

Meditation 2: Death is not the last word.

Dear pilgrims,

Eternity concerns us all. God created us to make us participants in his blessed life. This purpose gives our life all its meaning. Even death can be transformed into a satisfying work. What happens to the harmony between body and soul at the time of death? Should we neglect the body which tends to weaken over time and seek to preserve the soul which can grow until the last day?

Major ideas

- Why are we on earth? What does God want from us?
- The immortality of the human soul is a gift of God's grace.
- The moment of our death is decisive after the daily battle that we will have waged throughout our lives against sin
- The incessant curiosity of men about what is after death. How do pagans answer this question?
- The Church, mother and mistress, gives some details to know about the particular judgment.
- It is a blessing to think about your death today rather than distracting your mind from this important moment in our lives.



Eternity concerns us all

Let's imagine a father or mother confiding in close friends: "At the moment with our older teenagers, we are going through real hell at home."

Now, let's imagine a sixty-year-old from Neuilly in discussion with her hairdresser: "We bought a small shack on the Île de Ré with my husband, do you know the Île de Ré? It's quite charming, a real little corner of paradise!"

Let's now finish with an interview with a rugby player after the final whistle: "We are happy to have deserved this victory. After a fairly difficult start to the season, the points gained by this win do us good. We have the feeling of coming out of Purgatory a little."

Hell. Heaven. Purgatory. These three realities which belong to the Catholic Faith and to revelation have ended up being part of our cultural and civilizational heritage...

In our daily lives, we do not hesitate to use these evocative images linked to our inevitable fate: death. These images speak to us, and that's normal. Because deep down, our human nature senses, in a more or less confused way, that eternity concerns it.

Why did God create man?

The first question of the Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church gives us the elements of an answer: "What is God's plan for man? Infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, God, in a design of pure goodness, freely created man to make him a participant in his blessed life."

As a creature, the human being is in absolute dependence. He is not a necessary being, but only a *de facto* being. As our pilgrimage begins, I suggest that we reflect together on the great truths, unfortunately so forgotten, of our eternal destiny.

If men were necessary beings, then they would always have been, they would be required. But one day we were born, one day we began. Which allows us to see, upon reflection, that for a long time the world did without us... The place we occupy, on the scale of centuries, appears at first glance to be tiny and insignificant. Soon we will cease to be and the earth will continue to turn...

In other words: that little that we are, we did not give it to ourselves. Our body, our soul, the characteristics of our family, our roots, our temperament, our health: we chose nothing at all. A lot was given to us at the start. God had no need of us and it was therefore not for this reason, so pleasing to our self-esteem, that He created us.

“Lord, why did you create me?” there it is, the great cry of man! At the dawn of our pilgrimage, this inner question has every reason to become a compass. Its answer will indicate our pole star, and guide our wounded nature.

God created us to communicate his Heaven to us, to bring us into his Paradise. He called us into existence because He aspires, with a design of pure goodness, to exercise His liberality in us. What the catechism teaches is thus a pat on the shoulder, the one that supports, encourages and consoles. It is up to us to receive it as such and to deserve our Salvation. Only then, in the eternity of Paradise, will we be able, for our greatest bliss, to participate in the divine life of God through adoration, praise and service of his glory.

The immortality of the human soul

“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

In the Catechism of the Catholic Church no. 366, the Church teaches that each spiritual soul is immediately created by God – it is not “produced” by the parents; it also teaches us that it is immortal: it does not perish during its separation from the body in death, and will unite again with the body during the final resurrection.

The soul, which is a spiritual reality, is therefore immortal: there is a life for it, after the life of this earth.

But man is not a soul: he is body and soul, he is spirit and matter. Because of this matter, death – which let us remember is the separation of the immortal soul from our mortal body – is philosophically natural for man, because it is normal, in itself, that matter disintegrates after a brief time. And yet, when man entered the world, into the earthly Paradise, Adam and Eve were created immortal by God: they were not to die. This original immortality of man was not a property of his nature but a gift of grace.

However, what was a gift that God had given to our nature was turned upside down: Adam and Eve, by committing the first sin, brought death into the world. Through our first parents, we have all sinned. Like a bad note in a musical harmony, the universality of sin has led to general chaos. Disharmony entered the world because of original sin. And this is why death is now a punishment for man, since we have lost our immortality because of disobedience.

The decisive moment of our death

We know the words of Saint Thérèse of the child Jesus: “I do not die, I enter into Life.” For the true disciple of Christ, death does not have the same meaning as for the worldly person, because by dying on the Cross and rising from the dead, Jesus transformed the meaning of Christian death: it was a dead end, it becomes a passage to Heaven. It is like the actualization

of his baptism: having “died with Christ” in a sacramental way through baptism, the Christian is called to die to sin every day more: “Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.”

This spiritual combat in the face of the challenges of existence, and the prospect of death are both opportunities to configure ourselves to Christ, who died and rose again for the redemption of our sins. Death, which is the ultimate penalty of sin, is thus transformed into a satisfying work if it is accepted and lived in union with the death of Christ.

For the baptized, death then becomes desirable, it becomes a good: the day of death becomes the *dies natalis*, the day of birth in Heaven: “For me, certainly, Life is Christ and dying represents a gain. I feel caught in this alternative: on the one hand, I have the desire to go away and be with Christ, which would be much preferable; but on the other hand, remaining in the flesh is more urgent for your good.”

