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Man Elevated to Share in the Divine Life

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The Beatific Vision



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The Beatific Vision

It is fitting that we conclude our reflections on the nature and destiny of man, which we have been pursuing in the last twenty-five talks, by examining the nature of heavenly beatitude. What is the essential bliss of heaven?

Pope Benedict has some beautiful and very profound reflections on heaven in his encyclical on Christian hope, *Spe Salvi*. He introduces the theme by reflecting on the older form of the rite of Baptism in which the parents ask for the gift of eternal life for their child:

First of all the priest asked what name the parents had chosen for the child, and then he continued with the question: “What do you ask of the Church?” Answer: “Faith”. “And what does faith give you?” “Eternal life”. According to this dialogue, the parents were seeking access to the faith for their child, communion with believers, because they saw in faith the key to “eternal life”. Today as in the past, this is what being baptized, becoming Christians, is all about: it is not just an act of socialization within the community, not simply a welcome into the Church. The parents expect more for the one to be baptized: they expect that faith, which includes the corporeal nature of the Church and her sacraments, will give life to their child—eternal life. Faith is the substance of hope. But then the question arises: do we really want this—to live eternally? Perhaps many people reject the faith today simply because they do not find the prospect of eternal life attractive. What they desire is not eternal life at all, but this present life, for which faith in eternal life seems something of an impediment. To continue living for ever—endlessly—appears more like a curse than a gift. Death, admittedly, one would wish to postpone for as long as possible. But to live always, without end—this, all things considered, can only be monotonous and ultimately unbearable.

One of the main points of Benedict’s encyclical is the existence of a crisis of hope in the modern world. So many of our contemporaries are not sufficiently attracted by the Christian hope of eternal life. Perhaps it has never been rightly presented to them. What is in fact the essence of eternal life?

False Answers to the Quest for Beatitude

Every human being seeks complete happiness, which we understand as possession of the complete good, or the fulfillment of all our upright aspirations. Nevertheless, although we naturally desire happiness, we do not naturally know the object or type of life that will give us happiness. That is, we do not naturally know what the blessed life consists in. Everyone is seeking happiness, but not everyone agrees on what it is. Many seek happiness in pleasure and the avoidance of pain; others in wealth;

others in fame, honor, or power; others in work; others in love; and others in virtue and friendship.

The question about the true nature of happiness is the most crucial question of human life, for the entire course of our lives depends on the answer. Hence the question about happiness is also the principal question of philosophy and catechesis. If we rightly recognize the nature of happiness, we can order our actions to it and devote our lives to realizing it. If we fail in identifying it, we shall waste our lives in chasing a mirage, ordering our actions to what actually causes misery. The greatest and most common error in human life is mixing up the means and the end. People seek mere means as if they were the end, and they treat the true end—knowing, loving, and praising God—as if it were a mere means to other more deeply desired ends.

Does Beatitude Consist in Money?

Many people seek the accumulation of money or material goods as the goal of life. Cardinal Newman gives a good description of this idolization of wealth: “All bow down before wealth. Wealth is that to which the multitude of men pay an instinctive homage. They measure happiness by wealth; and by wealth they measure respectability. . . . It is a homage resulting from a profound faith . . . that with wealth he may do all things.”¹

It is easy to see that it is completely impossible for happiness to be found in wealth or material goods, because such things are mere means, and beatitude is man’s final end. How could man’s happiness consist in attaining things that are lower than him? Furthermore, such goods are extremely finite, temporary, and cannot come with us at death.

Does Beatitude Consist in Honor?

Many men pursue honor or fame as the principal goal of their lives. This can be done in politics, in any career, in sports and entertainment, etc. Even those who do not excel in anything still often seek honor as an end, as can be seen in the importance they place on being well thought of by others, and their fear of losing popularity or respect. Cardinal Newman puts it well: “Wealth is one idol of the day and notoriety is a second. . . . Notoriety, or the making of a noise in the world—it may be called “newspaper fame”—has come to be considered a great good in itself, and a ground of veneration.”²

1 John Henry Cardinal Newman, “Saintliness the Standard of Christian Principle,” in *Discourses to Mixed Congregations* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1906) 5:89-90; quoted in CCC 1723.

