Foreword

From Here to Eternity:
Reflections on Death and the Afterlife in Light of the Resurrection of Christ

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Pope St. John Paul II began his great encyclical *Fides et Ratio* with the words "Know Thyself." "In different parts of the world, with their different cultures," he wrote, "there arise at the same time the fundamental questions which pervade human life: *Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?*" These are questions, says the pope, "which have their common source in the quest for meaning which has always compelled the human heart"—not just Catholics or Christians but all men and women throughout history and across all cultures.[1]

THE THREAT OF NOTHINGNESS: IS THERE ANY POINT TO LIFE?

Few things force us to face the question of "the meaning of things and of their very existence"[2] more powerfully and more insistently than having to consider the question of death, the possible end of our existence, and/or what might lie in store for us after this life. "Depend upon it, sir," said the

[1] Pope St. John Paul II, Faith and Reason *Fides et Ratio* (Sept. 14, 1998), §1. All quotations from papal encyclicals have been taken from the official English translations at the Vatican web site, www.vatican.va.

[2] John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, §1.

great Samuel Johnson, "when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."[3]

If all we have strived for, all we have learned and experienced, everyone we have loved, simply comes to nothing in the end, is there any point to life? To most people throughout history and across cultures, it has seemed as though we need some notion of life *after* death for this life to have any meaning.

INADEQUATE VIEWS OF THE AFTERLIFE

And yet, although it seems we need some notion of the afterlife to make this life meaningful, we also need a notion of the afterlife that does not itself make this life meaningless. If heaven is so wonderful, why not simply get there? Why are we wasting time here?

Does the picture we hold of the afterlife affirm what we take to be a noble human life, or does it rather contradict it? If we imagine a heroic life to be one in which we live chastely, defending the dignity of women, who could respect anyone whose vision of the afterlife was made up of the endless sexual conquest of virgins? If we think that a noble, flourishing human life is one devoted to the selfless love of others, what sense would it make to picture the afterlife as one in which we care nothing for those we left behind?

Some cultures and religious traditions have envisioned the status of the human person after death as involving a much *lower* level of existence. In Homer's *Odyssey*, for example, Odysseus meets the spirit of the Greek hero Achilles in the underworld and reassures him that he has become the most renowned among all the Greeks. Achilles tells him that he would rather be a slave for a poor farmer than ruler of all the dead.[4] Homer describes the souls Odysseus meets in the underworld as "shades" since they lack any substantial bodies. When Odysseus sees his mother, he tries to hug her, but his arms pass right through her. None of those whom Odysseus meets in the underworld are happy, satisfied, or at peace. They mostly want news of those who are still alive. We are left to wonder whether Achilles's heroic deeds might have been essentially meaningless.

The Roman poet Virgil has a slightly more agreeable idea about the afterlife. His hero, Aeneas, makes a journey to the underworld, like Odysseus, but what he finds there is much less grim. Although there are punishments

[3] James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, ed. David Womersly (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 612.

[4] Homer, *Odyssey*, 11.488–91.

and torments for spirits who lived evil lives, those who lived noble lives enjoy the pleasures of the Elysian Fields.[5]

And yet, since they lack bodies, it is unclear whether they can feel the heat of the sun on their skin, smell the flowers and forest, or touch the grass—any of the experiences we associate with bodily existence. Aeneas does not seem to be able to hug anyone in the underworld either, although as a Roman Stoic, perhaps this did not seem like a great loss to him.

But was this mode of existence of persons in the Elysian Fields really better than the mode of existence of persons in this life? This is not entirely clear. One problem is that, given Virgil's admirable commitment to service on behalf of Rome, it is hard for him to tolerate the thought of noble Romans sitting around simply enjoying themselves in paradise in the afterlife because this would be at odds with the sort of life he wanted to inspire in his fellow Romans. We need a notion of the afterlife that does not involve an empty stream of essentially meaningless activities of the sort we would not respect here on earth and which we are convinced hold out little or no promise of making us truly happy. Would we enjoy games and pastimes in the afterlife while the people we love in this world continue to be subject to sorrow and suffering? We are bidden to "love our neighbor," but then in heaven, do we just forget them? And does that hope for life after death encourage us to be more complacent in the face of human suffering and ignore injustices in this life?

DOES HOPE FOR THE AFTERLIFE DIMINISH CONCERN FOR OTHERS IN THIS LIFE?

