



Theology Corner

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Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“What is Heaven?”

This is obviously a very loaded question, but I think it is something that we have to talk about since it is the very destination for which we were created. Since this is the goal of all humanity, then it seems like this is something we should know about! In the previous article, I briefly discussed purgatory and mentioned that this is a state in which our souls receive purification for the “holiness necessary to enter the joys of heaven” (CCC, 1030). But what exactly do we mean by heaven? What does the Church mean when she teaches that we were created for heaven? Those of you who have read these bulletin articles with any regularity will know that I often use the terms ‘heaven’ and ‘beatific vision’ interchangeably. The reason for this is because while *heaven* is a more common name for union with God, the term *beatific vision* is more theologically precise since what heaven refers to is a state in which we see God face to face, bringing us eternal happiness. There is a quote often cited by St. Irenaeus which says, “The glory of God is man fully alive.” For some reason, though, the last part of what he says is typically left out. The rest of sentence says, “...but the life of man is the vision of God.” What St. Irenaeus is saying here is that human beings are fulfilled in all ways when we see God face to face in heaven. Why? Because as human beings endowed with an intellect and will, we are satiated in two ways: when we gain knowledge, it satisfies the intellect and when we receive what is good, it satisfies the will.

Now, whatever is true and good that we experience in this world is participated. This means that anything true and good in the world is not the *source* of truth and goodness but are things that derive their truth and goodness from God himself. The fact that these things are not the source of truth and goodness, is why we are never truly satisfied with any created thing. You can possess multiple mansions, the most beautiful cars, millions of dollars, fame, and all the glory the world can give you, yet you will still be unsatisfied. Why? Because these things are means to an end -- not the end itself. So, if we treat these things as though they were the end itself, we are led into sadness and perhaps even depression because we despair at the idea that there is no such thing as real happiness. But those of us who have heard the Gospel know that there is such a thing. Happiness can be had in this life inasmuch as we know the truth and partake of true goods in the limited way that we are able in this life. We can also experience another level of still incomplete happiness when we live a life of grace through the sacraments as they help us to live a life of virtue in charity! But the desire for happiness will *never* be quenched until we see God face to face in heaven. In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine says: “You have made us for yourself (i.e. to be united with him in heaven) and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” St. Paul tells us, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall understand fully even as I have been fully understood.” (1 Cor 13:12). We see here that heaven is likened to understanding as our intellect *sees* God face to face. Keep in mind that this is not a *bodily* vision, since bodily eyes see bodily things. Rather, heaven is a *spiritual* vision where we see with the ‘mind’s eye’, so to speak.

St. John also tells us, “...we are God’s children now; it does not yet appear what shall be, but we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” (1 Jn 3:2). We see here that St. John explains like St. Paul that, in heaven, we shall see God as he is. This means that we will behold God’s essence; this is something that we cannot ever fully know in this life because this is beyond our comprehension. We can know things about him such as his existence and some things that have been revealed to us in the scriptures, but this is still just a “dim” understanding. For this reason, theologians sometimes refer to heaven as the vision of the divine essence, since it is this spiritual vision of God *as he truly is* that satisfies our innermost being. Our intellect has obtained all the knowledge that it can have by the light of glory, and our will desires nothing more because we have obtained that for which we were made. This is why heaven is eternal bliss. We will have at last reached union with what we have always desired. Lastly, we see St. John mention that we “shall be like him.” This is because when we are united with God in the beatific vision, we become one with him and share in his divinity in the most complete way possible. While we do not become God himself, we participate supernaturally in his eternal truth and love and “in contemplation of God in his heavenly glory” (CCC, 1028) forever and ever.