

HEAVEN, HELL AND PURGATORY Pope John Paul II

In three controversial Wednesday Audiences, Pope John Paul II pointed out that the *essential* characteristic of heaven, hell or purgatory is that they are *states* of being of a spirit (angel/demon) or human soul, rather than *places*, as commonly perceived and represented in human language. This language of *place* is, according to the Pope, inadequate to describe the realities involved, since it is tied to the temporal order in which this world and we exist. In this he is applying the philosophical categories used by the Church in her theology and saying what St. Thomas Aquinas said long before him.

"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." [St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Supplement, Q69, a1, reply 1]

Heaven is Fullness of Communion with God

Heaven as the fullness of communion with God was the theme of the Holy Father's catechesis at the General Audience of 21 July 1999. Heaven "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," the Pope said.

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" (n.1024).

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

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

Heaven is the transcendent dwelling-place of the living God

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

The depiction of heaven as the transcendent dwelling-place of the living God is joined with that of the place to which believers, through grace, can also ascend, as we see in the Old Testament accounts of Enoch (cf. Gn 5:24) and Elijah (cf. 2 Kgs 2:11). Thus heaven becomes an image of life in God. In this sense Jesus speaks of a "reward in heaven" (Mt 5:12) and urges people to "lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (*ibid.*, 6:20; cf. 19:21).

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" (Heb 4:14), and "entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself" (*ibid.*, 9:24). Since believers are loved in a special way by the Father, they are raised with Christ and made citizens of heaven. It is worthwhile listening to what the Apostle Paul tells us about this in a very powerful text: "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly 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" (Eph 2:4-7). The fatherhood of God, who is rich in mercy, is experienced by creatures through the love of God's crucified and risen Son, who sits in heaven on the right hand of the Father as Lord.

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. St 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" (1 Thes 4:17-18).

Sacramental life is anticipation of heaven

In the context of Revelation, we know that the "heaven" or "happiness" in which we will find ourselves is neither an abstraction nor a physical place in the clouds, but a living, personal relationship with the Holy Trinity. It is our meeting with the

Father which takes place in the risen Christ through the communion of the Holy Spirit.

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

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

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" (Col 3:1), in order to be with him in the eschatological fulfilment, when the Spirit will fully reconcile with the Father "all things, whether on earth or in heaven" (Col 1:20).

Hell is the State of Those who Reject God

At the General Audience of Wednesday, 28 July 1999, the Holy Father reflected on hell as the definitive rejection of God. In his catechesis, the Pope said that care should be taken to interpret correctly the images of hell in Sacred Scripture, and explained that "hell is the ultimate consequence of sin itself... 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".

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.

Hell is a state of eternal damnation

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 (cf. Ez. 28:8; 31:14; Jb. 10:21f.; 38:17; Ps 30:10; 88:7, 13), a pit from which one cannot reascend (cf. Jb. 7:9), a place in which it is impossible to praise God (cf. Is 38:18; Ps 6:6).

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]" (Rv 20:13). By using images, the New Testament presents the place destined for evildoers as a fiery furnace, where people will "weep and gnash their teeth" (Mt 13:42; cf. 25:30, 41), or like Gehenna with its "unquenchable fire" (Mk 9:43). 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 (cf. Lk. 16:19-31).

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" (Rv. 20:13f.). 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" (2 Thes 1:9).

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 for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called 'hell'" (n. 1033).

"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 that seals his choice for ever. God's judgement ratifies this state.

We are saved from going to hell by Jesus who conquered Satan

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 (*cf. Fourth Lateran Council, DS 800-801*). What happened to them is a warning to us: it is a continuous call to avoid the tragedy which 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 freedom within the proclamation that the risen Jesus has conquered Satan, giving us the, Spirit of God who makes us cry "Abba, Father!" (Rm. 8:15; Gal. 4:6).

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".

*[Note: The original Italian says, "(Più che) More than a place, hell indicates..." This suggests correctly that although hell is not essentially "a place," rather the definitive loss of God, confinement is included. Thus, after the general resurrection the bodies of the damned, being bodies not spirits, must be in "some place," in which they will receive the punishment of fire.] [return to text](#)

Purgatory Is Necessary Purification

Before we enter into full communion with God, every trace of sin within us must be eliminated and every imperfection in our soul must be corrected

At the General Audience of Wednesday, 4 August 1999, following his catecheses on heaven and hell, the Holy Father reflected on Purgatory. He explained that physical integrity is necessary to enter into perfect communion with God

therefore "the term purgatory does not indicate a place, but a condition of existence", where Christ "removes ... the remnants of imperfection".

1. As we have seen in the previous two catecheses, on the basis of the 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" (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1030-1032).

To share in divine life we must be totally purified

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 also specifically required for the realities which come into contact with God at the *sacrificial* level such as, for example, sacrificial animals (cf. Lv 22: 22) or at the *institutional* level, as in the case of priests or ministers of worship (cf. Lv 21: 17-23). Total dedication to the God of the Covenant, along the lines of the great teachings found in Deuteronomy (cf. 6: 5), and which must correspond to this physical integrity, is required of individuals and society as a whole (cf. 1 Kgs 8: 61). It is a matter of loving God with all one's being, with purity of heart and the witness of deeds (cf. *ibid.*, 10: 12f.)

The need for integrity obviously becomes necessary after death, for entering into perfect and complete communion with God. 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" (1 Cor 3: 14-15).

3. At times, to reach a state of perfect integrity a person's intercession or mediation is needed. For example, Moses obtains pardon for the people with a prayer in which he recalls the saving work done by God in the past, and prays for God's fidelity to the oath made to his ancestors (cf. Ex 32: 30, 11-13). 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 (cf. Is 52: 13-53, 12, especially vv. 53: 11).

Psalm 51 can be considered, according to the perspective of the Old Testament, as a synthesis of the process of reintegration: the sinner confesses and recognizes his guilt (v. 3), asking insistently to be purified or "cleansed" (vv. 2, 9, 10, 17) so as to proclaim the divine praise (v. 15).

Purgatory is not a place but a condition of existence

4. In the New Testament Christ is presented as the intercessor who assumes the functions of high priest on the day of expiation (cf. Heb 5: 7; 7: 25). 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 (cf. Heb 9: 23-26, especially, v. 24). He is both priest and "victim of expiation" for the sins of the whole world (cf. 1 Jn 2: 2).

Jesus, as the great intercessor who atones for us, will fully reveal himself at the end of our life when he will express himself with the offer of mercy, but also with the inevitable judgment 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" (Col 3: 14).

5. In following the Gospel exhortation to be perfect like the heavenly Father (cf. Mt 5: 48) 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" (1 Thes 3: 12f.). Moreover, we are invited to "cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit" (2 Cor 7: 1; cf. 1 Jn 3: 3), 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 does not indicate 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 (cf. Ecumenical Council of Florence, *Decretum pro Graecis*: DS 1304; Ecumenical Council of Trent, *Decretum de iustificatione*: DS 1580; *Decretum de purgatorio*: DS 1820).

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 (cf. Heb 9: 27), 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" (Mt 22: 13 and 25: 30)" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 48).

6. One last important aspect which the Church's tradition has always pointed out should be repropounded today: the *dimension of "communio"*. Those, in fact, 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 (cf. CCC, n. 1032).

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 other 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.

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