It is no coincidence that the devil, “like a roaring lion, prowls around us, seeking whom he can devour” strives to divert us, to distract us from the determining issue of our destiny. More than ever, one of the tragedies of the postmodern world lies in one fact: the concealment of death.

Advertisements, social networks, television shows, government information campaigns, various live coaches... all address a large number of subjects: we are taught to eat fruit and vegetables, to play sports, to sleep well, to respect the planet, to sort our waste... But who has the real ambition to teach us how to truly “die well”? Who teaches us to prepare for death?

The question of death, anchored in the soul of every man, always ends up tormenting him, tormenting him. Also, failing to pose a religious reflection on the subject of eternal destiny, the media evoke the afterlife in a roundabout, heterodox way by resorting to sensational devices: the famous broadcasts on cheap channels, in the second part of the evening ... “Paranormal, normal”, “The psychics, are they telling the truth?” “They experienced death and came out of it”... All these shows use catchy titles to boost ratings. Far from answering men's existential questions, these documentaries or pseudo-investigations seek to awaken morbid curiosity.

In the past, generations were steeped in this idea of death. They all lived with death, even from a very young age. Three generations shared daily domestic life under the same roof. We watched over the dead, we watched the animals die. For everyone, there was not the shadow of a doubt that our lives would end one day, and we prepared for it with serenity.

Today, death is so hidden, so forgotten, that thinking about it seems suspicious, talking about it becomes curious, being confronted with it in those around us sometimes generates psychological fragilities that our elders did not know. Death, having become embarrassing, ends up paralyzing. “Hide this death that I cannot see...”

And yet, the metaphysical anxiety of eternity remains among our contemporaries, despite what the dominant culture tries to make us believe. Hence the importance of clearly proposing the Church's teaching on the afterlife.

Some details on the particular judgment

Death is the end of our earthly existence. This is the universal law of humanity: to enter eternity, one must die.

A much-circulated modern theory seeks to reassure us by affirming that after death, or in death, we could still choose God and renounce sin: this is the theory of the final option. But the danger of this theory is to remove the entire issue of earthly life, and the real capacity of man to choose God or to refuse him on this earth. Yet the Lord tells us clearly: after death, we will be judged by our works, those of the earth: it is now that I make the choice, today is the time of Salvation. Not tomorrow! At death, the time for merit and demerit ends. Everything is accomplished. The eternal scales at this moment carry out their weighing: it is the moment of particular judgment.

We can read in the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

“Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ. The New Testament speaks of judgment primarily in its aspect of the final encounter with Christ in his second coming, but also repeatedly affirms that each will be rewarded immediately after death in accordance with his works and faith. The parable of the poor man Lazarus and the words of Christ on the cross to the good thief, as well as other New Testament texts speak of a final destiny of the soul - a destiny which can be different for some and for others.

“Each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven - through a purification or immediately, - or immediate and everlasting damnation.

“At the evening of life, we shall be judged on our love.”

How can we conceive this particular judgment? A human judgment involves three things: the examination of the case, the pronouncement of the sentence, the application of it.

- The examination of the cause takes place instantly: it is a divine action instantly illuminating the state of the soul: its merits and its demerits, in an obvious manner which excludes any gray area and any discussion.
- The pronouncement of the sentence necessarily results from this, it is stated to the soul in that light by which the soul knows itself in its truth, reading in its conscience as in a book: *“No creature is hidden before God, but everything is bare and exposed in the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”* The soul cannot in any way contradict this judgment, because it knows that it is true.
- The application of the sentence is then immediate, it consists on the part of God in a command, and on the side of the soul in a movement towards the place of reward or punishment.

- Who is the author of the judgment? God himself (but the soul does not see God face to face, it is illuminated by him). Saint Thomas Aquinas specifies that Christ as man will also intervene in the particular judgment: “to make it more gentle” (indulgent).

- What is the timing? It is the very moment of death and, more precisely, the first moment of the life of the separated soul immediately immersed in this full light which controls its definitive fate.

- Thus, during the particular judgment, Christ's humanity will intervene even if it does not manifest itself. (While for the general judgment, it is Christ himself who judges). We will be judged according to the truth, we will be measured by it, and He is the Truth.

Conclusion

"We mortals are no less careful to bury the thoughts of death than to bury the dead themselves," affirmed the great preacher Bossuet. Let us therefore be careful not to dismiss the inexorable reality of our death out of hand!

"Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return," we hear from the mouth of the priest during the imposition of ashes at the opening of Lent. Ah if only we could keep this truth before the eyes of our soul throughout the year!

Every morning, we will benefit greatly from repeating this sentence to ourselves vocally. Kneeling at the foot of our bed, when getting up and going to bed, it will be greatly profitable to kiss our crucifix or the floor of our room as a sign of humility, saying: *"Remember that you are dust and that you will return to dust."*

Keeping ourselves ready, following the Scout motto "Semper Parati": this is the real challenge of our baptismal life.

It is no coincidence that, in the "Hail Mary," we ask the Blessed Virgin to accompany us at the hour of our death, since it is she who could save what remains to be saved.

In the evening of our lives, as we will often hear during this pilgrimage: "We will be judged on love," according to the opinion of Saint John of the Cross. The mystery of our eternal life can only be clarified by the light of our charity lived here on earth.