

# Say It Again

RANDALL B. SMITH *on What Is There to Talk About in Heaven?*

**N**OT TOO LONG AGO, I was at a funeral. It was a sad affair, as the funerals of people who have played an important part in one's life usually are. But one thing that went a long way to diminishing the grief was the excellent homily of Fr. Marvin O'Connell, preaching on the occasion of the death of his long-time friend (of some 65 years), the venerable Ralph McInerny, professor of philosophy for over fifty years at the University of Notre Dame, author of numerous books on Thomas Aquinas, founding editor of *Crisis* magazine, and creator of the priest-sleuth Fr. Dowling.

During that homily, Fr. O'Connell suggested that Ralph McInerny would now reside in the company of the communion of the saints. He would, for example, see once again his beloved wife Connie and the son they lost when he was only four years old. And being a dedicated

Thomist, he was probably already deep in conversation with "the Angelic Doctor" himself, St. Thomas Aquinas. What a conversation that would be!

## A VERY GOOD QUESTION

Later in the homily, Fr. O'Connell made reference to the passage on heaven in Thomas's *Exposition on the Apostle's Creed* that says: "Our desire for knowledge will be complete because in heaven we shall know the nature of all things. We shall know all truth and whatsoever we wish to know, we shall know." Fr. O'Connell's rendering was a bit pithier, shortening Thomas's lengthy scholastic prose to the simpler and more dramatic, "In heaven, we shall know all."

Well, that got one of the ten-year-old children present thinking, as children sometimes do. He saw a small problem, which goes something like this: If, when Ralph McInerny gets to heaven, he will be talking with Thomas Aquinas; and if the two of them, because they are in heaven, "know all," then what will they have to talk about?

That, I think both Ralph McInerny and Thomas Aquinas would agree, is a very good question for a ten-year-old. (Nor would it have hurt this particular ten-year-old's cause any that he was one of Ralph McInerny's

grandchildren.) What that question shows, I think, is a profound grasp of basic *logic* and the ability to see logical inconsistencies between statements within an extended discussion. And that's impressive for a person of any age. (If only more of our politicians shared that ability.)

Be that as it may, I think there are two replies that we might offer our bright young ten-year-old, neither of which is: "Hell is made for people who ask too many questions." Quite the contrary. As Pope John Paul II pointed out at the beginning of his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, asking questions is what makes us human. Indeed, in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* and many other places, the pope talked about the hope he had in the young, precisely because the young ask so many questions, especially questions about the meaning of life.

So, while admitting that we do not yet "fully know as we are known" and that the true nature of heaven is not yet clear to us, we should welcome such questions. Perhaps we should even hazard a guess or two, especially if our guesses are based on God's own revelation. Heaven was made for people who continually ask questions in search of the Truth.

## SHARING BEAUTY

If I were to hazard a guess at what people in heaven, who "know all," have to talk about, I would say: *the absolute beauty of it all*. Even during our own brief lifetimes on this earth, it is not uncommon to hear conversations between friends that go something like this:

"Aren't the mountains beautiful?" says one.

"Yes, they are," his friend replies. "They make me think of those lines from Robert Fröst's poem 'The Mountain': 'There ought to be a view around the world/ From such a mountain.'"

"Yes, I know that poem. It's beautiful," the first one says. "The mountains also remind me of that passage in the Psalms: 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.'"

"Ah yes, I love the Psalms."

And on and on they would go, sharing with each other in words the truth and goodness of the beauty they behold. The fact that each sees the same mountain and knows the same poems would not make the sharing of them any less valuable or joyous.

Such conversations are far from dull. They are not really like the obvious parody one might imagine, which would go something like this:



"Isn't that sunset beautiful?"

"Yes, I know."

"And the mountains, aren't they beautiful, too?"

"Yes, I know."

"And the play of light and shadow on the mountains, isn't that beautiful, too?"

"Yes, I know!"

That's not a conversation really. It's more of an assault on someone who's neither looking, nor interested in looking. It shows that Person A doesn't really know Person B, and that Person B doesn't really grasp the beauty of the mountains—at least, not at that moment.

## SAME & DIFFERENT

I've had conversations with good friends who knew me so well that they knew the poem I was thinking about before I mentioned it. With certain friends, if I were to say, "That mountain makes me think of Frost's poem, 'The Mountain,'" they would reply, "I *knew* that's what you were thinking!" What is strange is that, when the friendship is really good, the fact that the other person *knew* what I was thinking doesn't destroy the joy of it. It's not like ruining a joke by blurting out the punch line ahead of time.

