

Session 21: Death and the End of the World

HYMN: The Strife is O'er



The strife is o'er, the battle done;
 now is the Victor's triumph won.
 O let the song of praise be sung!
 Alleluia!

Death's mightiest powers have done
 their worst,
 but Jesus has His foes dispersed.
 Let songs of joy and praise outburst!
 Alleluia!

On the third morn He rose again,
 glorious in majesty to reign.
 O let us swell the joyful strain!
 Alleluia!

Lord, by the stripes which wounded
 Thee,
 from death's dread sting Thy
 servants free,
 that we may live, and sing to Thee:
 Alleluia!

PRAYER: See Eph 1:21-21.
 Let us pray: O God,
 grant us a spirit
 of wisdom and insight
 to know You clearly.
 Enlighten our innermost vision,
 that we may know the great hope
 to which You have called us,
 the wealth of Your glorious heritage
 to be distributed among the members
 of the Church,
 and the immeasurable scope
 of Your power
 in us who believe.
 Through our Lord Jesus Christ,
 Your Son,
 Who lives and reigns with You
 in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
 God, for ever and ever.
 — Amen

READING: Jn 11:17-27
 The Lord be with you.
 — And with your spirit

A Reading from the holy Gospel
 according to John
 — *Glory to You, O Lord*
 When Jesus arrived at Bethany,
 He found that Lazarus
 had already been in the tomb
 for four days.
 Now Bethany was near Jerusalem,
 only about two miles away.
 And many of the Jews
 had come to Martha and Mary
 to comfort them about their brother.
 When Martha heard
 that Jesus was coming,
 she went to meet Him;
 but Mary sat at home.
 Martha said to Jesus,
 "Lord, if You had been here,
 my brother would not have died.
 (But) even now I know
 that whatever you ask of God,
 God will give you."
 Jesus said to her,
 "Your brother will rise."
 Martha said to Him,
 "I know he will rise,
 in the resurrection
 on the last day."
 Jesus told her,
 "I am the resurrection and the life;
 whoever believes in Me,
 even if he dies, will live,
 and everyone who lives
 and believes in Me will never die.
 Do you believe this?"
 She said to Him,
 "Yes, Lord. I have come to believe
 that You are the Messiah,
 the Son of God,
 the One Who is coming
 into the world."
 The Gospel of the Lord
 — *Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ*

IN BRIEF: WHAT THE CHURCH TEACHES

In the Apostles' Creed
 we say that Christ
 "will come to judge
 the living and the dead."
 We mean
 that Christ will come again,
 from Heaven, at the last day,
 to judge the thoughts,
 words, deeds, and omissions
 of all mankind. —

We also say, "I believe in the resurrection of the body." We mean that at the Day of Judgement, we shall all rise again, with our own bodies.

At the last judgement, Christ will say to the wicked, "Out of My sight, you condemned, into that everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

To the just He will say, "Come; you have My Father's blessing! Inherit the kingdom prepared for you."

Moreover, we will all be judged at death, not just at the last day, for "it is appointed that men die once, and after death be judged." After this judgement, we enter Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory.

The glory and happiness of Heaven is to see, love, and enjoy God for ever.

Scripture says of this happiness that "eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it so much as dawned on man what God has prepared for those who love Him."

Those who die in mortal sin will also live, but they will be punished for ever in the fire of Hell.

Those who die in venial sin, or without having fully paid the debt of temporal punishment due to sins

whose guilt has been forgiven, go to Purgatory, where souls suffer for a time after death

on account of their sins. (Temporal punishment is punishment that will have an end, either in this world or in the world to come.)

We know that Purgatory exists from the Church's constant teaching and from Scripture, which declares that God will "repay each man according to his conduct," that "nothing profane" shall enter Heaven,

and that some will be saved "as one fleeing through fire."

To prepare us for death, the Church administers the Sacrament of the Sick, in which those seriously ill from sickness or old age, or those facing serious operations, are anointed with holy oil, accompanied by prayer.

Such a person needs the special help of God in this time of anxiety, or he will be tempted, his faith weakened, and his spirit broken.

The Sacrament of the Sick comforts and strengthens the soul, remits sin, and may restore health, if God sees it to be expedient.

Scriptural authority for this Sacrament is found in the Letter of St. James: "Is there anyone sick among you? He should ask for the priests of the Church. They in turn are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the Name of the Lord. This prayer, uttered in faith, will reclaim the one who is ill; the Lord will restore him to health. If he has committed any sins, forgiveness will be his."

It can be seen that death, judgement, Hell, and Heaven are "the four last things to be ever remembered."

BIBLE READING

Jer 36-52

As you finish reading the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah this week, you will see the discord, destruction, and alienation that come, ultimately, from not living according to God's ways.

As we will see next week, "Divisions Among Christians" arose in the Church in the 11th and 16th centuries, "for which, often enough, people on both sides were to blame," says the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

Death and the End of the World

Introduction

"Death, judgement, Hell, and Heaven" are "the four last things to be ever remembered."¹ How often do we remember them?²

In a sequel to *Anne of Green Gables*, Anne's old school-fellow, Ruby Gillis, was dying of tuberculosis. Everyone knew it, but Ruby would not admit it. She continued, as always, to chatter about her boyfriends — but this, which had once been silly and amusing, now made Anne's visits hard.

One night, Ruby lay in her hammock looking over at the graveyard.

"How strange it looks by moonlight!" she said, shuddering. "How ghostly! Anne, it won't be long now before I'll be lying over there. You will be going about, full of life — and I'll be there — in the old graveyard — dead!"

For a few moments Anne could not speak.

"I've known it all summer," said Ruby bitterly. "And oh, Anne" — she caught Anne's hand pleadingly — "I don't want to die. I'm afraid to die."

"Why, Ruby?" Anne asked quietly.

"It'll all be so different. Heaven must be very beautiful, of course, the Bible says so — but, Anne, it won't be what I've been used to. I want to go on living *here*, but I have to die — and leave everything I care for."

Anne sat in almost intolerable pain. It was tragic — and true! There had been nothing in Ruby's gay, frivolous life, her shallow ideals and aspirations, to make Heaven seem to her anything but alien and unreal and undesirable.

She had laid up her treasures on earth, living solely for the little things that pass, forgetting the great things that go on into eternity — that make death a mere passing from twilight to unclouded day.

God would take care of her, Anne felt sure; she would learn. But it was no wonder that now she was clinging to the only things she knew and loved.³

In this world we have no security. We will all die, and even the world will end.

"I will pull down my grain bins and build larger ones," the rich farmer said. "All my grain and my goods will go there. Then I will say to myself: You have blessings in reserve for years to come. Relax!" But God said, "You fool! This very night your life shall be required of you. To whom will all this piled-up wealth of yours go?"⁴

Priests used to preach sermons on Hell to frighten us. Now, we think, we are above that. But Jesus was not. "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body and can do no more," He said. "I will show you whom you ought to fear. Fear him who has power to cast into Gehenna after he has killed. Yes, I tell you, fear him."⁵

So let us think about death, judgement, Hell, and Heaven.

