

Catholic Catechism: Handout 3

Here is another peek at *Love That Never Ends: a Key to the Catechism*, by DiNoia, O'Donnell, Cessario and Cameron, Our Sunday Visitor Press, 1996.

God is perfectly integrated. God is perfectly simple. God is perfect. We are incompletely integrated. We are complex. We are imperfect. On our way to God, we must integrate more perfectly. We must simplify. We must perfect our powers. The Catechism helps us towards perfection. Jesus awaits our decision to follow Him. Then he urges us on. Finally, if we agree, He carries us to perfection. He created us, invites us, and takes us to Himself. This unified vision of the Trinity creating, redeeming and sanctifying, suffuses every page.

Therefore “The Catechism teaches us that the last things can only be understood in perspective of the first. The end of the world, and of each particular human life, must be seen as the consummation of the divine plan to save us through the Incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. First and last, the divine invitation to embrace communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and with one another in them, frames and suffuses human history from the beginning to the end of the time. Resurrection of the body, life everlasting, particular judgment, heaven, purgatory, hell, last judgment, and the hope of a new heaven and a new earth, each of these elements in the Catholic doctrine of the last things must be viewed in the light of the invitation to Trinitarian communion that comes to us through Christ.” 43

Everything makes sense through revelation in the flesh: Christ. So He is first and last. God loves us into existence so we can freely love Him. Loving Him unites us with Him. As Jesus shows us, He is Three. He is a community. Perfect being is perfectly One Trinity. You say: “I don't understand that”. Right. However, you do love to try to understand That, and you love to love That. Each step along the way to God makes more sense. Each effort to understand expands your understanding. Each decision to love increases your love. This is the divine dynamic, perfect in the Trinity, imperfect in you but perfecting.

By creating you, God invites you to join Him in perfect love. By becoming man, Jesus reveals in His flesh all these mysteries. They surpass comprehension, but they continually improve our understanding, if we lovingly contemplate them. The Trinity is Infinity. So we finite creatures never exhaust It. But we love to expand into It. Like a drop in the ocean, we love to be with, in, and of Trinity. As soon as we drop the false desire to encompass Trinity, we let Trinity encompass us. Then we really belong, and bliss flows unhindered.

Unhindered means eternity, for an end would hinder our bliss. Somehow, we realize that we are eternal in the ongoing direction. True, we are not eternal back into the past. But once we exist, we exist forevermore. Our eternal existence is the perfection of our present existence. In this perfecting process, we remain bodily. Therefore, we who are our bodies now will be our bodies then. Christ shows us how by His resurrection. Jesus put it well: “In my Father's house there are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you”, Jn 14:2

Our authors express it more explicitly. “Our personhood is constituted by an essential unity of body and soul. Contrary to what sometimes masquerades as Christian thought on these matters, the body is not an accidental or disposable appurtenance to the real personal identity located in the soul. Our bodiliness is essential to the identity of the persons we are. For this reason, the Catholic doctrine about the life to come can never be expressed solely in terms of the immortality of the soul, but must always include the resurrection of the body. For this reason as well, the notions of the reincarnation of souls in human and subhuman form, and of the divine absorption of souls, must be judged to be utterly alien to authentic Christian faith.” 43-44

Death is horrible, absurd in many ways. The closest understanding we have is that it is the penalty for sin. “The wages of sin are death”, Rom 6:23. But Jesus paid these wages, so He overcame death. The mark of His victory was His resurrection. Easter is our greatest feast, because it celebrates His greatest accomplishment. As we die in Christ, we shall rise with Him. Our resurrection will take longer than 3 days, but we shall rise in the last days to be perfected in Christ forever. This is heaven, perfection in Trinitarian bliss.

“Life in Christ is life lived in view of the fullness of Trinitarian communion. As our Holy Father taught in *Veritatis Splendor*, and the Catechism clearly states in its treatment of the beatitudes and commandments in Part Three, the moral life is our divinely enabled, free embrace of the ultimate Good of Trinitarian communion. In growing conformity to Christ according to the pattern of His passion, death and resurrection, our struggle to choose the good in every occasion of action, and in extended patterns of action, contributes to our developing fitness for the enjoyment of this Trinitarian communion.”