2 Ibid.

However, it is impossible that happiness consist in being respected, for the esteem of others is notoriously fickle, temporary, and may be mistaken. Even when not mistaken it is but the *consequence* of some goodness in us, rather than that goodness itself.³ Furthermore, honor is not in us at all, but in the eyes of others. Beatitude, however, has to be something that intrinsically perfects the person who is blessed.

Does Beatitude Consist in Power?

Other men seek human happiness in the possession of power. Such power, in its most radical form, may consist in the supreme power of the state. In lesser forms, it may consist in power in the workplace or in a business, in the family, in local politics, etc.

However, it is completely impossible for happiness to consist in power, for it is the *means* to an end, as is money, and we are seeking the final end of human life. Power enables one to do things, and thus it is ordered to something other than itself. Furthermore, it is obvious that power can be very badly used and produce great misery. Hence it cannot be the final end.

Does Beatitude Consist in Pleasure?

The pagan philosopher Epicurus held that pleasure was the goal of life, and Epicurean ethics is based on this principle. Likewise, many of our contemporaries view beatitude as the amassing of pleasure. How can we respond to Epicurus?

First of all, there are two kinds of pleasure: sensible pleasures and rational or spiritual pleasures, which we could more specifically refer to as delight or joy. It is obvious that complete happiness cannot consist in bodily pleasures for many reasons. First of all, such pleasures are not proper to man, but common to the animals. Human beatitude cannot be a bestial thing—*pig heaven*—but must consist in something properly human.

Secondly, sensible pleasures are intrinsically temporary, and the satisfaction they afford always implies the momentary satiation of a previous hunger or thirst, which must return so as to be satisfied again, etc. No lasting fulfillment can come about in this way, and all men yearn for an *eternal* fulfillment. Third, every sensible pleasure is quite limited, whereas man yearns for an unlimited good.

Fourth, we recognize that not all pleasures are good for us, and that some pleasures lead us away from happiness. Indeed, some pleasures can even be abominable, as in a person who takes pleasure in sadism. Therefore, pleasure cannot be the final end and complete good, for all recognize that not all pleasures are good.

We can add the following consideration. The sense appetites cannot help but be motivated by the seeking

of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. This is because the senses do not perceive the good as such, but only the pleasurable good. However, the intellect grasps the good as such, and therefore the end of the rational appetite must be the *good as such*, and not merely the pleasurable good, or the pleasure that results from possession of the good.

Even on the spiritual level, pleasure or delight cannot be man's last end. Every pleasure is naturally a consequence of attaining some natural good, for God has associated pleasures with goods. God directs irrational animals to their ends by making those ends pleasurable, and thus attractive to them and naturally desired. The same thing happens in human life on the sensible level. We are attracted to the sensible goods necessary for human life by the pleasures that God has tied to the attainment of such goods, as in eating, sexual intercourse, recreation, and the like. The same is true in the higher rational pleasures, such as we find in family life, social communion, friendship, learning, contemplation, the exercise of virtue, etc.

Since the pleasure is for the sake of attracting us to the good, it is clear that beatitude must consist essentially in the possession of the good, rather than in the pleasure that follows from possessing the good. For example, no right-minded person would say that beatitude consists in the pleasure one gets from friendship, rather than in the friendship itself.⁴

Does Beatitude Consist in Virtue?

The Stoic philosophers of classical antiquity thought that human beatitude lay in the possession of moral and intellectual virtue. Clearly this view is far nobler than the others we have considered.

But is human virtue the supreme good? Clearly virtue is something finite and imperfect, and the human will naturally seeks the complete (infinite) and perfect good. Furthermore, the human heart seeks communion and interpersonal love: to be perfectly loved and to love. Clearly virtue alone cannot satisfy this highest aspiration of the heart.

Virtue can be considered to be man's end in a certain respect: insofar as it is an interior disposition that disposes man to gaining his extrinsic end, which is union with the infinite Good.

Beatitude Consists in Union with God

In order to clarify the object of beatitude, St. Thomas makes an important distinction between the object itself in which happiness consists, and the human operation by which we attain that object. He illustrates this with the example of an army. The external or objective final end of the army is victory, and the operation by which it attains this is its perfect order, virtue, and discipline in combat. Thus one can say that order and discipline are the ends of

³ See St. Thomas, *ST* I-II, q. 2, aa. 2-3.