Death as a consequence

At the beginning, God established Adam and Eve in His friendship, "in a state that would be surpassed" only by "the new creation in Christ." In this state, they enjoyed harmony within themselves, with each other, and with the rest of creation.⁶

Human nature — what we have been calling *Bios* — is mortal, subject to death.⁷ However, from the beginning, God called Adam and Eve to share in His own life, divine life⁸ — what we have been calling *Zoë* — and thus become immortal. Death, therefore, was "contrary" to God's plan.⁹

¹ *The Penny Catechism*, 332

² The Mass invites us to meditate on the fundamental truths of "the immortality of the soul, of Hell, of Purgatory, and of Paradise, truths which many try to hide today, when they are not able to place them in doubt or deny them completely" (Pope John Paul II, at a Mass in November 1997 in memory of cardinals and bishops who had died during the previous year).

³ Condensed and adapted from L.M. Montgomery: *Anne of the Island*, XIV

⁴ Lk 12:16-20

⁵ Lk 12:4-5. See CCC 407.

⁶ 2 Cor 5:17. See CCC 374, 376. Also see the talk on "Creation and the the Fall."

⁷ See CCC 1008.

⁸ See CCC 356, 375.

As long as Adam and Eve remained in their original "state of holiness and justice,"¹⁰ they "would not have to suffer or die."¹¹ However, Satan persuaded them to rebel against God. As a consequence, "death made its entrance into human history."¹² It was "the wages of sin,"¹³ explicitly foretold by God.¹⁴

Death as a punishment

Death is horrible: the soul leaves the body¹⁵ and the body decays. Christ Himself wept when His friend Lazarus died.¹⁶ Isaiah called death "a reproach"¹⁷ — "a disgrace."¹⁸

That is why tears spring to our eyes when we view a dead body, even one nicely laid out in a funeral home. We think of what it was: living, breathing, loving. Now it is a cold, still, expressionless corpse, about to be buried or burned.

Some people try to crush these feelings, arguing that death is natural and should be treated with indifference, as "kind nature's signal of retreat."¹⁹ Others exaggerate them, regarding death as the ultimate evil.²⁰ But to a Christian, they are reminders that death is not what God intended for us.

Death as a blessing

For created beings, living in "friendship" with their Creator means living in *free submission* to Him.²¹ That "free submission" is what Adam and Eve refused by their disobedience. And it is precisely what Jesus offered His Father by His obedience when He accepted death on the cross.²²

Jesus "entered willingly into His Passion,"²³ embracing the disgrace of death "in complete and free submission to His Father's will."²⁴ By His obedience, He made death — the consequence and punishment of Adam's disobedience — an instance of that free submission to God that Adam had refused.

Death had been Satan's master stroke against humanity; God made it the weapon by which He defeated Satan. Like a good general or a master chess-player, He took the strong point of His opponent's plan and made it the pivot of His own.²⁵

Thus His obedience "transformed the curse of death into a blessing."²⁶

It was death that won immortality for us, St. Ambrose said; death was its own redeemer. Christ could have found no better way to save us than by dying.²⁷

Death as medicine

The Sacraments of Initiation²⁸ make us members of Christ's Body and so "partners"²⁹ in His death. Thus our own death becomes "an act of obedience and love toward God the Father."³⁰ As a result, death, for us, now has a positive

9 See CCC 1008.

10 CCC 375

11 CCC 376; see CCC 1008.

12 See CCC 400.

13 Rom 6:23

14 Gn 2:17

15 CCC 1005

16 Jn 11:1-44

17 Is 25:8

18 "I am not so much afraid of death as ashamed of it" (Sir Thomas Browne: *A Letter to a Friend upon the Occasion of the Death of his Intimate Friend*, 1690).

19 Samuel Johnson: *Vanity of Human Wishes*, line 363

20 In contrast, Maria Goretti, at the age of 12, allowed herself to be stabbed to death rather than submit to rape, crying out that it would be a sin.

21 CCC 396. See the talk on "Creation and the Fall."

22 See Phil 2:6-8.

23 Eucharistic Prayer 2

24 CCC 1009

25 See C.S. Lewis: *Miracles*, XIV.

26 CCC 1009

27 See Ambrose: *On the Death of Satyrus*, Book II, 46.

28 Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist. See the talk on "Grace and the Sacraments."

29 CCC 618

30 CCC 1011

meaning.³¹ Through Baptism, we have "already died with Christ sacramentally, in order to live a new life; and if we die in Christ's grace, physical death completes this dying with Christ and so completes our incorporation into Him."³²

Thus death is not only a *punishment* for our fallen condition: it is also the *medicine*. Welcomed with "humility and self-renunciation," death, our enemy,³³ "becomes our servant," undoing the rebellion that brought death as a consequence and merited death as a punishment in the first place.³⁴

"God did not institute death at first, but gave it as a remedy."³⁵ For we "can depend on this": that "if we have died with Him, we shall also live with Him."³⁶

By His death, Jesus "overcame the sting of death and opened the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers."³⁷ For us, the cross, an instrument of torture and death, is a sacred symbol of life.³⁸ In fact, "the sign of the cross" is distinctively Christian. "We are signed with the sign of His death; we show forth His death when we pray; when we offer the Sacrifice [of the Mass] we declare His death."³⁹

Death as a friend

"Where was God when my son fell to his death?" a lady asked bitterly, and Father Vince replied, "At the bottom, welcoming him with open arms."

When we die, God calls us to Himself.⁴⁰ Accordingly, we can have the *desire* for death⁴¹ expressed by the saints: "I long to be freed from this life and to be with Christ."⁴² "I want to see God and, in order to see Him, I must die."⁴³ "Praised are you, my Lord, for our sister bodily Death."⁴⁴ "I am not dying; I am entering life."⁴⁵

On the other hand, we must never deliberately hasten death, for it marks the end of "the time of grace and mercy" God gives us "to decide our ultimate destiny."⁴⁶ After death, there is no return; "it is appointed that men die once."⁴⁷

The Church urges us to prepare for death. In the Litany of the Saints, we pray, "From a sudden and unforeseen death, deliver us, O Lord." In the *Hail Mary* we ask our Lady to pray for us "at the hour of our death."⁴⁸ We beg the intercession of St. Joseph as the patron of a happy death.⁴⁹

Every action, every thought of ours "should be those of one who expects to die before the day is out." Death would not frighten us if we had a clear conscience. "Then why not keep clear of sin instead of running away from death?"⁵⁰

Sacrament of the Sick

As we have seen, there is "a certain resemblance between the stages of natural life and the [sacramental] stages of the spiritual life."⁵¹ As we might expect, then,

31 CCC 1010

32 CCC 1010

33 See CCC 1008.

34 See C.S. Lewis: *Miracles*, XIV.

35 Ambrose: *On the Death of Satyrus*, Book II, 47

36 2 Tim: 2:11. See Rom 6:5,8.

37 *Te Deum*. See the talk on "Prayer," Appendix 1.

38 A person who dies of cancer has *won*, not *lost*, his battle with cancer; he is alive, while his cancer is dead. "Death, be not proud, though some have called thee mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so; for those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me.... One short sleep past, we wake eternally, and death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die" (John Donne: *Death Be Not Proud*).

39 Ambrose: *On the Death of Satyrus*, Book II, 46

40 CCC 1011

41 See CCC 1011, 1014.

42 Phil 1:23

43 Teresa of Avila: *Life*, Chapter 1

44 Francis of Assisi: *Canticum of the Creatures*

45 Thérèse of Lisieux: *The Last Conversations*

46 See CCC 1013, 1021.

47 Heb 9:27

48 See the talk on "Prayer," Appendix 1.

49 Because he died (we suppose) in the company of Jesus and Mary.

50 Thomas à Kempis: *Imitation of Christ*, 1, 23, 2

there is a Sacrament "especially intended to strengthen" the sick^{5 2} and the dying.

