

November A Time to Remember

A Catholic Understanding of Eternal Life (3)

November is the month we remember the faithful departed. Last week, I wrote about the Mystery of Death. Today, I write about the Mystery of Eternal Life.

Some years ago I was at a wake, and the family was talking about the deceased. I did not know the family very well, and I knew even less about their faith. But at one point, I listened to their conversation. While the family was clearly distraught about the death of their mother, they were consoled by the assurance she was already enjoying eternal life. They were consoled by the thought she was now enjoying her evening cocktail once more with her husband who had predeceased her! They imagined mom and dad, reunited again, enjoying their evening martini.

As I thought about this conversation, two things struck me. First, the family had some kind of faith in eternal life; they did not believe death was the end of life. Second, their understanding of eternal life, or at least the way they expressed it, was very much like this life. As they understood eternal life, heaven is a place where we continue to do what we are already doing.

So what do we mean by eternal life? What do we believe in? What are we hoping for? To be sure we cannot answer these questions perfectly because we have not yet experienced eternal life. It will only be when we experience eternal life that we will understand what it is. And even then we will not know it completely since it will be ever new. But there are some things we do know through our Catholic faith.

First, Jesus has already entered into the fullness of this eternal life through his resurrection from the dead. When God raised Jesus from the dead, God brought him into the fullness of his own life. Resurrection life, then, is eternal life. But what do we mean by the resurrection of the dead? What does it mean to say God raised Jesus from the dead? What does it mean to say God will raise us from the dead?

Second, it is important not to confuse resurrection from the dead with resuscitation from the dead. If resurrection from the dead means resuscitation from dead, then we would die again. Resuscitation is simply a return to our old way of life. The people at the wake service I mentioned above gave the impression their mother had returned to her former way of life. She was now having evening cocktails in heaven with her husband as she did in the past. But if resurrection is not a matter of returning to our old way of life, what is it?

St. Paul describes resurrection life in 1 Corinthians 15 as *transformation*. At the resurrection of the dead we will be changed and transformed. Our earthly body will become what St. Paul calls a *spiritual body* because it will be transformed by the power of God's Holy Spirit. At the moment of resurrection, we will enter into a new way of being that we cannot even imagine—we will enter into the very life of God. At the resurrection of the dead, St. Paul assures us, we shall be like the risen Christ.

So what is heaven? Well, it's not a place out there. No matter how far we travel in the cosmos, even if we go to its very edge, we are not going to find a "place" called heaven. Nor will we find a "place" called heaven outside or beyond the cosmos. Heaven is life with and in God. When God raises us from the dead as he raised Jesus from the dead, we will enter into the fullness of God's life. We will enter into a new way of being that we will not understand until we

enter into it. And even then, this new way of being will always be new because it is the very life of God.

I believe in eternal life because I believe in resurrection life. I believe in God who raised Jesus from the dead and so will raise us from the dead. Exactly how this new life will come about, I do not know. What it will be like, I do not know. But I know it will be the fullness of life because in God's way, in God's time, I will experience the very life of God.

This life has already begun for us who believe in Christ; and it will come to its fruition when God raises us from the dead. *Father Matera*