⁴ See St. Thomas, *ST* I-II, q. 2, a. 6.

the army in a certain sense (as its virtuous interior disposition by which it attains its extrinsic end). However, victory is its final end, simply speaking.

Similarly, God alone is the essential object of heavenly beatitude. But we attain union with God through operations of our own soul. These must be our highest operations: knowing and loving. Thus man's heavenly beatitude must lie in the union of perfect knowledge and love of God. This is made possible through the beatific vision.

Natural and Supernatural Contemplation of God

In order to understand heavenly beatitude, it is necessary to reflect on various modes of contemplating God. Love follows on knowledge, for one cannot love what one does not know. Thus the levels of the love for God follow on various forms of knowing God.

There is a natural knowledge and love of God through creation. In this way a person without faith can know God's existence through reason and come to love Him as the Creator. It was in this way that philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle knew of God's existence and revered Him.

God's revelation makes possible an immensely higher knowledge of God through divine faith. Faith is a supernatural knowledge of God that is a participation in God's own knowledge of Himself. Faith makes possible the love of charity, by which we love God with a love of friendship not merely as Creator, but as Father and as Spouse.

Faith and charity are perfected further by the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit,⁵ by which the saints are enabled to penetrate further into what we believe through gifts of mystical union. This deeper penetration through wisdom and understanding makes possible a deeper act of love for God.

None of these forms of knowledge of God, however, enables us to know Him as He is. God still remains immeasurably above everything that we can know about Him through reason and faith.

The reason for this is that God infinitely transcends all His works. But our natural knowledge of God comes through creatures. Even God's revelation has to be presented to us through concepts that we draw from creatures. For example, it is revealed to us that God is Father, and that we are adopted as His sons in the Son, and that Christ is the Bridegroom and we are the brides. However, we have to understand fatherhood, sonship, and spousal relationships according to our human experience, which falls infinitely short of representing how God is Father, Son, and Spouse.

In order to understand how God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and how He will be the Bridegroom of the Church, we have to see God not through created concepts, but in

⁵ Wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, fortitude, piety, fear of the Lord.

Himself, as He is. This is the great promise of Christian hope: the beatific vision!

At the heart of the Gospel—the Good News brought by God Incarnate—there is the promise of a supernatural happiness that man would never dare to hope for or even imagine. Every human person naturally desires happiness, complete fulfillment of his natural inclinations and faculties, a fullness of being, truth, and love. Nevertheless, St. Paul tells us that the human desire for happiness has been outdone by the reality of the Gospel, according to which final human happiness will be realized in the vision of God face to face.

In 1 Corinthians 2:9 Paul writes: “*Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man, what things God hath prepared for them that love Him.*” This beautiful text is a paraphrase of Isaiah 64:4: “From the beginning of the world they have not heard, nor perceived with the ears: the eye hath not seen, O God, besides thee, what things thou hast prepared for them that wait for thee.”⁶

No created mind can imagine what it means to see God face to face in the beatific vision. It is infinitely greater than anything that we have seen or heard; it is infinitely greater than the natural desire for happiness written onto our heart. Hence St. Paul says that the glory that God has prepared for those who love Him has not even entered the heart of man, for it transcends every desire. It transcends desire because the vision of God is proper only to God. To see God is to be made like Him. Thus St. John writes: “We know, that, when He shall appear, we shall be like to Him, because *we shall see Him as He is*” (1 Jn 3:2).⁷

In the words of St. Augustine: “God is the goal of our desires, He is the one whom we shall see without end, whom we shall love without weariness, whom we shall glorify without fatigue.”⁸ The *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (362) states that eternal happiness is “the vision of God in eternal life in which we are fully ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Pt 1:4), of the glory of Christ and of the joy of the Trinitarian life.”

Since the perfect happiness that we hope for goes beyond anything that we experience in this life, it will always remain “unknown” to our experience and transcend anything we can imagine. For this reason “we do not know what we should pray for as we ought” (Rom 8:26). We could say that our knowledge of heaven is at best a “learned ignorance,” as St. Augustine says,⁹ for our hope transcends all expectation. As Benedict says, “All we know is that it is not this. . . . We do not know what we would really like; we do not know this ‘true life’; and yet we know that there must be

⁶ Douay-Rheims translation.

⁷ See also Titus 2:13: “awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.”

⁸ *City of God*, bk. 2, ch. 30, n. 1.