It used to be called Extreme Unction,^{5 3} administered only at the point of death. However, the Second Vatican Council^{5 4} restored the ancient custom of administering it earlier, as soon as there is danger of death from sickness, old age,^{5 5} or a serious operation.^{5 6}

Jesus instituted this Sacrament^{5 7} when He sent His apostles out to "cure the sick, raise the dead, heal the leprous," and "expel demons."^{5 8} The apostles "expelled many demons, anointed the sick with oil, and worked many cures."^{5 9}

"Is there anyone sick among you?" the apostle James wrote. "He should ask for the [priests] of the Church. They in turn are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the Name [of the Lord]."^{6 0}

The Sacrament of the Sick is one of the two "Sacraments of Healing."^{6 1} It is administered by a priest. First he "lays hands" on the sick person.^{6 2} Then — and these are the efficacious signs of the Sacrament^{6 3} — he anoints him on the forehead and hands with blessed oil, saying, "Through this holy anointing may the Lord in His love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord Who frees you from sin save you and raise you up."^{6 4}

Anointing with oil can symbolize abundance and joy,^{6 5} cleansing, limbering, healing,^{6 6} beautifying, strengthening, and consecration.^{6 7} In Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders it symbolizes consecration;^{6 8} in the Sacrament of the Sick, it symbolizes healing and comfort.^{6 9}

This Sacrament can be received more than once. It gives strength, peace, and courage to bear the difficulties of illness or the frailty of old age; it renews trust and faith in God; it defends us from the devil's temptations to discouragement and anguish in the face of death, and, if God is willing, it also heals the body.^{7 0}

Of course, any bodily healing is only temporary, as when Christ healed the sick on earth. The principal effect of this Sacrament is to heal *Zoë*. For example, Christ cured the paralyzed man, but first He said, "Your sins are forgiven."^{7 1}

The Sacrament of the Sick is particularly appropriate for someone near death, for it completes his configuration to Christ, just as Baptism began it.^{7 2} After this Sacrament,^{7 3} the priest can speak to him 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 was poured out upon you.... May holy Mary, the angels, and all the saints come to meet you.... May you

51 CCC 1210. For example, Baptism is our birth into supernatural life, Confirmation our maturity, and the Eucharist our nourishment.

52 CCC 1511

53 CCC 1512. "Unction" means "anointing with oil"; the Latin *in extremis* means "at the point of death."

54 1962-1965

55 CCC 1514

56 CCC 1515

57 See CCC 1511.

58 Mt 10:1-8

59 Mk 6:12-13

60 Jas 5:14

61 The other one is the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

62 The "laying on of hands" is a significant symbolic action with various meanings; see Gn 48:18; Ex 29:10; Nm 27:18; Dt 24:9; Mt 9:18, 19:15; Acts 6:6, 8:17, 13:3, 28:8; 1 Tim 1:6, 4:14.

63 See the talk on "Grace and the Sacraments."

64 CCC 1513

65 See Dt 11:14; Ps 23:5, 104:15.

66 See Is 1:6; Lk 10:34.

67 See Ex 28:41, 29:7; Lv 8:12; 1 Sm 9:16, 10:1, 16:1, 12-13; 1 Kgs 1:39, 19:16.

68 See the talks on "Baptism and Confirmation," "Mass: Sacrament and Sacrifice," and "Holy Week."

69 In the many healings Jesus performed (see, for example, Mt 8:1-17, 28-34, 9:1-8, 18-34, 12:9-15, 14:34-36, 15:29-31, 17:14-18, 20:29-34), He often used signs such as spittle (see Mk 8:22-25), mud and washing (see Jn 9:1-7), touching (see Mk 7:32-36), and the laying on of hands (see Mk 5:21-43).

70 CCC 1520

71 See Mt 9:1-7.

72 CCC 1523

73 Together with the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist and the plenary indulgence for the dying.

see your Redeemer face to face...."⁷⁴

Judgement

At the moment of death, each person undergoes a "particular" or "individual" judgement,⁷⁵ after which he is rewarded according to his faith and his actions.⁷⁶

- Those who die in a state of grace,⁷⁷ perfectly purified, enter Heaven immediately.⁷⁸
- Those who die in a state of grace, but imperfectly purified,⁷⁹ enter Heaven after purification in Purgatory.⁸⁰
- Those who die in mortal sin (which kills *Zoë*) without repenting and accepting God's mercy, enter Hell immediately and forever.⁸¹

Heaven

Those in Heaven behold "the beatific vision": God "as He is,"⁸² face to face.⁸³ Now that they can see clearly, they conform their wills to God's not with painful effort, but with sheer joy,⁸⁴ for Heaven is the ultimate fulfilment of the deepest human longings: the state of supreme, definitive happiness.⁸⁵ The Bible describes it only with images,⁸⁶ for "eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it so much as dawned on man what God has prepared for those who love Him."⁸⁷

Those in Heaven live "in Christ."⁸⁸ As members of His Body, they retain their identities — or rather find them,⁸⁹ for to each the Holy Spirit gives "a white stone, upon which is inscribed a new name, to be known only by him who receives it."⁹⁰

"The giving of the white stone with the new name is the communication" to the man of what God sees him to be, says George MacDonald. The name "expresses the character, the nature, the meaning of the person who bears it." For God to tell the man this name is to "seal" his success.⁹¹

Each has his own white stone. Each has his own name. Each, therefore, has a unique relationship with God.

Surely, says C.S. Lewis, this means that each one knows and praises some "aspect of the divine beauty better than any other." Why were individuals created, if not so that "God, loving all infinitely, should love each differently?"⁹²

And the perfect "communion of life and love"⁹³ among those in Heaven includes the communication of what each has to tell all the others: "fresh and ever fresh news" of what they, and only they, find in the Blessed Trinity.⁹⁴ Accordingly, those around God's throne cry *to one another*, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord!"⁹⁵

Everyone in Heaven experiences the maximum happiness possible to him, for he enjoys God as fully as he can and, at the same time, at every moment,

74 CCC 1020

75 CCC 1022

76 CCC 1013, 1021. See Lk 16:19-31, in which Lazarus went to Heaven and the rich man to Hell, and Lk 23:39-43, in which Jesus said to the thief on the cross: "This day you will be with Me in Paradise."

77 See the talk on "Grace and the Sacraments."

78 See CCC 1022-1023.

79 See CCC 1030.

80 See CCC 1022.

81 See CCC 1022-1023.

82 1 Jn 3:2

83 1 Cor 13:12

84 CCC 1029

85 CCC 1024

86 For example, life (Jn 10:10), light (Mt 17:2), peace (Jn 14:27), wedding feast (Mt 8:11), wine (Is 29:6), the Father's house (Jn 14:2), the heavenly Jerusalem (Rv 21:10), and paradise (Rv 2:7).

87 1 Cor 2:9; see Is 64:3.

88 Phil 1:23. See the talk on "The Communion Among the Saints in the Body of Christ."

89 CCC 1025

90 Rv 2:17

91 George MacDonald: *Unspoken Sermons*, First Series, "The New Name"

92 C.S. Lewis: *The Problem of Pain*, X

93 CCC 1024

94 C.S. Lewis: *The Problem of Pain*: X

95 See Is 6:3; Rv 4:8.

consummates his enjoyment by giving it perfect expression.⁹⁶

Will this perfect happiness ever grow boring?