Two modern thinkers who believed this were the German Karl Marx (1818–1883) and the Frenchman Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Marx believed that hope for an afterlife robbed man of his only opportunity to be fully himself. The practice of worshipping an unreal Supreme Being, he claimed, alienated man from his better self. Those who suffered injustice patiently now in the belief that they would receive their reward later were having their sense of justice deadened by "the opiate of the masses."[6]

Auguste Comte believed that hope for the afterlife merely produced

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[5] Virgil, *Aeneid*, bk. 6, esp. 6.268–800.

[6] Originally written in the Introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* but first published in *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, February 7 and 10, 1844 in Paris. For this Introduction, see *Marx's Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. Joseph O'Malley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) or the online version at https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm.

"slaves of God" and servants of the Church. In order to develop what was needed, namely "servants of Humanity," men had to turn away from the fictitious notion of a life after death and concentrate on this life.[7]

Perhaps we can agree that if these criticisms are correct—if Christianity causes people to devalue this life, if it causes people to have less concern for justice and the welfare of others—then Christianity would have a problem, not primarily because of these external critiques but because Christians would be holding a view of the afterlife that was inconsistent with its own stated principles. Having preached repeatedly that Christians have a special responsibility to exhibit a "preferential option for the poor," if Christians then held a view of the afterlife that resulted in a diminishment of that care and concern, Christian doctrine would be in conflict with itself, quite independent of anything Marxists or other secularists might claim.

REINCARNATION?

But let's return to the *Aeneid* for a moment. Aeneas's father, Anchises, seems happy and satisfied when Aeneas meets him in the afterlife, but he shows Aeneas the place where many other souls are readying themselves to be reincarnated into new bodies.[8] Does Anchises himself yearn to return to an embodied state? Virgil does not tell us. But it is interesting to note that the narrative of the story depends on him *not* being reincarnated. A key step in the process of reincarnation is that souls must cross the River Lethe, the "river of forgetfulness," before they get their new bodies. If Anchises had crossed that river, he would not remember his own son, and he could offer him no wise advice. However much Anchises had loved Aeneas before, however much he had been devoted to him in this life, this connection would be broken and lost forever once he crossed that river.

This lack of identity of the self—the loss of all wisdom gained, all memory of the people one loved—is especially telling because what disturbs people the most about the prospect of death is the fear that they will lose their connection with their loved ones. It is not without reason that in all the most famous stories about the afterlife—in Homer, Virgil, and Dante—the most frequent request souls make is to get news about those they have left behind.

The second problem with reincarnation, however, from the Christian perspective, is that it encourages the view that our bodies are essentially

[7] See Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, trans. E. Riley, A. E. Nash, and M. Sebanc (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1995), 172–73, esp. nn101–3.

[8] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6.703–24.

meaninglessness to our personal identity. On this view, bodies can be switched out without violation to one's "identity." And not only one's body but also one's memories and most treasured relationships—all these are to be jettisoned as so much excess baggage in order to "liberate" the self. Perhaps this is why so many modern people find this view appealing.

DEATH AS LIBERATION? WHAT IS "LIBERATED"?

Let me suggest that a person's notion of the afterlife reveals a great deal about what they think makes life meaningful. A person who thinks *intellect* is the most essential element of our humanity will likely believe that *intellect* is what survives death. And vice versa, if a person believes it is *intellect* that survives death, this is likely because he believes that *intellect* is the most essential element of our humanity. We leave behind sense experience, appetites, passions, and physical intimacy, "transcending" them, it is said, as we move into realms of pure intellection.

The question we must ask, however, is whether pure *intellection* is the sole and/or most important part of our human identity and whether a life made up solely of intellection, lacking, for example, all physical intimacy, would be a *higher* mode of existence or a much diminished one.

DEATH IS THE ENEMY

But let us turn now to the Christian message. The first thing we should notice is that, in the Christian Scriptures, death is not pictured as a release or a liberation. Death is the enemy. So, for example, in the Book of Wisdom, we read:

> God did not make death, and
> he does not delight in the death of the living.
> For he created all things that they might exist,
> and the creatures of the world are wholesome,
> and there is no destructive poison in them;
> and the dominion of Hades is not on earth.
> For righteousness is immortal. . . .
> For God created man for incorruption,
> and made him in the image of his own eternity,
> but through the devil's envy death entered the world.[9]

[9] Wis 1:13–15; 2:23–24.

HEAVEN REVEALED IN AND THROUGH THE RISEN CHRIST

There are numerous images in the Scriptures meant to suggest something about heaven: it is said to be "the new Jerusalem," a city whose buildings and streets are made of precious stones. But these images are meant to be taken figuratively, suggesting a reality that is largely beyond our understanding.