⁹ See St. Augustine, Ep. 130 *Ad Probam* 14, 25-15, 28: CSEL 44, 68-73, cited in SS11.

something we do not know towards which we feel driven” (*Spe salvi* 11).

Beatific Vision

Although it exceeds all comprehension of the mind, theologians seek to determine the essential features of the beatitude of heaven. The Catholic tradition identifies two fundamental aspects of this beatitude: perfect knowledge, which is an intellectual *seeing*, and perfect love of God. We are promised that we shall know God as He knows Himself, and that we shall love Him as He loves Himself.

The beatific vision is described by Dante in his *Paradiso* as a combination of beatific knowing, loving, and rejoicing: “Light intellectual replete with love, love of true goodness replete with joy; joy that transcends all sweetness.”¹⁰

Vision

Beatitude is first of all perfect knowledge of God, in which we shall know God not through our finite human concepts or discursive human reasoning, but through His own infinite Word, which is Christ. All the blessed shall know God through God the Word.

In the beatitudes, Jesus promises: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall *see God*” (Mt 5:8).¹¹ He is speaking not of a vision of the eye, but a perfect understanding of the mind and heart. Jesus also speaks of the beatific vision when He says in His priestly prayer (Jn 17:3): “And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.” Eternal life is knowing God perfectly, as He knows Himself.

St. Paul speaks of this in 1 Corinthians 13:9-12:

For [now] our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. . . . 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.

In this life we can only know God through finite concepts, which fall infinitely short of the divine reality. This is true not only of philosophical ideas of God, but also of the higher knowledge given by faith, and even of the highest mystical illuminations received by the saints and prophets. Even when Moses spoke with God on Mt. Sinai, it was still as “in a mirror dimly,” as it was for mystics like St. Teresa of Avila and St. Ignatius in their ecstasies. For this reason, John says that “no one has ever seen God” (Jn 1:18).

10 Canto 30, vv. 40-43: “Luce intellettuale, piena d’amore; amor di vero ben, pien di letizia; letizia che trascende ogne dolzore.”

11 See also Jn 17:3: “And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.” The beatific vision is not directly promised in the Old Testament. Nevertheless, many texts express the longing for the vision of God. For example, in Ps 16:15, the Psalmist says: “As for me, I shall behold thy face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with beholding thy form.”

In the beatific vision, on the other hand, all the dim veils of our limited concepts will be taken away, and we shall see God as He is through His own perfect Word. St. Paul emphasizes that we shall know God *even as we have been known by Him*. In other words, we shall know God without the mediation of any creature.

This is expressed in a beautiful verse of Psalm 36:9: “They shall be inebriated with the plenty of thy house; and thou shalt make them drink of the torrent of thy pleasure. For with thee is the fountain of life; and in thy light we shall see light.”¹² We shall know God’s intimate being and essence through the light of God’s own Word.

Love

A complementary aspect of beatitude is the perfection of the love of God. As the soul receives the perfect knowledge of God’s infinite Goodness and Glory, the soul is enabled to make a perfect return to God through love. Charity is defined by theologians like St. Thomas Aquinas as intimate friendship with God. Love of friendship consists in mutually willing the good for the other, and mutually giving oneself to the beloved.

In his priestly prayer before going to the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed for His disciples, “that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one” (Jn 17:22-23).

Jesus thus shows that the divine plan for mankind is that we be united—with the Trinity and with one another—with the *same love* with which the Father and the Son are united. This perfect communion of love will clearly be an essential part of the beatitude of heaven.

This doctrine is expressed in Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes* 24, the text most frequently quoted by John Paul II:

Indeed, the Lord Jesus, when He prayed to the Father, “that all may be one. . . as we are one” (John 17:21-22) opened up vistas closed to human reason, for He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God’s sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.

Just as the divine beatitude consists in a perfect communion in which the Father and Son ineffably give themselves to each other through the Holy Spirit, who is the divine Gift, so too the beatitude of the created person is to be completed in the total gift of self to God and to neighbor.

Already here on earth, everyone can recognize that the truest happiness we can have in this life is to be found when we give ourselves most completely to God and neighbor. For example, the truest happiness of marriage is when the spouses give themselves most completely to one another and to their children.