No, says Pope Benedict. In our mortal life, *Bios*, every moment is too short, "because life itself seems to pass away with the moment before we can catch hold of it." But it is also too long, "because the great number of moments, each always the same as the others, becomes too laborious for us." If eternal life were merely an endless sequence of moments, then indeed we would suffer boredom and anxiety, oppressed by its endlessness.

But it is not, he says. Eternal life is "another level of being," in which existence is no longer "fragmented" into moments by time; "duration" disappears and "everything flows together into the 'now' of love."⁹⁷

No; Heaven will not be boring. Perfect happiness is, by definition, perfect.

But is Heaven really what we desire?

"There have been times when I think we do not," says Lewis; "but more often I find myself wondering whether, in our heart of hearts, we have ever desired anything else."⁹⁸

There is something we were born desiring, he says: something we are always looking, watching, listening for. It is incommunicable. It is unappeasable, for all we get is tantalizing glimpses and unfulfilled promises, echoes that die away just as they catch our ear.⁹⁹

But when the reality materializes, we will know it, beyond all possibility of doubt. We will recognize that here, at last, is what were made for; if we had lost this, we would have lost everything. Also see C.S. Lewis: *The Problem of Pain*, X.»

In the meantime, we try to seize it by planning the perfect holiday, wooing the perfect woman, applying for the perfect job — but reality always falls short.

There are three ways we can respond. We can stifle the desire, abandon the hope, and settle for what we can get here and now. Or we can try another holiday, another wife, another job.

Or — and this is the Christian way — we can nourish our hope, realizing that if nothing on earth can satisfy our longing, it is because we were made for Something else.¹⁰⁰

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Purgatory

"The encounter with God requires absolute purity. Every trace of attachment to evil must be eliminated; every imperfection of the soul corrected."¹⁰¹ Consequently, for those who die "open to God, but imperfectly, the journey toward full beatitude¹⁰² requires a purification."¹⁰³

We call this final purification, or purgation, *Purgatory*.¹⁰⁴ It is not "a prolongation" of our earthly life; it does not give us another chance to accept or reject God. No; the "souls in Purgatory" have died "in the love of Christ"; now Christ "removes from them the remnants of imperfection."¹⁰⁵

96 See C.S. Lewis: *Reflections on the Psalms*, IX. See the talk on "Prayer."

97 Pope Benedict XVI: *God is Near Us*, "My Joy is to Be in Thy Presence," 2. Eternity "embraces and possesses simultaneously the whole fullness of everlasting life, which lacks nothing of the future and has lost nothing of the past" (Boethius: *Consolation of Philosophy*, Consolation V, 6).

98 C.S. Lewis: *The Problem of Pain*, X

99 The unifying thread in Lewis' autobiography is this "secret desire," which, he says, is itself an object of desire, something we long to experience. He calls it "joy" (C.S. Lewis: *Surprised By Joy*, I). Similarly, "it had always seemed to Emily" that "she was very, very near to a world of wonderful beauty. Between it and herself hung only a thin curtain; she could never draw the curtain aside — but sometimes, just for a moment, a wind fluttered it, and then it was as if she caught a glimpse of the enchanting realm beyond — only a glimpse — and heard a note of unearthly music" (L.M. Montgomery: *Emily of New Moon*, 1).

100 See C.S. Lewis: *Mere Christianity*, Book III, 10. Also read C.S. Lewis' autobiography *Surprised By Joy*.

101 Pope John Paul II: General Audience, August 4 1999, 5; see the Appendix, "Purgatory," 2.

102 From the Latin *beat*, translated "blessed." "Blessedness" means "happiness" or "enjoyment of God's favour," so "beatitude" means "happiness conferred by God."

103 Pope John Paul II: General Audience, August 4 1999, 1; see the Appendix, "Purgatory," 1.

104 CCC 1031

105 Pope John Paul II: General Audience, August 4 1999; see the Appendix, "Purgatory," 5.

In support of this doctrine,¹⁰⁶ the Church cites Scripture:¹⁰⁷

- Christ warned that sins against the Holy Spirit will be pardoned neither in this age *nor in the age to come*¹⁰⁸ — as if some sins *can be forgiven in the age to come*.¹⁰⁹
- Speaking of those who build their lives on Christ as the foundation, Paul said that some build with gold, silver, and precious stones, while others build with wood, hay, and straw. "Fire will test the quality of each man's work," he said. "If a man's building burns, he will suffer loss. *He himself will be saved, but only as one fleeing through fire.*"¹¹⁰
- When Judas Maccabeus found that the soldiers who had died were wearing amulets honouring idols, he "prayed that the sinful deed might be fully blotted out" and "took up a collection" which "he sent to Jerusalem to provide for an expiatory sacrifice." Thus "he made atonement for the dead that they might be freed from this sin."¹¹¹

The Church also cites Sacred Tradition.¹¹² "From the beginning," she has "offered prayers" for the dead, especially the Mass, "so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God." She has also commended "almsgiving, indulgences,¹¹³ and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead."¹¹⁴

Faced with the holiness of God, Purgatory is something we will *want*. In Newman's poem, the angel tells Gerontius that when he dies, he will see God. However, he warns, "that sight of the Most Fair will gladden you, but it will pierce you too. You will feel that you have sinned ... and will desire to slink away, and hide yourself from His sight." And Gerontius says, "I go before my Judge.... Ah!... Take me away."¹¹⁵

Imagine God saying, "It is true, My son, that your breath smells and your rags drip with mud and slime, but we are charitable here and no one will upbraid you with these things." Would we not *beg* to be cleaned up first?¹¹⁶

In light of her doctrine on Purgatory, the Church, at a funeral, prays for the dead person rather than praising him. She urges that the homily not be a eulogy, but instead explain "the mystery of Christian death."¹¹⁷ Thus a Catholic funeral looks forward, to the next life, while so-called "celebrations of life" look backward, to the life that has ended.

Hell

In the Apostles' Creed, we say that Christ "descended into hell." Here, "hell"¹¹⁸ is "the abode of the dead, not the place of eternal damnation."¹¹⁹

But "the place of eternal damnation" is real. Jesus often spoke of it,¹²⁰ as "Gehenna,"¹²¹ "Hell," or "the unquenchable fire," where both soul and body are

106 Expressed especially at the Councils of Florence, in 1439, and Trent, in 1563.

107 CCC 1031

108 Mt 12:31-32. See the talk on "Sin and Forgiveness."

109 See CCC 1031.

110 1 Cor 3:15. See the Appendix, "Purgatory," 2.

111 See 2 Mc 12:38-46.

112 See CCC 1031, 1032.

113 See the talk on "The Communion Among the Saints in the Body of Christ" and its Appendices 1-3.

114 See CCC 1032.

115 John Henry Newman: *The Dream of Gerontius*, 6

116 See C.S. Lewis: *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm*, XX.

117 CCC 1688

118 In Greek, *Hades*; in Hebrew, *Sheol*.

119 Pope John Paul II: General Audience, January 11 1989. See the talk on "The History of Our Salvation."

120 See Mt 3:12, 5:22, 29-30, 10:28, 18:9, 23:33; Mk 9:43, 45, 47; Lk 12:5.

121 From the Hebrew *ge-hinnan* through the Aramaic *ge-hinnam* ("valley of the son of Hinnom"). "Hinnom" is conjectured to be the name of the original Jebusite owner. This valley, to the south-southwest of Jerusalem, eventually joins the Kidron Valley, which runs along the east side of the city. In the later Old Testament writings, it was ominous, for it had been the location of Tophet, a pagan shrine where humans were sacrificed (see 2 Kgs 23:10). The idea that Gehenna was a dump of smoldering refuse cannot be traced farther back than 1200 AD and seems to have no archaeological basis (see Our Sunday Visitor's *Catholic Encyclopedia*).

lost,¹²² reserved for those who refuse to the end of their lives to believe and repent.¹²³ He said that His angels will gather "all evildoers" and "hurl them into the fiery furnace,"¹²⁴ and that He will pronounce the condemnation: "Out of My sight, you condemned, into that eternal fire!"¹²⁵

Now some people see the existence of Hell as contrary to God's love and mercy.¹²⁶ How, they ask, can a kind and compassionate God send someone to burn in Hell for all eternity?