Thus the clearest and most definitive revelation of what "heaven" is has been given to us, I would suggest, in the person of the risen Christ. St. Paul describes the proclamation that Christ has risen from the dead in a famous passage in 1 Corinthians 15 as "of first importance" (v. 3). And he goes on to complain that, "if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (vv. 12–14). Indeed, "if for this life only we have hoped in Christ," says Paul, "we are of all men most to be pitied" (v. 19). "But in fact," adds Paul immediately, "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (v. 20). For Paul, this is the heart of the Gospel. Hence it is no accident that each of the four Gospels culminates in the story of Christ's death and Resurrection.

But we turn now to another famous passage—this one from the Gospel of John—in which Jesus promises that in his Father's house "are many rooms" and that he must go to "prepare a place" for us (John 14:2; see also v. 12). In John's Gospel, this passage comes during the Last Supper, not long after Jesus has washed the disciples' feet. "Let not your hearts be troubled," he tells them; "believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (vv. 1–3). But then Thomas says to him: "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" (v. 5). To which, Jesus answers with the famous admonition: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me" (v. 6). But then Philip speaks up and says: "Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied." To which Jesus answers: "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?" (vv. 8–10).

Note the association here with the afterlife and entering the Father's house (in which there are "many rooms") and the further association of this union with the Father with our union with Christ. Christ is, in one sense, the way to the Father, but in another sense, he and the Father are one. So

to be united to Christ is to be united to the Father. Or to put this another way, the way to be united to the Father is to unite ourselves to Christ, who himself is from the Father and returns to the Father. In uniting ourselves to Christ, we enter into the threefold communion of love shared between the Father, Son, and Spirit.

It is an important refinement of our conception of the afterlife to realize that "heaven" is not merely a place like the Elysian Fields in Virgil's *Aeneid*; "heaven" is a name we give to our union with God after death, when we will enjoy the "beatific vision"—that is to say, when we will share with God so great an intimacy that it is said we will see God "face to face," the way lovers stare into each other's eyes.[10]

Toward the end of Mark Twain's comic tale "Eve's Diary," Adam—who had at first been resistant to Eve, this strange, somewhat distressing new creature who invaded his space—upon her death, laments at her grave: "Wheresoever she was, there was Eden."[11] Twain's "Diary" is meant to be a comic love story, not profound theology. But it poses for us the important question: Is paradise primarily a place or a person? If we can say, with Mark Twain's Adam, that it is primarily a person to whom we are connected in love, then perhaps it should not be so hard for us to accept in faith that heaven is not primarily a place but a Person. And that Person is Christ, who sends the Holy Spirit to pour the love of God into our hearts and so bring us into a more perfect union with his Father (see Rom 5:5).

WHO CAN SEE GOD AND LIVE? RESURRECTION AND THE TRIUNE GOD

But we are still left with a bit of mystery, are we not? Christ tells his disciples that he will be crucified, that he must leave them, but that he will send the Holy Spirit to help and guide them after his death. Why, then, does he stop off on the way back to his Father to spend some extra time with the disciples—forty days, in fact?

Certainly Christ's Resurrection appearances after his death had a great deal to do with revealing his victory over death and the fidelity of the Father to his Son's sacrifice on the Cross. But *along with* revealing this crucial truth, we might suspect there was something going on here since he appeared multiple times over a full *forty* days before "ascending to the right hand of His Father."

Jesus had never been given to bouts of histrionic miracle-making to

[10] See 1 Cor 13:12.

[11] This is the last line in "Eve's Diary." It is said that Twain wrote it about his own wife, who had recently died.

reveal his power during his life. If he had simply wanted to show himself as "God," he could have "come down off the cross," as his antagonists tempted him to do. Indeed, if he had wanted to "prove" that he was God, he could have shot fifty feet up in the air and spun around in mid-air while shooting laser beams out of his eyes. That's the kind of ending you want as a kid. But (a) Christ did not choose to do this, even though the Apostles likely would have been highly relieved if he had, and (b) if he had done this, what kind of "God" would he have been revealing himself to be? The kind of pagan god everyone expected him to be? The kind of god to whom people give sacrifice so that they can gain power?