12 Douay-Rheims version, in which it is numbered Ps 35:9-10.

In heaven, the blessed will be able to give themselves perfectly and eternally back to God through the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son as their mutual love. Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as the “Gift” of God. The Holy Spirit is the divine Gift, because He proceeds as Love, and it is proper to love to make a gift of oneself to the beloved. By receiving the Holy Spirit, the blessed are enabled to perfectly give themselves back to God as sons in the Son, so that they can cry “Abba, Father.”¹³ Furthermore, having received the divine Word through the beatific vision, the blessed are able to give themselves back to God enriched by the gift of God Himself. St. John of the Cross expresses this in his work, *Living Flame of Love*:

Since God gives himself with a free and gracious will, so too the soul (possessing a will more generous and free the more it is united with God) gives to God, God himself in God; and this is a *true and complete gift of the soul to God*. She is conscious there that God is indeed her own and that she possesses him by inheritance, with the right of ownership, as his adopted child through the grace of his gift of himself. Having him for her own, she can give him and communicate him to whomever she wishes. Thus she gives him to her Beloved, who is the very God who gave himself to her. By this donation she repays God for all she owes him, since she willingly gives as much as she receives from him.¹⁴

Thus the blessed are enabled to give, with the gift of themselves, God the Son back to God the Father through God the Holy Spirit.

This means that the blessed in heaven will share in the Trinitarian life, which consists in the eternal generation of the Son through the divine act of God’s self-knowing, and the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit through the eternal love between Father and Son. We shall be drawn into this Trinitarian life, because we shall receive the divine Word in us from the Father, and we shall receive the divine Love from the Father and the Son, by which we shall be enabled to love God as He loves Himself, returning ourselves to Him.

This Trinitarian dimension to beatitude is also taught by St. Thomas Aquinas. He teaches that just as the divine processions are the exemplar principles of creation, so they are likewise the principles of the perfect return of rational creatures to their Source. It is fitting that the return to God be realized through the same exemplar principle by which they were brought forth. This theme, which came

to St. Thomas through Pseudo-Dionysius, is beautifully set forth as follows:

In the going forth of creatures from the first principle there is found a certain circular movement or return, in that everything returns to its end in that from which it took its beginning. And thus it is necessary that the return to the end be through that principle from which it was brought forth. Since, as was said above, the procession of the divine persons is the exemplar of the production of creatures . . . , so also the same procession is the exemplar of their return to the end. Since we were created through the Son and the Holy Spirit, so likewise we are joined through them to the final end.¹⁵

St. Thomas is saying that there is a circular movement in creation, by which the creature is meant to be rejoined to its Creator. This return is realized by the same principle by which the creature was brought forth. The principle of our creation is the procession of the divine Persons. Therefore, it is fitting that the principle of reunion with our source also be through the same procession of the divine Persons: the generation of the Word and the procession of the Spirit of Love. This would seem to imply that the rational creature reaches perfect beatitude through the divinized operation of intellect and will together. We return to our source by mysteriously participating in the two divine processions through beatific knowledge—seeing the Father through the Word—and beatific love, giving ourselves back to God through and with the Holy Spirit. In this way the Trinitarian image of God in the soul is brought to perfect likeness.¹⁶

In other words, the divinization of the soul in glory produces within her the perfect image of the Trinity, as she receives the Word from the Father in the beatific vision, and, on the basis of that vision, breathes forth Love for the Father and Son in and with the Holy Spirit. Since the Holy Spirit is the inter-Trinitarian Gift,¹⁷ it is fitting that the divinization of the soul in glory, by which she is fully conformed to the Holy Spirit, should enable the soul to make a perfect gift of self to God.¹⁸

Furthermore, as St. John of the Cross explains, the beauty of this gift of self is that it includes the Beloved. When the lover has been enriched by the beloved, then his gift of self back to the beloved involves giving also all that he has received. To make the gift of oneself to God means returning to God the gift of God’s very Self that He has given to us in Christ and the Holy Spirit.

13 See Gal 4:5; Rom 8:15.

14 *Living Flame of Love*, stanza 3, section 78, in *Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publ., 1979), 641 (I have modified the pronouns in the translation). See also *Living Flame*, stanza 3, no. 80, p. 642: “This is the great satisfaction and contentment of the soul, to see that it is giving to God more than it is in itself and is worth in itself, with that same divine light and divine warmth that is given to it. This is caused in the next life by the light of glory, and in this life by most enlightened faith.”

