

### **I believe in life everlasting**

In our survey of Catholic dogmas listed by the Holy See's *Doctrinal Commentary*, we now start looking at 'the doctrine on the immortality of the spiritual soul and on the immediate recompense after death' – reward or punishment. Any reasonable interpretation of the New Testament books, and the Gospels in particular, indeed already recognises that they obviously teach life beyond death, and the two ultimate possibilities of heaven and hell. But Catholic doctrine further confirms and clarifies the meaning of the scriptural teaching.

As so often, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is a good starting point, worth quoting here at length. We read: 'Each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgement that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven – through a purification or immediately – or immediate and everlasting damnation.' (n. 1022)

'Those who die in God's grace and friendship and are perfectly purified live for ever with Christ. They are like God for ever, for they "see him as he is," face to face. (*1 Jn* 3:2)' (n. 1023)

'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 and fulfilment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness.' (n. 1024)

'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. The Church gives the name *Purgatory* to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned. (DS 1304; 1820; 1580) The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence and Trent. The tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire. (Cf. *1 Cor* 3:15; *1 Pet* 1:7)' (nn. 1030-31)

The *Catechism* then turns to the unhappy alternative final possibility. We read: 'We cannot be united with God unless we freely choose to love him. But we cannot love God if we sin gravely against him, against our neighbour or against ourselves... To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from him for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called "hell."' (n. 1033)

'Jesus often speaks of "Gehenna" of "the unquenchable fire" reserved for those who to the end of their lives refuse to believe and be converted, where both soul and body can be lost. (Cf. *Mt* 5:22, 29; 10:28; 13:42, 50; *Mk* 9:43-48) Jesus solemnly proclaims that he "will send his angels, and they will gather... all evil doers, and throw them into the furnace of fire," (*Mt* 13:41-42) and that he will pronounce the condemnation: "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire!" (*Mt* 25:41).' (n. 1034)

'The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, "eternal fire." The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God,

in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs.’ (n. 1035)

Although the *Catechism* is not in itself an ‘infallible definition’, it gives clear authoritative teaching, and refers back to numerous other statements of the magisterium that *are* infallible. In particular, on the question of ‘immediate recompense after death’, it quotes Pope Benedict XII’s 1336 Constitution *Benedictus Deus*, also referenced by the *Doctrinal Commentary*.

A controversy had arisen because Benedict’s predecessor, Pope John XXII, had put forward the opinion (not magisterially, but in some homilies) that the full recompense after death was *not* immediate, and that souls who were saved would have to wait until the Last Judgement before enjoying the beatific vision of God’s essence. John XXII did retract this the day before his death; but Benedict XII then went further, to remove all doubt.

So he declared infallibly: ‘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 judgement – and this since the Ascension of our Lord and Saviour 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.’ (DS 1000)

He also taught infallibly concerning the immediacy of damnation: ‘We declare that according to the common arrangement of God, the souls of those who depart in actual mortal sin immediately after their death descend to hell where they are tortured by infernal punishments, and that nevertheless on the day of judgement all men with their bodies will make themselves ready to render an account of their own deeds before the tribunal of Christ, “so that everyone may receive the proper things of the body according as he has done whether it be good or evil” (2 Cor 5:10).’ (DS 1002)

The reality of hell then, like the reality of heaven, is unchangeable Catholic dogma. So is the eternity of these states. The *Creed* of the Fourth Lateran Council had already professed in 1215: ‘[Christ] shall come again at the end of time to judge the living and the dead and to render to each one according to his works...All of them will rise again with their own bodies which they now bear to receive according to their works, whether these have been good or evil, the ones perpetual punishment with the devil and the others everlasting glory with Christ.’ (DS 801)

So there is the *particular* judgement of each soul, after which it already enters either heaven (possibly via purgatory) or hell; but at the *general* judgement, the Last Judgement, everyone’s body will rise again to share the everlasting destiny already experienced by each soul. We are warned of the danger of damnation, but above all, we are confirmed in our hope of the unimaginable glory and joy promised to those who die in God’s grace.

In the words again of Benedict XII’s infallible definition, *Benedictus Deus* (DS 1000-01): ‘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...rather the divine essence immediately manifests itself to them, plainly, clearly, and openly...And after such intuitive and face-to-face vision and enjoyment have or will have begun for these souls, the same vision and enjoyment have continued and will continue without any interruption and without end until the Last Judgement and from then on forever.’