There are three points we must appreciate before we can understand.

1) A person does not go to Hell because his bad deeds outweigh his good deeds. In fact, "if the wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed,... none of the crimes he has committed shall be remembered against him."¹²⁷

A person goes to Hell not because he has done evil — even great evil — but because he "claims to have a 'right' to persist in evil — in any sin at all" — and thus "rejects Redemption."¹²⁸ In short, "You don't go to Hell for doing something wrong. You go to Hell for not being sorry."¹²⁹

2) To die in mortal sin without repenting means remaining separated from God for ever "by our own free choice." Hell is the state of "self-exclusion from communion with God and the blest."¹³⁰ The damned souls, rebels to the end, lock the doors of Hell on the *inside* to keep God out.¹³¹

Does anyone really hate God? "Explicit hatred of God may be rare, but there is a form of self-love that is equivalent to it." A person "may go through life ignoring God — and therefore not hating Him — but building up such a love of self that he has only to be confronted with God to hate Him."¹³²

Does anyone really choose Hell? The choice may be gradual, but we affirm it every time we sin.¹³³ We can always repent and be forgiven,¹³⁴ but the original sin was a sin of pride,¹³⁵ and that pride, which we inherit, makes repentance hard.

In any particular wrong choice, we might not have full knowledge of what we are doing; we might not give full consent. However, with repetition, our choice of the Hellward road can harden into a habit and then into a principle.

Thus, gradually, at our centre, there can develop "a hard, tight, settled core of resolution" to continue as we are. Even if it is not fully articulate, it can amount to "a real and deliberate" rejection of God's graciousness.¹³⁶

God gives us all the time we need — a lifetime — to decide for Him or against Him.¹³⁷ He gives us all the help we will accept and all the wakeup calls we can hear. As long as there is any hope, He will always give us another chance.¹³⁸

"Do I indeed derive any pleasure from the death of the wicked?" He asks. "Do I not rather rejoice when he turns from his evil way that he may live?"¹³⁹

However, faced with the freedom He has given us, God has decided to make

122 See Mt 10:28.

123 See CCC 1034.

124 Mt 13:41-42

125 Mt 25:41

126 Like the "boozy major" who maintained that God is "a Sahib" who "wouldn't send a chap to burn forever in Hell just because he'd had a bit of fun with the girls and the bottles" (see Bruce Marshall: *The World, the Flesh, and Father Smith*, IX).

127 Ez 18:21-22; see Mt 20:1-16.

128 See Pope John Paul II: *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 46.

129 Ken Murphy, my father.

130 CCC 1033

131 See C.S. Lewis: *The Problem of Pain*, VIII.

132 Frank Sheed: *A Map of Life*, XIII

133 The original sin consisted of disobedience to God and lack of trust in His goodness. "In that sin, man preferred himself to God and by that very act scorned Him." And all subsequent sin has been essentially the same. (See CCC 397-398.)

134 See the talk on "Sin and Forgiveness."

135 See the talk on "Creation and the Fall."

136 See C.S. Lewis: *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*.

137 See CCC 1013, 1021.

138 See the talk on "The History of Our Salvation."

139 Ez 18:23. God, in His merciful love, "can only desire the salvation of the beings He created" (Pope John Paul II: General Audience, July 28 1999; see the Appendix, "Hell," 3).

Himself powerless.¹⁴⁰ Once our minds are made up — and He, Who knows everything, knows when that is — He accepts our decision. If, at the end, we do not say to Him, "Thy will be done," He says to us, "Then *thy* will be done."

And "the state of those who definitively reject the Father's mercy, even at the last moment of their life,"¹⁴¹ is what we call Hell.

3) "The images of Hell that Sacred Scripture presents to us must be correctly interpreted." Their purpose is not to "create anxiety or despair," but to show us "the complete frustration and emptiness of life without God."¹⁴²

Twice, Jesus describes Hell as a fiery furnace;¹⁴³ but three times, as the dark or night outside;¹⁴⁴ and seven times, as a place of "wailing and grinding of teeth."¹⁴⁵ "In a world separated from God and therefore from love you begin to freeze," Pope Benedict explained; "your teeth begin to chatter."¹⁴⁶ The poet Dante Alighieri¹⁴⁷ pictured the centre of Hell as ice, not fire; indeed, cold iron can *burn* like fire.¹⁴⁸

Jesus also describes Hell as punishment,¹⁴⁹ destruction,¹⁵⁰ and banishment.¹⁵¹ *Banishment* from God is Hell's chief *punishment*, for only God can give us "the life and happiness" we long for.¹⁵² And when you add the element of *destruction*, you get what Lewis calls the state of *having been* a human soul.

"To enter Heaven is to become more human than you ever succeeded in being on earth," he explains; "to enter Hell is to be banished from humanity. What is cast (or what casts itself) into Hell is not a man: it is 'remains.' To be a complete man means to have the passions obedient to the will and the will offered to God; to *have been* a man — to be an ex-man or a damned ghost — [means] to have a will utterly centered in itself and the passions utterly uncontrolled by the will."¹⁵³

Such a creature — so nearly nothing that it hardly exists, like the ghosts in Lewis' *The Great Divorce*¹⁵⁴ — does not have the capacity to enjoy God in Heaven; but neither, we may suppose, does it have the capacity to suffer like a human being. To the damned, then, Hell may not be the hell it appears to us.¹⁵⁵

This is not to undermine the severity of Christ's warnings. A vision of Hell would "send any soul not already damned flying to its prayers in nightmare terror."¹⁵⁶

However, the damned might find it endurable, because only there can they save their pride. "The one principle of Hell is, 'I am my own'"¹⁵⁷ — "the record shows I took the blows and did it my way!"¹⁵⁸

Lewis imagines the damned always quarrelling and moving farther away from one another.¹⁵⁹ Each one's goal is to be utterly isolated, shut up in himself. Their fists, their teeth, their eyes are clenched. At first they *would* not, but now they *cannot*, "open their hands for gifts, or their mouths for food, or their eyes to see."¹⁶⁰

"They will not let us help them," Aslan¹⁶¹ tells Lucy at the end of Narnia, when

140 See Pope John Paul II: *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, "Why Does God Tolerate Suffering?"

141 Pope John Paul II: General Audience, July 28 1999; see the Appendix, "Hell," 1.

142 Pope John Paul II: General Audience, July 28 1999; see the Appendix, "Hell," 3.

143 See Mt 13:42,50.

144 See Mt 8:12, 22:13, 25:30.

145 See Mt 8:12, 13:42,50, 22:13, 24:51, 25:30; Lk 13:28.

146 Joseph Ratzinger: *God and the World*, Part II.

147 Praised by numerous Popes.

148 See Hugh Gray: *Letters From Canada*, xix.

149 Mt 25:46

150 Mt 10:28

151 Mt 22:13, 25:10

152 See CCC 1035.

153 C.S. Lewis: *The Problem of Pain*, VIII

154 Especially the Tragedian; see Chapter 12.

155 "God in His mercy made/The fixed pains of Hell./That misery might be stayed,/God in His mercy made/Eternal bounds and bade/Its waves no further swell./God in His mercy made/the fixed pains of Hell" (C.S. Lewis: *Poems*, "Divine Justice").