But what if the "God" he was trying to reveal himself to be was the kind of God who wasn't asking for human sacrifice but was willing to make himself the sacrifice? How else than by dying would he reveal his message that we have to die to "self" and to selfishness in order to rise in "life"? How else would he show mortal, suffering human beings that he would be *with them* at the moment of their death? How else to demonstrate to suffering, mortal human beings that he *understands* our suffering and was not asking of us anything that he himself had not suffered? How better to show them that death need not be, as it so often seems, a final, obliterating end, but that it might be, in union with his death and Resurrection, a purgation and beginning of a new resurrected life?

But what else? If he is "the first fruits" of what we, too, will enjoy, what does Christ reveal to us in his Resurrection appearances? Two things, in particular, I would suggest. First, he shares fully in the Father's power and glory and enjoys full communion with him. And second, though united fully with the Father and the Father's glory, Christ retains his personal identity. This is still the same man the Apostles knew and loved, the man with whom they ate, slept, and suffered.

What is promised to us, then, by the risen Christ, who is the "first fruits" of what we, too, will enjoy, is that, like Christ and with Christ, we can, after death, be united fully with God and share in the eternal communion of love shared between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But also—and this is important—we will be united to God in such a way that *we will not lose our personal identity*. The "I" that I am will remain and not be lost like a drop of water returning to the ocean.

But what makes us be so presumptuous to imagine that it is possible to be united with *God*—that infinite Being beyond all our comprehension—and not be swallowed up like that drop of water returning to the ocean? The ultimate basis of that faith is founded upon the revelation that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit can be perfectly united *in* God as perfectly *One*,

and yet not lose their separate "person-hood." Their distinct person-hood does not make impossible their true union as one God; and yet their unity also does not dissolve their distinctness *as three Persons*. They are a perfect unity in diversity and a perfect diversity in unity.

This, then, is how *we* can hope in faith that we, too, can be united to God and not lose our person-hood: because this is what Christ reveals to us in his Resurrection appearances: he is the fruit of the promise of the Triune God, a perfect communion of Persons in One, extended to us in and through the Person of the Son incarnate.

"BE NOT AFRAID": RECOGNITION AND THE RESURRECTION APPEARANCES

The descriptions we find in the Gospels of the Resurrection appearances can be puzzling. They are obviously trying to express something ineffable, something they cannot quite capture. On the one hand, the Gospel writers go out of their way to indicate that Christ could *not* have gotten into the room *bodily*. The doors and windows were all locked, they insist, hence when they saw him, they assumed what most of us would assume: it's a ghost! But having gone out of their way in one direction, the Gospel writers then go out of their way to insist on the opposite: that he was *there bodily*. Jesus calms them, saying, "It is I myself. See, put your hands in the nail marks in my hand and in the hole in my side." They *touch* him. He *eats* with them. These are things you cannot do with ghosts. Anyone who has seen comic ghost cartoons knows that ghosts don't eat or drink. The liquid goes in but then pours right out. Ghosts cannot *touch* people.

And yet, having gone out of their way to insist that Jesus was there with them in the room *bodily*, the Gospel writers then tell us that he simply disappeared, leaving them to wonder again, "Did we just imagine that? *Was* it a ghost?" Indeed, the apostle Thomas, who was absent when Christ comes the first time, is so skeptical about what the others tell him that he says he will not believe it unless he is able to put his hand in the nail marks and in the hole in Christ's side for himself. And a week later, he does. Jesus still has the wounds from the Crucifixion. He addresses Mary and the others in identifiable ways as *the same person he was before the Crucifixion*.

We say that Christ's presence among the Eleven in the Upper Room was a *glorified* presence, but this does not mean he was any *less* present to them than during life; rather, he became even *more* present to them. He reveals even more fully who he truly is: the only begotten Son of the Father. But this revelation was not accomplished through some sort of disembodied

presence, as though he were present only in their memories or present merely "spiritually." He revealed himself to them in and through his risen *body*.

And yet Jesus's bodily existence does not suffer the same limitations as ours. We are limited by time and space. But the risen Christ transcends these limitations. He can be with his disciples on the road to Emmaus and in the Upper Room at the same time. He can be present at the times and places of his choosing, with those who need him most at that moment. But note, he is not conjured up like a demon or a ghost. He appears when and where he chooses and stays only as long as he is needed.

This is the same Jesus who died on the Cross, not some phoenix that has risen from his ashes. Consider, for a moment, how the story of the Resurrection appearances might have been told differently. A "divine being" made of light, glowing like gold, might have shown up in the Upper Room with the Eleven to calm their fears, saying, "Be not afraid. I am the divine being who existed in the man you knew as Jesus. With his death, I have been released, and now I go to be with my Father and your Father in heaven." If *that* had been the story, that would be the kind of afterlife we knew we were being promised. It would have been the kind of story that a good Neoplatonist might have respected. The body is a shell hiding an angelic being, and with the death of the body, the angel is released and goes to a "higher realm." Many people think this is what Christianity teaches.

