is "worthwhile" to live a fully Christian life. "Heaven is the ultimate end and the fulfilment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme and definitive blessedness" (CCC, 1024). As St Augustine said in his *Confessions*: "You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."⁷ Eternal life is the main goal of Christian hope.

"Those who die in God's grace and friendship and are perfectly purified, live for ever with Christ. They are like God for ever, for they 'see him as he is' (1 Jn 3:2), that is face to face (1 Cor 13:12)" (CCC, 1023). Theology has called this state the "beatific vision". "Because of his transcendence, God cannot be seen as he is, unless he himself opens up the mystery to man's immediate contemplation and gives him the capacity for it" (CCC, 1028). Heaven is the maximum expression of divine grace.

On the other hand, heaven does not consist in a purely abstract, immobile contemplation of the Blessed Trinity. In God souls can contemplate all realities that in one way or another refer to their life, rejoicing in them, and in particular loving those they have loved on earth with a pure and everlasting love. "Never forget: after death you will receive Love. And in God's love you will find in addition all the clean loves that you have had on earth."⁸ The joy of heaven comes to its full culmination with the resurrection

⁵ Ibid., 12

⁶ Ibid., cf. 13-15, 28, 48.

⁷ St Augustine, *Confessions*, 1,1,1.

⁸ St Josemaria, *Friends of God*, 221

of the dead. According to St Augustine eternal life consists in eternal rest, and in a pleasant and supreme activity.⁹

That heaven lasts forever does not mean that we cease to be free there. In heaven we are unable to sin, because in seeing God face to face, seeing him also as the living source of all created good, it is no longer possible to “want” to sin. Freely and filially, the saved person will be in communion with God for ever. Our freedom has reached its fulfilment.

Eternal life is the definitive fruit of God’s self-giving to man, and therefore it has something of infinity about it. Nevertheless, divine grace does not eliminate human nature, neither in our being or our faculties, or in our personality or in what we have merited in life. Hence among those who rejoice in the vision of God there is distinction and diversity, not in the object, which is God himself contemplated without intermediaries, but rather in the quality of the subject: “the one who has more charity partakes more in the light of glory, sees God more perfectly and will be happy.”¹⁰

4. Hell as a definitive rejection of God.

Holy Scripture teaches repeatedly that men who do not repent of their grave sins lose the eternal prize of communion with God, suffering perpetual misery. “To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God’s merciful love means remaining separated from him for ever by our own free choice. This state of self exclusion from communion with God and with the blessed is called ‘hell’ ” (CCC, 1033). God does not predestine anyone to perpetual condemnation, it is a man himself who by seeking his ultimate goal outside of God and his will, makes himself an isolated world into which the light and love of God cannot penetrate. Hell is a mystery, the mystery of rejected love, a sign of the destructive power of human freedom when it abandons God.¹¹

When considering hell it is traditional to distinguish between the “pain of loss” and the “pain of the senses.” The pain of loss is the more fundamental and involves the most suffering; it consists in the unending separation from the God for whom the human heart always longs. The pain of the senses we find frequently referred to in the gospels under the figure of eternal fire.

The teaching on hell in the New Testament is a call to us to be responsible in the use we make of gifts and talents we have received, a call to conversion. The existence of hell make the gravity of mortal sin very clear and the need to take every measure to avoid it, chiefly, as stands to reason, through trusting and humble prayer. The possibility of being condemned reminds Christians of the need to live a life that is completely apostolic.

⁹ Ref. St Augustine, *Letters*, 55,9.

¹⁰ St Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, l.q.12, a.6,c.

¹¹ “With death our life-choice becomes definitive--our life stands before the judge. Our choice, which is the course of an entire life takes on a certain shape, can have a variety of forms. There can be people who have totally destroyed their desire for truth, and readiness to love, people for whom everything becomes a lie, people who have lived for hatred and have suppressed all love within themselves. This is a terrifying thought, but alarming profiles of this type can be seen in figures of our own history. In such people all would be beyond remedy and the destruction of good would be irrevocable: this is what is meant by the word *Hell*” (Benedict XVI, Enc. *Spe Salvi*, 45)

Without doubt, the existence of hell is a mystery, the mystery of the justice of God for those who shut themselves off from his merciful pardon. Some authors have thought of the possibility of the annihilation of impenitent sinners when they die. This theory is difficult to reconcile with the fact that God out of love has given spiritual and immortal existence to each person.¹²

5. The purification needed to meet God

“Those 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 to achieve the holiness needed to enter the joy of heaven” (CCC, 1030). Many people may not have lived a holy life on earth, but neither have they shut themselves up in sin. The possibility after death of being cleansed from the impurities and imperfections of a more or less misspent life then appears as a new sign of God’s goodness, an opportunity to prepare themselves to enter into intimate communion with God’s holiness. “Purgatory shows God’s great mercy and washes away the defects of those who long to become one with him.”¹³

The Old Testament speaks about purification beyond death (cf. 2 Mac. 12: 40-45). St Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 3: 10-15) presents Christian purification in this world and the next through the image of fire: fire which in some way comes from Jesus Christ, saviour, judge and foundation of the Christian life.¹⁴ Even though the doctrine of purgatory was not formally defined until the Middle Ages,¹⁵ the ancient and unanimous practice of offering prayers for the dead, especially the holy sacrifice of the Mass, is a clear indication of the Church’s belief in purification in the next world. It would not make sense to pray for the dead if they were either saved and in heaven or condemned and in hell. Most Protestants deny the existence of purgatory since they think that it shows an excessive confidence in human works and in the ability of the Church to intercede for those who have left this world.

Rather than being a “place,” purgatory should be thought of as a “state” of temporary and painful separation from God in which venial sins are pardoned and the soul is cleansed from the inclination to evil left by sin, and the temporal punishment due to sin is fulfilled. Sin not only offends God and damages the sinner himself, but because of the communion of the saints it damages the Church, the world and humanity. The Church’s prayer for the dead re-establishes right order and justice to some extent, principally through the Mass, almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance (cf. CCC, 1032).

Theologians teach that those in purgatory suffer greatly, according to each one’s situation. Nevertheless, it is a suffering filled with meaning, “a blessed suffering.”¹⁶ Hence Christians are invited to seek purification from sin in their present life through contrition, mortification, reparation and a holy life

¹² Cf. *Ibid.*, 47

¹³ St Josemaria, *Furrow*, 889.

¹⁴ “Some theologians are of the opinion that the fire which both burns and saves is Christ himself the Judge and Saviour. (Benedict XVI, Enc. *Spe Salvi*, 47)

¹⁵ Cf. DS 856, 1304

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, Enc. *Spe Salvi*, 47

6. Children who die before Baptism

The Church entrusts children who die without being baptised to the mercy of God. There are reasons to think that God in some way welcomes them, whether because of the great affection Jesus showed for children (cf. *Mk* 10:14), or whether because his Son was sent so that all might be saved (cf. *1 Tim.*2:4). At the same time, relying on divine mercy is no reason for delaying the administration of the Sacrament of Baptism to newborn babies.¹⁷ It confers a particular configuration to Christ: “it signifies and actually brings about death to sin and entry into the life of the Most Holy Trinity through configuration to the Pascal mystery of Christ” (CCC 1239).

Paul O’Callaghan

Basic bibliography

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Recommended reading

John Paul II, *Catechises on Creed IV: I believe in life everlasting*. (Audiences from 25 May 1999 to 4 August 1999.

Benedict XVI, Enc. *Spe Salvi*, 30 November 2007

St Josemaria, Homily “The Christian’s Hope,” *Friends of God*, 205-221

¹⁷ Code of Canon Law 1983, no 867