156 C.S. Lewis: *The Problem of Pain*, VIII

157 George MacDonald: *Unspoken Sermons*, Third Series, "Freedom"

158 Appropriate lines in the lyrics "for a song from Hell" (Father Larry Richards at the "Be a Man" Conference in Vancouver June 15 2012).

159 See C.S. Lewis: *The Great Divorce*, 2.

160 See C.S. Lewis: *The Great Divorce*, 13.

she begs him to help the dwarfs. "They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out."¹⁶²

Satan, Lewis says, is not the majestic, tragic personage of Milton's *Paradise Lost*¹⁶³ or the "humourous, civilized, sensible, adaptable" Mephistopheles of Goethe's *Faust*.¹⁶⁴ No; the one whom Jesus called "the father of lies"¹⁶⁵ is "inside out"; on the surface, there are "great designs" and "an antagonism to Heaven" that involve "the fate of worlds"; but, deep within, there is "nothing but a black childishness, an aimless empty spitefulness."¹⁶⁶

Why we have spent so much more time on Hell than on Heaven or Purgatory? Because we do not want anyone to doubt God's love and mercy.

Christ's second coming

The "good news of the Kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world," Jesus promised. "Only after that will the end come."

The preceding days "will be more filled with anguish than any from the beginning of the world," He continued. "The sun will be darkened, the moon will not shed her light, the stars will fall from the sky, and the hosts of Heaven will be shaken loose."

"Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the clans of the earth will strike their breasts as they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of Heaven with power and great glory." "As the lightning from the east flashes to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be." "Stay awake, therefore! You cannot know the day your Lord is coming."¹⁶⁷

And that is all we know: 1) the end of the world will be sudden and violent; 2) Christ will return, and everyone will see Him; 3) we cannot possibly predict when all this will happen; and so 4) we must always be ready.

"Do those who say, lo! here or lo! there are the signs of His coming, think to be too keen for Him and spy out His approach? When He tells them to watch lest He find them neglecting their work, they stare this way and that, and watch lest He should succeed in coming like a thief!"¹⁶⁸

Resurrection of the body

Many people believe vaguely that human life continues in some spiritual fashion after death, but Christians believe not only that our souls will live forever, but also that Christ will "raise up" our bodies on the last day.¹⁶⁹ We proclaim our belief in this doctrine every time we say the Creed.

"Those who have done right shall rise to live; the evildoers shall rise to be damned."¹⁷⁰ Even the damned, so "nearly nothing"¹⁷¹ as they are, will have their bodies with them in Hell. However, if we have died "in Christ,"¹⁷² God will grant our bodies "incorruptible life" by "reuniting them with our souls."¹⁷³

Jesus made it very clear. To the Sadducees, who denied it, He said, "You are badly misled, because you fail to understand the Scriptures or the power of

161 Narnia's counterpart to Christ.

162 C.S. Lewis: *The Last Battle*, 13

163 Who, "majestic, though in ruin," evokes our admiration at his heroic and tragic stand against superior powers when he proclaims, "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven" (see C.S. Lewis: *The Screwtape Letters*, Preface).

164 Who "has helped to strengthen the illusion that evil is liberating," when it is Faust, not Mephistopheles, "who really exhibits the ruthless, sleepless, unsmiling concentration upon self which is the mark of Hell" (see C.S. Lewis: *The Screwtape Letters*, Preface).

165 Jn 8:44

166 "This creature was, by all human standards, See C.S. Lewis: *Perelandra*, 9.

167 See Mt 24:14-42.

168 George MacDonald: *Unspoken Sermons*, Second Series, "The Word of Jesus on Prayer"

169 Jn 6:39,44,54. "On no point does the Christian faith encounter more opposition" (CCC 996).

170 Jn 5:29

171 C.S. Lewis: *The Great Divorce*, 13

172 See the talk on "The Communion Among the Saints in the Body of Christ."

173 CCC 997

God."¹⁷⁴ To Martha, whose brother Lazarus had died, He said, "Your brother will rise again." When she replied, "I know he will rise again, in the resurrection on the last day," Jesus said, "I am the Resurrection and the life."¹⁷⁵

And Paul argued that "if the Spirit of Him Who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also."¹⁷⁶

Now when Jesus first appeared to His apostles after His own Resurrection, "they thought they were seeing a ghost," and they panicked. Jesus had to reassure them. "Look at My Hands and Feet: it is really I," He said, showing them the holes where the nails had been. "Touch Me, and see that a ghost does not have flesh and bones as I do."¹⁷⁷

The apostles "were still incredulous for sheer joy and wonder," so Jesus said, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave Him a piece of fish, which He took and ate in front of them¹⁷⁸ to prove He was alive.

Jesus' risen Body, then, was real, and it was recognizably His. However, it was different. For example, It could appear and disappear, even through locked doors.¹⁷⁹ It was also, sometimes, hard to recognize.¹⁸⁰

Like Jesus, we too will rise again with bodies that are our own, but changed.¹⁸¹

"How are the dead to be raised up? What *kind* of body will they have?"

"A nonsensical question!" Paul replies. "The seed you sow [in the ground] does not germinate unless it dies. When you sow, you do not sow the full-blown plant, but a kernel of wheat or some other grain."¹⁸²

"So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown in the earth" — at a funeral — "is subject to decay; what rises is incorruptible. What is sown is ignoble, what rises is glorious. Weakness is sown, strength rises up. A natural body is put down and a spiritual body comes up. If there is a natural body, be sure there is also a spiritual body."¹⁸³

Now a "spiritual body" does not sound like something made of solid "flesh and bone."¹⁸⁴ Again, Lewis helps us with images: remember how the lecherous, oily ghost rose as the solid, muscular man.¹⁸⁵ Perhaps we can paraphrase Paul: "If there is a *Bios*-body, be sure there is also a *Zoë*-body."

The "how" of all this "exceeds our imagination and understanding; it is accessible only to faith." But the transubstantiation of bread into Christ's Body at Mass "gives us a foretaste" of the "transfiguration of our bodies,"¹⁸⁶ and so does Christ's own transfiguration, when God filled "with the greatest splendour" the bodily form Jesus shares with us, to show us how what first "shone forth" in the Church's Head "is to be fulfilled" in the Church's Body.¹⁸⁷

Baptism makes us members of Christ's Body, already risen and glorified, but our new life remains "hidden with Christ in God"¹⁸⁸ until we rise on the last day.¹⁸⁹

174 Mk 12:24

175 Jn 11:25

176 Rom 8:11. See also 1 Cor 15:44.

177 Lk 24:37-39; Jn 20:25-27

178 Lk 24:41-43

179 See Jn 20:19,26.

180 See Jn 20:14; Lk 24:16.

181 CCC 999. See Pope John Paul II: *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 18 (see the talk on "Mass: Sacrament and Sacrifice," Appendix 1).

