



March 2002

Maronite Monks of Adoration

Most Holy Trinity Monastery ✦ Petersham MA 01366-9725

The Art of Dying Well

God's will is that one day each and every one of us be with Him in heaven. This is the whole purpose of our existence and the goal which we should be striving to attain. Therefore, it is good to turn our minds and hearts heavenward and to reflect on the last things: death and the particular judgement; heaven, hell and purgatory; and all that pertains to the second coming, that is, the resurrection of the dead, the last judgement and the new heaven and the new earth.

Some of these things we can come to know by reason itself; for instance, that death is the separation of the soul from the body, that the soul exists after death, even that there is some sort of judgement and reward and punishment after death for good and evil done during this life. We can come to know these things without revelation—so that no one can say on judgement day, "I did not know!" However, God has revealed much more to us than this—great mysteries beyond the scope of our reasoning—in order to enkindle our longing for the good things He has in store for us and even instill in us a holy fear of the bad things that await us if we do not live rightly.

Death and Dying

Death, as we said, is the separation of the soul from the body. The body returns to dust, but the soul continues to exist. Yet, this separation is only for a time since body and soul will once again be reunited at the resurrection of the dead.

Everybody dies, but not everybody dies well. In the Middle Ages one finds the beautiful tradition of the *Ars Moriendi*; that is, little manuals on how to die well. This is a very Christian idea. Death is not meaningless; rather, in Christ, death falls within God's plan of salvation. We should "use" death well, always remembering the words of our catechism: "Death puts an end to human life as the time to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ" (CCC #1021). Thus, when we are dying, it is our last chance to turn to God. At that time let us ask His mercy, offer up our lives to Him, receive the Sacraments (or at least desire them, if they are not available to us) and make acts of faith, hope and love. We can pray: "Jesus, I trust in You ... My God and My All ... Let me never be separated from you!" We should always be prepared for death so that we may die well.

The Particular Judgement

We know by faith that, after death, the soul will be judged immediately. This is called the particular judgement for the soul stands alone before God to be held accountable for what she did or did not do in her life. God knows the truth and the soul knows. Excuses are neither conceivable nor possible. At this time the soul receives an eternal reward or eternal punishment.

Hell

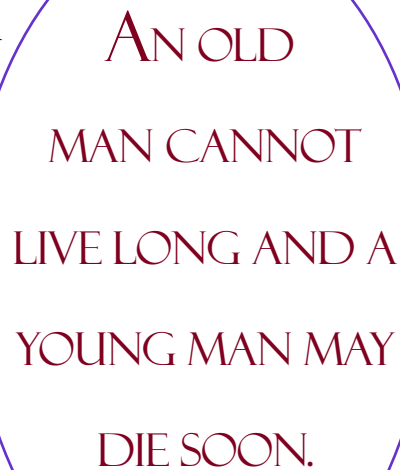
A soul judged worthy of hell goes there immediately and forever. There is no delay and there is no end. This is not only God's justice, but also His mercy since such a soul would not be happy in heaven. In fact, such a soul does not want heaven. By her own free choice, she has chosen a path that has formed her—formed her fit for hell and unfit for heaven. Such a soul could not stand heaven. If you do not believe this, consider how much Satan and his demons hate God and His saints. The same is true of the damned. Did they not despise God and His saints while yet on earth? Why should they want to live in heaven ... and forever! If you imagine all the worst things in the world like plagues or war or concentration camps or any physical, mental or emotional suffering, hell is even worse than all of this rolled into one! It is the ultimate civilization of hate, suffering and

despair—the natural consequence of turning away from God and His love.

Heaven and Purgatory

A soul judged worthy of heaven may go there immediately or may have to undergo first the purification that is purgatory. Purgatory is the finishing polish of a soul still "rough around the edges." Purgatory makes one perfectly fit for heaven; thereby insuring that heaven will be "heaven" both for the soul and all the others there as well. Purgatory is only for a time. It is a gateway to heaven. While it is a great mercy from God; nevertheless, we must not forget that our goal is heaven. If we can bypass purgatory (e.g. by doing our purgatory here on earth), all the better. So let us aim high!

What can we say about heaven? "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard nor has it so much as dawned on man what God has prepared for those who love Him" (1 Cor 2:9). Take the best in the world—light and love, mountains and music, whatever is best in the world—and it still falls short of the reality of heaven, the ultimate civilization of love, happiness and peace. As the catechism says: "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



AN OLD
MAN CANNOT
LIVE LONG AND A
YOUNG MAN MAY
DIE SOON.

Old English Proverb

and fulfillment of the deepest human longing, the state of supreme, definitive happiness” (CCC #1024).

The Resurrection of the Dead

Thus far, we have considered death, the particular judgement and the soul in heaven, hell and purgatory. What about the body? We said before that the body will be reunited with the soul at the resurrection of the dead. At the second coming of Christ, all the dead will rise, that is, bodies will be reunited to their souls, reformed anew by God’s almighty power in virtue of the Resurrection of Christ, to share either in the reward of heaven or the punishment of hell as they shared in the good and in the evil done during this life.

The Last Judgement

The last judgement, unlike the particular judgement, will involve everyone. All will be revealed and made known, and all will be set right. As the catechism says: “In the presence of Christ who is Truth itself, 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 ...” (CCC #1039). And again, “Then through his Son Jesus Christ, [the Father] will pronounce the final word on all of history. We shall know the ultimate meaning of the whole work of creation and of the entire economy of salvation and understand

the marvellous ways by which his providence led everything towards its final end. The last judgement will reveal that God’s justice triumphs over all the injustices committed by his creatures and that God’s love is stronger than death” (CCC #1040).

A New Heaven and a New Earth

And after the last judgement? The new heaven and the new earth! Just as man is transformed soul and body so too the material world is to be transformed (as the catechism says, quoting St. Irenaeus) “so that the world itself, restored to its original state, facing no further obstacles, should be at the service of the just,’ sharing their glorification in the risen Jesus Christ” (CCC #1047). And again, quoting the Second Vatican Council: “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” (CCC #1048). What more can be said? Read St. John, *Apocalypse* chapter 21-22:1-5.

So we see that we are called to great and marvellous things! Let us live a life worthy of our calling so that one day we may hear the voice of our Lord and King saying, “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Mt. 25:34).