

Supplemental Information for
Why Catholic? Journey through the Catechism
The Profession of Faith: What We Believe
To group leaders of
Christ the King Parish, Springfield, Illinois

By Deacon Al Laabs
February/March, 2010

Session 12: “We Believe in Life Everlasting”

Suggested Environment

Note again the usual accompaniments of the *CCC* and the *USCCA* as well as a color appropriate for the Lenten season. I’m going to suggest that you try something maybe a little unique and ask your group members to bring something that reminds them of heaven or even bring an image of heaven. This may sound a bit odd but during a Renew program many years ago in another diocese, we had a chapter almost identical to this and the group leader made a similar request in advance. Here’s what happened. Someone brought a fresh, warm cherry pie because she said it was her mom’s special recipe and she used it and whenever she made it the aroma reminded her of mom who she “just knew” was in heaven. Another brought a beautiful souvenir from Ireland, a place she visited to see where her grandparents had come from, and she understood why they had talked about it when she was small “as if it was heaven.” Well, the point that we made during our discussion was that we weren’t really sure what heaven was all about or even what everlasting life meant in a certain sense, but we had this remarkably strong belief in our Lord’s promise—and that was comforting to share. Note below some interesting images of heaven from my favorite online resource:





There thousands of images out there but I just love this one of the little rabbit and the imagination that goes with it.

Lifting Our Hearts

I would simply point out that this prayer is taken from the Roman Missal, from the Mass in the section of Masses and prayers for various occasions, in this case, the Mass for a Happy Death.

Sharing Our Good News

Might be a good idea to ask if anyone had an opportunity to read what Vatican II said about Mary and the Church in the document, *Lumen Gentium*, that was highlighted last week as a good source of theological reflection on Mary and the Church.

Reflection One “Dying and Rising”

I think this may be one of the best reflective stories to introduce a session, certainly in the past six we have discussed this year. It reminded me of some of the best advice I received over the years in my hospital administration career from those excellent individuals I knew in pastoral care or in hospice. Be honest to the point that the answer to suffering and tragedy is most often that there is no answer to the specific why me or why now? For a Christian, the response of turning to the cross and the promise that comes with it, as the rest of this chapter suggests, is so often the only way to peace through acceptance.

I suspect that a good deal of conversation on the topics developed on page 92 may have occurred during our second session which highlighted the Pascal Mystery. The paragraph that begins with “Eternal life...” has two important aspects. One speaks about death as a mystery, and the second raises the question about the proof of the resurrection. While neither subject has any definitive treatment in the text, I would simply add that Christians today are living proof and heirs of those who first believed.

I suspect these topics in this section may lead to a discussion about our individual comfort with the idea of our dying. I know that this can be an uncomfortable conversation for some individuals but you may be surprised at your group’s ability to honestly speak about their feelings in this matter. A conversation along these lines really is a wonderful preparation for our entering into the great events of Holy Week. Those beautiful words from the Preface for a Christian Death—“Lord, for your faithful people, life is changed, not ended”—in some many ways almost encapsulate our entire conversation on this topic.

It might help again to offer an observation as the occasion arises of how our faith serves as a lens or a pair of glasses through which we observe the reality of the world around us. In that light of faith, then, that which occurs to all of us, namely suffering and death, can be seen in a different light. Those first two sentences starting the next to last paragraph on the bottom of page 91 should be underlined: “This belief in the promise of Christ...our hope” and “Our lives have real meaning...purpose in light of our faith.” To paraphrase Pope Benedict’s comments in the blue box on page 90 (from *Spe Salvi*, his second encyclical), Jesus himself has walked the path [of death], he has descended into the kingdom of death and conquered death, and he accompanies us now till the end of our days. Here is a more complete quote from the encyclical that broadens that last paragraph on the bottom of page 91:

“Here too we see as a distinguishing mark of Christians the fact that they have a future: it is not that they know the details of what awaits them, but they know in general terms that their life will not end in emptiness. Only when the future is certain as a positive reality does it become possible to live the present as well. So now we can say: Christianity was not only “good news”—the communication of a hitherto unknown content. In our language we would say: the Christian message was not only informative” but “performative”. That means: the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known—it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing. The dark door of time, of the future, has been thrown open. The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life.”

Benedict XVI, [Spe Salvi \(2\) Link to entire document](#).

So I would definitely give everyone time to talk about their level of comfort with dying. Some of the more powerful comments may come, even if with difficulty, from those who have lost loved ones recently, and certainly those who have gone through a wonderful hospice process.

Scripture: Pondering the Word

“I will raise them up”

John 6: 39-40

39

And this is the will of the one who sent me, that I should not lose anything of what he gave me, but that I should raise it (on) the last day.

40

For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life, and I shall raise him (on) the last day.”

This scripture is taken from the USCCB web site. This particular reading follows very closely the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes and is part of the beautiful “Bread of Life” discourse as scripture scholars call this section of John’s Gospel. Readings from this section of St. John’s Gospel are among the most frequently requested at Masses of Christian burial.

Sharing Questions

If the conversation hasn’t started about death and comfort, well the first question will certainly move things in that direction. Don’t hesitate to prod a bit with a question like, “Comfort in what sense?” By that I mean I have heard individuals tell me such things in a comforting vein as “I know I will see my spouse again” or “Mom can really watch over her grand kids now” or similar sentiments. It may help in the broadest sense to share the varying ways of “comfort” that our hope holds out to us. As far as the second question, the only logical response is really to begin with “Here’s what I believe and what has been a comfort to several thousand years of lived experience...” In other words, share the hope we find in Christ’s promise.