15 St. Thomas, *In I Sent.*, d. 14, q. 2, a. 2.

16 See *ST I*, q. 93, a. 7-8.

17 See John 4:10.

18 See John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, no. 7: “Being a person means striving towards self-realization (the Council text speaks of self-discovery), which can only be achieved “through a sincere gift of self”. The model for this interpretation of the person is God himself as Trinity, as a communion of Persons. To say that man is created in the image and likeness of God means that man is called to exist “for” others, to become a gift.”

The Eucharist most perfectly reveals this aspect of self-donation. Christ gives Himself to us in the Eucharist so that we can return Him to the Father in the Holy Spirit together with the gift of ourselves, which has been joined to Christ's gift of self—that is, joined to Christ's sacrifice. As *Lumen gentium* teaches: "Taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice, which is the source and summit of the whole Christian life, they offer the Divine Victim to God, and offer themselves along with It."¹⁹

Delight

As a consequence of seeing God face to face, the blessed will rejoice with an eternal joy or delight. Joy or delight is analyzed by philosophers as the emotion produced in us when we rest in the attainment of what we love and desire. Joy is thus the fruit of resting in the possession of the good that is loved.

The joy of a true lover lies in seeing that the beloved has every good thing, for love of friendship consists in willing the good for the beloved, giving oneself to him, and rejoicing in his goodness. The blessed who love God with all their hearts, minds, and souls, will thus rejoice eternally to see God. This joy will consist in seeing the infinite glory of God and rejoicing that He is who He is, that He has such an infinite glory and goodness, that He has loved us to the end and given Himself completely to us, and enabled us to love Him back with His own love, accepting our gift of self to Him. At the Last Supper, Jesus spoke of this joy to His disciples: "I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" (Jn 16:22).

Eternity

As God's beatific knowledge and love is eternal and out of time, so the blessed in heaven will also share in God's eternity. People often think that an eternity in heaven would be infinitely boring because they try to imagine eternity as an endless extension of time without end. God's eternity, however, does not simply mean that God has no beginning or end. God's eternity refers to the fullness of God's being, which is a simultaneous possession of all good without any shadow of change.²⁰ God is not in time because time is a measure of change, and there is no room for change where the absolute fullness of Being, Truth, and Goodness is present.

¹⁹ LG 11. See also *Sacrosanctum concilium*, no. 48: "Offering the immaculate victim, not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, they should learn to offer themselves"; Pius XII, encyclical *Mediator Dei*, no. 98: "In order that the oblation by which the faithful offer the divine Victim in this sacrifice to the heavenly Father may have its full effect, it is necessary that the people add something else, namely, the offering of themselves as a victim."

²⁰ Boethius gave the classic definition of God's eternity: "Eternity is the simultaneously whole and perfect possession of unending life" (*Consolation of Philosophy*, bk. 5, section 6).

The eternity of heaven thus means that the blessed will enter into God's simultaneous possession of the fullness of all life, truth, and love. Benedict attempts to describe this in one of the most marvelous passages of his encyclical on hope:

To imagine ourselves outside the temporality that imprisons us and in some way to sense that eternity is not an unending succession of days in the calendar, but something more like the supreme moment of satisfaction, *in which totality embraces us and we embrace totality*—this we can only attempt. It would be like plunging into the ocean of infinite love, a moment in which time—the before and after—no longer exists. We can only attempt to grasp the idea that such a moment is life in the full sense, a plunging ever anew into the vastness of being, in which we are simply overwhelmed with joy. This is how Jesus expresses it in Saint John's Gospel: "I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" (16:22). We must think along these lines if we want to understand the object of Christian hope, to understand what it is that our faith, our being with Christ, leads us to expect.²¹

The Beatific Vision and the Last Judgment

Who receives the beatific vision and when? All those and only those who die in a state of grace. When do they receive it? Many Protestants hold that the beatific vision will be received only with the resurrection of the body at the end of the world. This is false. The beatific vision is received as soon as a soul who dies in a state of grace finishes whatever purging is necessary in Purgatory. This is a dogma of faith, defined by Pope Benedict XII in the fourteenth century:

By virtue of our apostolic authority, we define the following: According to the general disposition of God, the souls of all the saints . . . and other faithful who died after receiving Christ's holy Baptism (provided they were not in need of purification when they died, . . . or, if they then did need or will need some purification, when they have been purified after death, . . .) already before they take up their bodies again and before the general judgment - and this since the Ascension of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ into heaven - have been, are and will be in heaven, in the heavenly Kingdom and celestial paradise with Christ, joined to the company of the holy angels. Since the Passion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ, these souls have seen and do see the divine essence with an intuitive vision, and even face to face, without the mediation of any creature.²²

The Particular Judgment

At the moment of death there is the particular judgment before the tribunal of Christ. Natural reason can grasp that since man has moral responsibility, he will be judged ac-

²¹ Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi* 12.

²² Benedict XII, *Benedictus Deus* (1336): DS 1000; cf. LG 49, cited in CCC 1023.

ording to the law revealed to him in his conscience. We must make an accounting to God—author of the moral law—for the use of our freedom during the whole of our life. This accounting must be made at the moment of death.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1021, states that “death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ.” This is the basis for the belief of the Church in the particular judgment. The essence of this doctrine is that the disposition of the human will at the moment of death determines its disposition for all eternity.

St. Augustine brilliantly expressed it: “We see then that the two cities were created by two kinds of love: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord.”²³ All the variety of the dispositions of the human will on this earth can be grouped into these two categories. Another way of expressing this same truth is that every adult human being (above the age of reason) is either in a state of grace, or in a state of mortal sin.

Every man acts for some final end, and every other choice of his will is for the sake of that final end, which will ultimately be either God loved above all things, or oneself loved above all things. Whenever a man commits a mortal sin, he commits it ultimately for the sake of self-love, which is preferred over the commandments of God as made known to him in conscience. Such an act then determines a *state of mortal sin*, in which a person remains until he validly receives the sacrament of Penance, or makes an act of perfect contrition (supreme sorrow for one’s past sins because they offend God whom one loves above all things).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1861, states: “Mortal sin is a radical possibility of human freedom, as is love itself. It results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace, that is, of the state of grace. If it is not redeemed by repentance and God’s forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ’s kingdom and the eternal death of hell, for our freedom has the power to make choices for ever, with no turning back.”

After the particular judgment, therefore, those who die in a state of mortal sin will descend immediately to hell.²⁴ Of those who die in a state of grace, many will have something to purge in purgatory. Those who die in a state of sanctity or innocence with nothing to be purged will ascend immediately to heaven to enjoy the beatific vision, the gates

of which have been opened by the Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ.²⁵

The Last Judgment

The Last Judgment will follow the general Resurrection, after Christ’s Second Coming. However, if every man is judged already in his particular judgment, what is the point of the Last Judgment? If man were a purely individual creature, the particular judgment would perhaps be enough. However, man is essentially a social and historical creature. God has to judge and manifest His judgment not only of individuals but of all societies and of all history. The Last Judgment will publicly manifest the meaning of all of history, and make clear all the secret judgments of God that were at work throughout history.

All human virtue and vice has an essential social dimension which will be manifested before the world in the Last Judgment.²⁶ Every act of virtue works in society as a seed of future virtues, whereas every act of vice tends of itself to a proliferation of vice in society. Therefore, it is fitting that every act of virtue and every patient suffering of injustice will be manifested before all men and receive an eternal crown of glory, whereas every act of vice will receive an eternal reprobation, as is graphically portrayed by Jesus in Matthew 25:31-46.

The Last Judgment is often thought of as an object of terror; and it may seem like the exact opposite of an object of hope. Nevertheless, Pope Benedict XVI points out that the Last Judgment is indeed an object of hope for it corresponds to a *basic and ineradicable human aspiration*: the desire to see full and perfect justice accomplished and realized forever.²⁷ In the Last Judgment we hope for

“an ‘undoing’ of past suffering, a reparation that sets things aright. For this reason, faith in the Last Judgment is first and foremost hope—the need for which was made abundantly clear in the upheavals of recent centuries. I am convinced that the question of justice constitutes the essential argument, or in any case the strongest argument, in favour of

²⁵ Ibid., Denz 530.

²⁶ See Mt 10:26: “Nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.”