But the truth St. Paul proclaimed was quite different; it was something he himself understood would be a "stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:23). For St. Paul, the "good news" was the resurrection of the *body*—not merely Christ's body, but ours. Christ's Resurrection is the promise, the first fruits, of the "general resurrection" that will be for all the faithful.

THE GENERAL RESURRECTION AND THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

Christianity is a very fleshy religion, a characteristic that often in history has made it seem absurd to those with a gnostic "spiritualist" bent. Christianity, in accord with the Jewish creation account, affirms that the material world is "good, very good." The Christian creed includes the affirmation that the Word became *flesh* in the Incarnation of God's Son. And its notion of the afterlife is that we will enjoy a *bodily* resurrection. Properly understood, then, the Christian view of the life after death would not cause one to diminish the value of the human body or, by extension, of our other material connections in this life, especially our connections to other people and the

particular communities into which we are born or to whose good we have devoted ourselves.

As St. John Paul II emphasized in his *Theology of the Body*, our communion with others is achieved in and through the *body*. The Christian teaching about the resurrection of the body assures us that we will not be denied the benefits of our bodily existence after death. Things like taste, touch, and hearing are functions of a body: feeling the softness of skin, tasting the sharp yet bitter combination of salt and tequila in a margarita or the musky flavor of some barbequed ribs, feeling the warmth of a hot shower in the morning—all these depend on having a *body*. Ghosts don't hug, as Odysseus found out when he attempted to embrace his mother in the underworld.[12]

But the *way* we are embodied at present in this life comes with restrictions. The problem we have now is that when we are with our friends in New York, we cannot be with our friends in San Francisco. And when we are with our beloved grandparents, we usually cannot also be with our beloved grandchildren. We are limited by time and space. To be free of those restrictions, but not as a ghost or a memory, is the promise of the glorified body. It is the promise Christ *shows* us when he reveals himself to the women at the empty tomb and the disciples on the road to Emmaus and to the Eleven in the locked Upper Room. It is the promise realized every day around the world when the *one* crucified, risen Christ makes himself present in the Eucharist in Chicago and Tokyo and St. Petersburg and Berlin and in cities and hamlets around the world, as he has been doing for centuries and will do until the end of time.

We should not think of heaven as just a place, as though dying and going to heaven were something like losing your job and having to leave your friends and move to Cleveland where you don't know anyone. Heaven is a loving communion of persons. You enter into an eternal communion of Trinitarian love. United with the living, risen Christ, we do not love this world and the persons in it less; we can love them even more perfectly, more divinely.

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

What if, instead of losing our loved ones, we could be even more intimately present to them, help them more fully, and love them more selflessly? For many people, that would be a comforting thought. And this is the significance of the doctrine of the communion of saints. We believe that Christ

[12] See Homer, *Odyssey*, 11.204–22.

lives and that he continues to watch over us, sending his Holy Spirit to guide and strengthen us. When those we love were alive, we sometimes asked them to pray for us, knowing they would precisely because of their love for us. The Christian promise is that this sort of love can never die.

Thus the Christian view of the afterlife neither negates the value of this life nor proposes an activity for those in the next life that those of us in this life would find essentially empty and meaningless. We are bidden in this life to give ourselves over to the love of God and neighbor. The activity we are promised we will be engaged in the next life is an even more perfect love of God and neighbor. We are bidden to *care* for the world, especially for the poor and those in need. This is not some "dirty work" we need to do until we are released from the "burden" in the next life. The next life is the life of infinite care, when we will be able to see all people with the eyes of divine love, not with the limited perspectives we now have.

The hope of entering the communion of saints in union with God the Father, Son, and Spirit, should not make us *less* concerned to love and care for our neighbors in this life. It should make us *more* concerned for them, *eternally*, so to speak. The Catholic view of the afterlife does not *negate* the importance of this life; rather, it encourages us to see that all our actions and all the connections we make in this life remain meaningful eternally. If we devote ourselves to the love of God and neighbor, then, as St. Paul assures us, no power in heaven or on earth, neither death nor life, can separate us from that love (see Rom 8:39). The good news of the Gospel is this: start living the heavenly life *now*, and God will see to it that you never have to stop.