182 1 Cor 15:36-37

183 1 Cor 15:42-44

184 Lk 24:39. We find it hard to think of the spiritual as more real than the physical, the soul as more real than the body, *Zoë* as more real than *Bios*. To us, an angel is "a thin, half-real body that can go through walls and rocks; to himself, he goes through them because he is solid and firm and they are like cloud" (C.S. Lewis: *Out of the Silent Planet*, 15).

185 C.S. Lewis: *The Great Divorce*, 11

186 CCC 1000

187 Transfiguration: Preface. See the talk "The Communion Among the Saints in the Body of Christ."

188 Col 3:3

189 CCC 1002-1003. In the meantime, we must be careful to treat everyone's body with respect (see CCC 1004). The body "is for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body" (1 Cor 6:13-15). "You must know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.... So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor 6:19-20).

The Last Judgement

The resurrection of the dead will be followed by the Last Judgement. "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, escorted by all the angels of Heaven, He will sit upon His royal throne, and all the nations will be assembled before Him. Then He will separate them into two groups, as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. The sheep He will place at His right hand, the goats on His left."

He will say to those on His right, "Come. You have My Father's blessing! Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world," and to those on His left, "Out of My sight, you condemned, into that everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels!"¹⁹⁰

"The truth of each man's relationship with God will be laid bare. The Last Judgement will reveal even to its furthest consequences the good each person has done or failed to do during his earthly life."¹⁹¹ Christ will "pronounce the final word on all history" and we shall know "the ultimate meaning of the whole work of creation." We will see "that God's justice triumphs over all the injustices committed by His creatures and that God's love is stronger than death."¹⁹²

After that, "the universe itself will be renewed,"¹⁹³ transformed into "new heavens and a new earth."¹⁹⁴ In this new universe, there will be no more death, mourning, or pain, and God will live among us.¹⁹⁵

Again, we cannot imagine it.¹⁹⁶ But, once more, Lewis can help. Read *The Last Battle*, the last of his Narnia books, especially the final chapters.

Conclusion

"For Your faithful, Lord, life is changed, not ended," the Church prays at a funeral. "When this earthly dwelling turns to dust, an eternal dwelling is made ready for them in Heaven."¹⁹⁷

We spend less than 100 years on earth and eternity somewhere else, so it is only prudent to keep death, judgement, Hell, and Heaven before our minds.

Do we ever think, as we are driving, how close we might be to death? Are we ready? Is our will made? Are our affairs in order?¹⁹⁸ But — far more important — is our *Zoë* alive? Are we in a state of grace?¹⁹⁹

For "when all is said and done, that is all that matters."²⁰⁰

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190 Mt 25:31-46

191 CCC 1039

192 CCC 1040

193 CCC 1042

194 2 Pt 3:13

195 See Rv 21:4.

196 1 Cor 2:9; see Is 64:3.

197 Preface I For the Dead

198 Both are requirements of charity toward those who will survive us.

199 See the talk on "Grace and the Sacraments."

200 Archbishop Emeritus Adam Exner OMI of Vancouver, at a Mass for Father Vince's father after his death.

Appendix

Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory

Introduction

When Pope John Paul II spoke about Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory during three successive General Audiences July 21, July 28, and August 4 1999, he created some controversy by pointing out that none of them is a "place" as we understand the term. However, he was merely applying what St. Thomas Aquinas said: "Incorporeal things are not in place after a manner known and familiar to us, in which way we say that bodies are properly in place; but they are in place after a manner befitting spiritual substances, a manner that cannot be fully manifest to us."¹

Here are the texts of the audiences, taken from the weekly English edition of the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*.

Heaven

1. 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 fulfilment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness."²

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.

2. In biblical language "heaven," when it is joined to "earth," indicates part of the universe. Scripture says about creation: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."³

Metaphorically, "Heaven" is understood as the dwelling-place of God, Who is thus distinguished from human beings.⁴ He sees and judges from the heights of Heaven⁵ and comes down when He is called upon.⁶ However, the biblical metaphor makes it clear that God does not identify Himself with Heaven, nor can He be contained in it;⁷ and this is true even though in some passages of the First Book of the Maccabees "Heaven" is simply one of God's names.⁸

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 Enoch⁹ and Elijah.¹⁰ Thus Heaven becomes an image of life in God. In this sense Jesus speaks of a "reward in Heaven"¹¹ and urges people to "lay up for yourselves treasures in Heaven."¹²

3. 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"¹³ and "entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into Heaven itself."¹⁴ Since believers are loved in a special way by the Father, they are

1 Thomas Aquinas: *Summa Theologiae*, Supplement, Q 69, a1, reply 1

2 CCC 1024

3 Gn 1:1

4 See Ps 104:2, 115:16 and Is 66:1.

5 See Ps 113:4-9.

6 See Ps 18:9,10, 144:5.

7 See 1 Kgs 8:27.

8 See 1 Mc 3:18,19,50,60, 4:24,55.

9 See Gn 5:24.

10 See 2 Kgs 2:11.

11 Mt 5:12

12 Mt 6:20; see 19:21.

raised with Christ and made citizens of Heaven.

It is worthwhile listening to what the apostle Paul tells us about this subject 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 places in Christ Jesus, that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."¹⁵ 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.

4. After the course of our earthly life, participation in complete intimacy with the Father thus comes through our insertion into Christ's Paschal Mystery. Saint Paul emphasizes our meeting with Christ in Heaven at the end of time with a vivid spatial image: "Then 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."¹⁶

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, personalist¹⁷ 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."¹⁸

5. This final state, however, can be anticipated in some way today in sacramental life, whose centre 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,"¹⁹ 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."²⁰

13 Heb 4:14

14 Heb 9:24

15 Eph 2:4-7

16 1 Thes 4:17-18

17 "Personalism" is a philosophy that affirms the centrality of the person for philosophical thought.

Personalism posits ultimate reality and value in personhood — human as well as (at least for most personalists) divine. It emphasizes the significance, uniqueness, and inviolability of the person, as well as the person's essentially relational or social dimension.

18 CCC 1026

19 Col 3:1

20 Col 1:20

Hell

1. 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 for ever 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.

2. To describe this reality, Sacred Scripture uses a symbolical language which will gradually be explained. In the Old Testament the condition of the dead had not yet been fully disclosed by Revelation. Moreover, it was thought that the dead were amassed in Sheol, a land of darkness,²¹ a pit from which one cannot reascend,²² a place in which it is impossible to praise God.²³

The New Testament sheds new light on the condition of the dead, proclaiming above all that Christ by His Resurrection conquered death and extended His liberating power to the kingdom of the dead. Redemption nevertheless remains an offer of salvation which it is up to people to accept freely. This is why they will all be judged "by what they [have done]."²⁴

By using images, the New Testament presents the place destined for evildoers as a fiery furnace, where people will "weep and gnash their teeth,"²⁵ or like Gehenna with its "unquenchable fire."²⁶ All this is narrated in the parable of the rich man, which explains that Hell is a place of eternal suffering, with no possibility of return, nor of the alleviation of pain.²⁷

The Book of Revelation also figuratively portrays in a "pool of fire" those who exclude themselves from the book of life, thus meeting with a "second death."²⁸ Whoever continues to be closed to the Gospel is therefore preparing for "eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His might."²⁹

3. The images of Hell that Sacred Scripture presents to us must be correctly interpreted. They show the complete frustration and emptiness of life without God. Rather than a place, Hell indicates the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy.