With good friends, even though I might know the poem by heart, I'd be likely to say, "Go ahead and recite it. I want to hear it." But of course, that's only part of the truth. I not only want to hear *the poem*; I want to hear *my friend* recite it.

When the same poem is read by different people, the beauty is in some ways the same and in some ways different, just as when the same song is sung by different people, the beauty is in some ways the same and in some ways different. I love hearing Judy Garland sing "Over the Rainbow," but I also love hearing Israel Kamakawiwo'ole sing it. It's the same song, but those are two very different voices and two very different personalities that shine through in the music. In their own way, these various expressions of Beauty—what the theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar called "the forgotten transcendental"—give us a certain foretaste of unity in difference and difference in unity, about which we will say more in a moment.

In the meantime let me suggest that the same things we have noticed about Beauty might also be said about Goodness and Truth. Watching Mother Teresa cradle a premature baby in her arms isn't any less interesting than watching a surgical nurse do the same. Seeing how other teachers teach the same passage in Dante isn't only interesting to me as a source of information about how I should teach it; sometimes it's just a joy to see the way other people's minds work. It fills me with wonder to see and hear how other people can make the same passage come alive in different ways, to see the faces of the students as they respond, and to see the bond that begins to form as students and teacher both stand in awe before the same ineffable truth.

### SHARING OF SELF

The experiences we have of sharing beauty and truth validate something the French Canadian theologian René Latourelle once said in *The Theology of Revelation*: namely, that with *words*, we not only communicate *information* (How long until dinner? Where is the nearest gas station?), but we also communicate *ourselves* (I love you. How may I help?). Words, he says, are "the means through which two interiorities unveil themselves to each other with a view towards reciprocal exchange." When words attain to this level, they are

the sign of friendship and love . . . the welling up and expression of a freedom which opens to another person and thus gives itself. It is a form of giving of and from one person to another. Each gives himself in honest hospitality, in a communion of love.

Perhaps this is why I not only want to hear Robert Frost's poem again, I want to hear it recited by *this particular person* whom I love. It's not just the words of the poem that are a gift; so, too, is the person speaking them. I not only want to hear the words and notes of "Over

the Rainbow" again; I want to hear it sung *by this person*. When the song works, it's because the singer has shared something of himself in the singing.

But it's not only that. When the song works, it's also because the singer has somehow found the innermost *beauty*, the deepest *truth*, of the song and expressed it in a way not yet seen or heard by anyone else in quite the same way. Merely to copy someone else wouldn't be to share *oneself* in the singing.

And yet, when the song is sung well, there's no need to change the tune into something else or to alter the lyrics so as to "make it one's own." Often enough, to make a song one's own is precisely *not* to share it; it is merely to offer odd bits of oneself peeking out from behind the mask of the song. Great singers manage to express both themselves *and* the song. Mediocre singers express neither the song nor themselves.

### A FORETASTE OF HEAVEN

What do people talk about in heaven? *Everything*. They don't necessarily tell each other things the other person doesn't know. Rather, with their words, they offer the gift of *themselves* to one another (and to God) in a reciprocal exchange of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. In this way, they mirror the relationship between the three Persons of the Triune God, in whose image they have been made and then re-made, the God who is both One and Three, whose unity of Being does not make impossible the difference between the three Persons, and in Whom the difference between the Persons does not make impossible the true unity of their Being.

As a theological doctrine, this statement can be hard to grasp. How can there be a *unity* in God if there is *distinctness* and indeed *difference*? And how can there be *distinctness* and *difference* in God if there is *unity*? Admittedly, this is a difficult doctrine to *visualize*. But perhaps in our shared experience of Beauty, we enjoy a certain foretaste of that "difference in unity, unity in difference" for which we strive only imperfectly in this life.

For those who are united to the Triune God in the communion of the saints, it is not unimportant to their joy that it is one and the same Word that each of them pronounces with his being. But that wouldn't make any less interesting the distinct and different song each one sings. ❖

---

*Randall B. Smith is Associate Professor of Theology at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas. He wrote this article, however, while a visiting fellow at the Jacques Maritain Center at the University of Notre Dame, and he would like to thank the Center's director, Dr. John O'Callaghan, and his remarkable assistant, Alice Osberger, for their good will and unstinting generosity.*