The Catechism says: heaven is the “perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity... communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, the angels and the blessed” (1024). Such is our high destiny. We can’t attain it on our own. But Jesus lifts us to it, if we agree, and cooperate. The alternative is ghastly: hell. “But a life of mortal sin and persistent unrepentance could render a person permanently *unfit* for the enjoyment of this communion. If this condition perdures to the point of death and beyond – if in the words of the Catechism, a person by his own free choice dies ‘in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God’s merciful love’ (1033), then he remains separated from Him forever. God neither predestines nor consigns anyone to hell. Rather, hell is the natural consequence of a life lived apart from God. This terrible suffering of hell consists in the realization that, over the course of a lifetime, one has come, not to love, but to hate one’s true good, and thus to be radically unfit to enjoy that Good. It is this pain of loss that is central to the Catholic understanding of hell. Imagine the predicament of one who both knows that God is the great love of his life, and that he has turned irreversibly away from his love. That is what hell is.” 45

Some theologians are so horrified by hell that they argue for universal salvation. Hans Urs von Balthasar is the most recent major theologian to think that hell is empty.

True, all sin is washed away in Christ's blood. True, no sin can withstand Jesus. But each person chooses freely to accept Christ's salvation. Jesus will not save you without your free cooperation. So hell's an option. This scares the hell out of us, and urges us to heaven.

Our personal experiences include lots of sin. How can we escape all that muck? We cannot appear before God stained by sin. Purgatory is the most reasonable option for people who choose God, but remain imperfect. Our authors say: "Since no one who is not fit can actually enjoy the ultimate good of Trinitarian communion, the Catechism teaches that all 'who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation ... but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven' (1030). According to Catholic tradition, God has provided for this interval of further purification in purgatory ... In effect, purgatory is a temporarily deferred enjoyment of promised bliss. The souls in purgatory ... are assured of the bliss of full Trinitarian communion, but know that they must be completely purified in order to enjoy it." 45-46

Which of these three final states will we attain at death? Some people who let Christ perfect them here below, will go directly to heaven. Some people, we hope none, have perfectly rejected Christ, and will go directly to hell. Some people will fall short of heaven, and be in purgatory for a while. It's easy to imagine that the majority will pause in purgatory. But they're bound for glory, just momentarily delayed. When each person dies, his consistent choices determine his condition. This is the personal judgment. This particular judgment is not visible, but if it were, we would see the just-now-dead person appearing before Jesus. Jesus judges that person's heart-felt and reiterated choice. Is it for God or against? If it is for God, is it perfectly for Him? If so, Jesus welcomes the person into heaven. If it's not perfect, but for God, Christ says "wait in purgatory." If it's perfectly against God, Jesus weeps for the soul's loss, but the person hates the Trinity, and is therefore in hell.

Personal judgment is a good way to picture our fate as individuals. But throughout life we interact with other people. Our social acts demand a social judgment. "With Christ's return in glory, 'the good each person has done or failed to do during his earthly life' (1039) will be revealed, as well as the 'ultimate meaning of the whole work of creation, and of the entire economy of salvation ... the marvelous ways by which [God's] Providence led everything toward its final end' (1040). The end of time, then, is not just an ending, but a consummation. The world, and human beings with it, do not simply come to an end. They rather reach the end, arrive at the goal, for which God created all things." 46 The world does not whimper away, it ends with a bang.

Such a grand finale intrigues us. We want to know when it will occur. The Catechism quotes *Gaudium et Spes*: "We know neither the moment of the consummation of the earth and of men, nor the way in which the universe will be transformed. The form of this world, distorted by sin, is passing away, and we are taught that God is preparing a new dwelling and a new earth in which righteousness

dwells, in which happiness will fill and surpass all the desires of peace arising in the hearts of men” (1048; GS 39)

“Thus it is that for the Christian, anxiety yields to faith, hope and love as the transition to the new millennium is marked, not by fear and suspense, but by celebration and thanksgiving. As Pope John Paul II stated in his recent apostolic letter on preparation for the year 2000, this is the time ‘to confirm the Christians of today in their *faith* in God, who has revealed himself in Christ, sustain their *hope*, which reaches out in expectation of eternal life, and rekindle their *charity* to active service to their brothers and sisters.’” Christ from first to last.