This is how the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* summarizes the truths of faith on this subject: "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.'"³⁰

"Eternal damnation," therefore, is not attributed to God's initiative, because in His merciful love He can only desire the salvation of the beings He created. In reality, it is the creature who closes himself to His love. Damnation consists precisely in definitive separation from God, freely chosen by the human person and confirmed with death, which seals his choice for ever. God's judgement ratifies this state.

21 See Ez 28:8, 31:14; Jb 10:21, 38:17; Ps 30:10, 88:7,13.

22 See Jb 7:9.

23 See Is 38:18; Ps 6:6.

24 Rv 20:13

25 Mt 13:42; see 25:30,41.

26 Mk 9:43

27 See Lk 16:19-31.

28 Rv 20:13

29 2 Thes 1:9

30 CCC 1033

4. Christian faith teaches that in taking the risk of saying "yes" or "no," which marks the human creature's freedom, some have already said no. They are the spiritual creatures that rebelled against God's love and are called demons.³¹ What happened to them is a warning to us: it is a continuous call to avoid the tragedy that leads to sin and to conform our life to that of Jesus, Who lived His life with a "yes" to God.

Eternal damnation remains a real possibility, but we are not granted, without special divine revelation, the knowledge of whether or which human beings are effectively involved in it. The thought of Hell — and even less the improper use of biblical images — must not create anxiety or despair, but is a necessary and healthy reminder of our freedom within the proclamation that the risen Jesus has conquered Satan, giving us the Spirit of God, Who makes us cry "Abba, Father!"³²

This prospect, rich in hope, prevails in Christian proclamation. It is effectively reflected in the liturgical tradition of the Church, as the words of the Roman Canon attest: "Father, accept this offering from Your whole family ... save us from final damnation, and count us among those You have chosen."

³¹ See Fourth Lateran Council: Confession of Faith.

³² Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6

Purgatory

1. We have seen in the previous two catecheses that on the basis of his definitive option for or against God, the human being finds he faces one of these alternatives: either to live with the Lord in eternal beatitude, or to remain far from His presence.

For those who find themselves in a condition of being open to God, but still imperfectly, the journey towards full beatitude requires a purification, which the faith of the Church illustrates in the doctrine of "Purgatory."³³

2. In Sacred Scripture, we can grasp certain elements that help us to understand the meaning of this doctrine, even if it is not formally described. They express the belief that we cannot approach God without undergoing some kind of purification.

According to Old Testament religious law, what is destined for God must be perfect. As a result, physical integrity is specifically required for the realities which come into contact with God; for example, at the sacrificial level, sacrificial animals,³⁴ and, at the institutional level, priests or ministers of worship.³⁵

Total dedication to the God of the Covenant, which — according to the great teachings found in Deuteronomy³⁶ — must correspond to this physical integrity, is required of individuals and society as a whole.³⁷ It is a matter of loving God with all one's being, with purity of heart and the witness of deeds.³⁸

The need for integrity to enter into perfect and complete communion with God becomes obviously necessary after death. Those who do not possess this integrity must undergo purification.

This is suggested by a text of St. Paul. The apostle speaks of the value of each person's work which will be revealed on the day of judgement and says: "If the work which any man has built on the foundation [which is Christ] survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire."³⁹

3. At times, to reach a state of perfect integrity, a person needs the intercession or mediation of others. For example, Moses obtains pardon for the people with a prayer in which he recalls God's saving work in the past and prays for God's fidelity to the oath made to his ancestors.⁴⁰

The figure of the Servant of the Lord, outlined in the Book of Isaiah, is also portrayed by His role of intercession and expiation for many; at the end of His suffering He "will see the light" and "will justify many," bearing their iniquities.⁴¹

According to the perspective of the Old Testament, Psalm 51 can be considered a synthesis of the process of reintegration: the sinner confesses and recognizes his guilt,⁴² asking insistently to be purified or "cleansed"⁴³ so that he can proclaim the divine praises.⁴⁴

4. In the New Testament Christ is presented as the Intercessor Who assumes the functions of High Priest on the day of expiation.⁴⁵ But in Him the priesthood is presented in a new and definitive form. He enters the heavenly shrine once and for all to intercede with God on our behalf.⁴⁶ He is both Priest and "Victim of expiation" for the sins of the whole world.⁴⁷

Jesus, as the great Intercessor Who atones for us, will fully reveal Himself at the

33 See CCC 1030-1032.

34 See Lv 22:22.

35 See Lv 21:17-23.

36 See Dt 6:5.

37 See 1 Kgs 8:61.

38 1 Kgs 10:12

39 1 Cor 3:14-15

40 See Ex 32:30, 11-13.

41 See Is 52:13-15, 53, especially 53:11.

42 Ps 51:3

43 Ps 51:2,9,10,17

44 Ps 51:15

45 See Heb 5:7; 7:25.

46 See Heb 9:23-26, especially 9:24.

47 See 1 Jn 2:2.

end of our life, when He will express Himself with the offer of mercy, but also with the inevitable judgement for those who refuse the Father's love and forgiveness. This offer of mercy does not exclude the duty to present ourselves to God pure and whole, rich in that love which Paul calls a "[bond] of perfect harmony."⁴⁸

5. In following the Gospel exhortation to be perfect like the heavenly Father⁴⁹ during our earthly life, we are called to grow in love, to be sound and flawless before God the Father "at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints."⁵⁰ Moreover, we are invited to "cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit,"⁵¹ because the encounter with God requires absolute purity.

Every trace of attachment to evil must be eliminated, every imperfection of the soul corrected. Purification must be complete, and indeed this is precisely what is meant by the Church's teaching on Purgatory.

The term indicates not a place, but a condition of existence. Those who, after death, exist in a state of purification, are already in the love of Christ, Who removes from them the remnants of imperfection.⁵²

It is necessary to explain that the state of purification is not a prolongation of the earthly condition, almost as if after death one were given another possibility to change one's destiny. The Church's teaching in this regard is unequivocal and was reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Council, which teaches: "Since we know neither the day nor the hour, we should follow the advice of the Lord and watch constantly so that, when the single course of our earthly life is completed,⁵³ we may merit to enter with Him into the marriage feast and be numbered among the blessed, and not, like the wicked and slothful servants, be ordered to depart into the eternal fire, into the outer darkness where 'men will weep and gnash their teeth.'"⁵⁴

6. One last important aspect which the Church's tradition has always pointed out should be repropounded today: the dimension of "*communio*."

Those who find themselves in the state of purification are united both with the blessed who already enjoy the fullness of eternal life, and with us on this earth on our way towards the Father's house.⁵⁵ Just as in their earthly life believers are united in the one Mystical Body, so after death those who live in a state of purification experience the same ecclesial solidarity, which works through prayer — prayers for suffrage — and love for their brothers and sisters in the faith. Purification is lived in the essential bond created between those who live in this world and those who enjoy eternal beatitude.

48 Col 3:14

49 See Mt 5:48.

50 1 Thes 3:12

51 2 Cor 7:1; see 1 Jn 3:3.

52 See Ecumenical Council of Florence, Session 6, July 6 1439; Council of Trent, Decree on Justification, Cannon XXX, Session 6, January 13 1547; Council of Trent, Decree on Purgatory, Session 25, December 3 1563.

53 See Heb 9:27.

54 Mt 22:13, 25:30, quoted in the Second Vatican Council's *Lumen Gentium*, 48

55 See CCC 1032.