²⁷ The same idea is nicely expressed by a Jewish author, Marc Gellman, in the anthology *Wrestling with the Angel: Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning*, ed. Jack Riemer (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), p. 328: “The only question is Why do the righteous suffer? And the only answer is the *olam habah*, the world-to-come. That is my teaching when the reality of suffering presses in upon us. I place great stress on the value and truth of this authentic but often-overlooked Jewish belief which we have given to Christianity and then abandoned ourselves. . . . *Olam habah* not only saves our hope in the face of death; it also saves our faith in God in the face of the world. The essential and defining belief of our faith is that the world was created by an all-powerful and benevolent God, and unless there is a world-to-come to even out the scales of justice set so askew in the world-that-is, we simply cannot believe in a God of justice. Without a world-to-come where goodness is rewarded and evil punished, we simply cannot believe in a God of goodness.”

²³ *City of God*, bk. 14, ch. 28.

²⁴ See the edict “Benedictus Deus,” by Benedict XII of 1336 (Denz 531): “We define that according to the general disposition of God, the souls of those who die in actual mortal sin go down into hell immediately after death and there suffer the pain of hell.”

faith in eternal life. The purely individual need for a fulfillment that is denied to us in this life, for an everlasting love that we await, is certainly an important motive for believing that man was made for eternity; but only in connection with the impossibility that the injustice of history should be the final word does the necessity for Christ's return and for new life become fully convincing."²⁸

Social Dimension of Christian Hope

Many adversaries of Christianity have charged it with being an individualistic escape from the world and from man's social and historical responsibility. Pope Benedict takes this objection seriously, and he returns to it again and again.²⁹

He answers that Christian hope has an essential social dimension, for the redemption of man also concerns his essential social aspect. Every person naturally desires to be in a loving communion with others, and isolation is seen as the greatest of hardships. Heaven therefore cannot fail to superabundantly fulfill this social aspect of man's natural aspirations.

This social dimension of heaven is expressed in the doctrine of the *communion of saints*. It is symbolized in Scripture through the image of the heavenly Jerusalem. Heaven is not portrayed in the sources of Revelation as an individualist paradise, but as a holy *city*, in which *communion* in its two dimensions—vertical and horizontal—is perfectly realized. Vertical communion with God is the basis for a perfect horizontal communion among the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem. In Revelation 21:2-4, heaven is described in this way:

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away."

Pope Benedict XVI has drawn attention to this social dimension of heaven in *Spe salvi* 14:

²⁸ Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi* 43. This line of thought continues in no. 44: "To protest against God in the name of justice is not helpful. A world without God is a world without hope (cf. *Eph* 2:12). Only God can create justice. And faith gives us the certainty that he does so. The image of the Last Judgment is not primarily an image of terror, but an image of hope; for us it may even be the decisive image of hope. Is it not also a frightening image? I would say: it is an image that evokes responsibility, an image, therefore, of that fear of which Saint Hilary spoke when he said that all our fear has its place in love. God is justice and creates justice. This is our consolation and our hope. And in his justice there is also grace. This we know by turning our gaze to the crucified and risen Christ."

²⁹ See Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi* 28, 33, 48, etc.

Against this, drawing upon the vast range of patristic theology, de Lubac was able to demonstrate that salvation has always been considered a "social" reality. Indeed, the *Letter to the Hebrews* speaks of a "city" (cf. 11:10, 16; 12:22; 13:14) and therefore of communal salvation. Consistently with this view, sin is understood by the Fathers as the destruction of the unity of the human race, as fragmentation and division. Babel, the place where languages were confused, the place of separation, is seen to be an expression of what sin fundamentally is. Hence "redemption" appears as the reestablishment of unity, in which we come together once more in a union that begins to take shape in the world community of believers. . . . This real life, towards which we try to reach out again and again, is linked to a lived union with a "people", and for each individual it can only be attained within this "we". It presupposes that we escape from the prison of our "I", because only in the openness of this universal subject does our gaze open out to the source of joy, to love itself—to God." (SS14)

The Church on earth already begins to make this communion possible in embryo. It will be completed, however, only in the Church triumphant in heaven. The perfect vertical union with God perfects the horizontal communion of the children of God. However, in the Church militant, there is also a reciprocal effect, by which our striving to perfect the horizontal communion among men further perfects our communion with God. Thus Christ says (Mt 5:9), "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." However, we can only be true peacemakers to the extent that we have supernatural charity, which establishes us as friends of God.