Reflection Two: “God’s Promise”

That first paragraph beautifully suggests the Christian life with Jesus as our model centers around love as the motivating factor of life. I would broaden that to suggest that the very love of the Trinity is indeed a model of Christian life. The love of God, neighbor, and self can be seen in a Trinitarian relationship. Let me suggest you picture God/Jesus at the apex of a triangle with self at the left corner and neighbor at the right. Just as there is mutuality of love that unites the Trinity in a true sense, so a model of Trinitarian love can be seen as that bond of love between your relationship to self, neighbor and God. Even though Jesus shows us the face of our God whom He wants us to call Father, I think it is good to remind ourselves of how much we are drawn into the Trinity of love: the sign of the cross as we begin Mass, our prayers, a quick dip into Holy Water, the priest’s words as he begins the consecration “Let your Spirit come upon these gifts”....and so on.

I love the interjected thought of how a “brush with death” in the middle of that first paragraph can be a wakeup call to love more while we are on earth. See if anyone has a story about a brush with serious illness and how that may have changed their perspective on living. I can remember one of my favorite cardiologists telling me that there is nothing more sobering than lying in bed in an ICU listening to your heart beat on a monitor after a heart attack, and remembering, if you can, what it felt like when it stopped. He went on to add to that famous line, “There are no atheists in a fox hole in combat *or in an ICU.*”

I would certainly call to everyone's attention sections CCC 1033 to CCC 1037 which is the entire section on "hell." This is not always a teaching that a gospel of prosperity and light finds comforting but the reality is that it is possible for us to choose to forever separate ourselves from God's great love.

I would suggest you underline the sentence in the third line down from page 93 beginning with the words, "Our willingness to walk the path of suffering.....is a sign of God's grace and an expression of hope." I think one of the key ideas here is that we as individuals can be signs of hope to one another. This should be evident when we see ourselves as God's hands here on earth reaching out to our neighbors and caring for those around us.

Equally important is the blue box on page 93 which has three related but wonderful quotes from the Catechism. That center one (CCC 1024) contains that beautiful definition of heaven as "the perfect life with the Trinity." I think this would be a good time to explore images and idea of what heaven is like, even though those last few sentences referring to St. Paul's words would clearly suggest that we really can't imagine what has been prepared for us. That last paragraph on the top of page 94 says it well, and the final sentence makes a fitting conclusion: "Ours is truly a faith in the Love (Jesus) that conquers death." How can we not be people of hope?

Sharing Our Faith

I imagine that some of the conversation suggested by the questions in this section may have already taken place but do point out that one question, "How did you love?" One of the most interesting retreats I ever made in college was given by a Jesuit in Washington, DC. As part of a reflection, he suggested we write our obituary. So there I was at the tender age of 21, struggling to answer that very question, "How did you love," that our retreat director had suggested for meditation. So in that spirit, I would encourage you perhaps to broaden that third bullet question from preparing for death this week to making this a part of our meditation during the remainder of Lent. For if we experience dying with Christ then surely we will rise with Him in our Easter celebration, filled with the true joy of his promise fulfilled for us.

Living the Good News

Even though the suggestions may be seen as "heavy" by some individuals, as a leader try to encourage everyone that we live in promise and hope and what we reflect on is simply a reality that all of us will face. The good news is that we know the "rest of the story" to quote a departed journalist, Paul Harvey. And that is founded on Christ's victory that we celebrate at Easter.

Lifting our Hearts

Before concluding with this prayer, let me again suggest you offer the group an opportunity to go around in prayers of petition for all those concerns and people we hold close to our hearts. For all of us with faith in Christ's promise, may we have the courage to call death our "sister" as St. Francis did, let us pray to the Lord...

Addendum: I thought I would add to the idea that I introduced above in the “Suggested Environment” section. While the idea is true that we do not have a picture of what heaven or everlasting life will be like, we do have some notions from scripture that give us some insights. I would especially refer you to part VI “The Hope of the New Heaven and the New Earth” found in the *Catechism*, sections 1042 to 1050. In the very first section, we are told that the “...righteous will reign for ever with Christ, glorified in body and soul.” I mention this because it is very clear when Christ appears to the apostles in the episode called the “doubting Thomas” that He has a body which bears the wounds of His Passion. Remember the invitation to Thomas to put his hands into the wounds? There is somewhat of a debate about what will be the nature of a “glorified body.” Certainly our bodies and the universe itself will not be bound by space and time constraints. The *Catechism* calls this a “mysterious renewal” which “will transform humanity and the world.” Section 1044 points out that “In this new universe, the heavenly Jerusalem, God will have his dwelling among men.” In 1045 mankind will be united in a mutual communion enjoying the beatific vision with God and the cosmos itself in the following section is described as “...freed from bondage to decay” with the visible universe restored to its original state. Section 1048 tells us that God is preparing a new dwelling and a new earth “...in which righteousness dwells” surpassing “all the desires of peace arising in the hearts of men.”

Now I’m mentioning this because in the next section, 1049, a caution is raised that bears repeating. To put it into my own words, we shouldn’t be so focused on the world to come that we in some way belittle or diminish our efforts to build God’s kingdom on earth. Remember Paul having to write to the Thessalonians who were so sure the end was coming that they were literally standing around idle? The promise of the transformed world to come and the promise of everlasting life have always been seen in the context of Christ’s overwhelming message of preaching the spread of God’s kingdom on earth. After all, it is here that we work out our salvation; and it is about our stay here on earth that we will be asked to demonstrate how we have loved God, self, and fellow men and women. I like to think as Bishop N. T. Wright does in his book, *Surprise by Hope*, that the goodness we build on earth will in some fashion be transformed and be part of that final transformed new earth and heaven.

Addendum Note: Any feedback you would like to give is most welcome. Please reply to allaabs1770@gmail.com