

HEAVEN
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Where is it? How do we get there?

This past week I watched a Barbara Walter's special on TV addressing the subject of heaven. She interviewed representatives of several religions, including Catholicism as well as people with near death experiences. Catholics should find this a cheeky question when posed by an apparently agnostic or atheistic person. Nevertheless she raises an interesting question in the context of American life in the 21st century. What do Americans think about the meaning of Heaven and what do they expect?

Many tried to use scripture to justify their positions. No one identified a primary cause; everything was expressions of feelings. There were only vague references to God; as if God was an incidental. These beautiful, flowery falderals were all about me-ism. God was an inconvenient auxiliary to the destination of achieving Heaven. In the end she left it up to you to reconcile the irreconcilable.

Catholics should have asked themselves, after seeing this program, "How can there be a heaven without a God?" For it is God who created Heaven as well as the earth. Heaven is about God and only God! Not a God that is conjured up by the limited imagination of man but a God that transcends all things that are.

One of the problems that man has is language. Our language and concepts are limited to human experiences which try to reduce God to the image of man. It is called "anthropomorphism." Man has a beginning, a life and an apparent end. We cannot conceive of an experience without that sequence. So, when Moses asked God who it was that was speaking to him from the burning bush, God replied "I am who am". Most of us miss the subtitles of this simple statement; that heaven is a perpetual now. God has no past and no future tenses, despite the fact that, in a great mystery the Second Person of

the Blessed Trinity entered history at a specific time and place, and will come again in the future. It is absolutely impossible for God to have a past; if He had, He would not be perfect because He could grow or increase. God can have no future, for this would make Him imperfect now. So God is immutably in the present tense; a mystery that the human mind cannot fathom. This immutable God has not changed nor can He change, as He could no longer be God by definition. There can be no other cause but one God. If there is more than one God, then God is not perfect and has an equal, and neither would be supreme.

Since we do not have the capacity, as humans, to have a divine vocabulary, we are unable to properly identify that which is beyond human capacity. We refer to God in the masculine gender, which God is not. It is only a means to make a point. God also is not feminine, nor neuter gender. God is above all sexuality. God is pure spirit, the full qualities of which we cannot know. [a mystery] The closest we can come to understand, is that God is the pure spirit of love, the burning furnace of charity, the never ending fountain of perfect love. God is awesome.

One of the first characteristics of love is that it wishes to be loved in return. That is why we have free will. Forced love is no love and it generates hatred. Another characteristic is that it wants to share, to have a relationship; that is why it creates. Man and the world were created out of this love. A third characteristic of love is that a true love is a forgiving love and a suffering as long as there is true repentance. Love is also a forbearance in order to teach and disclose. [making itself vulnerable] Further, human love is self-denial so the object of love can increase. A fifth point is that love is justice; for justice brings peace and truth. The depth of God's love for us is found in the incarnation; where Heaven is brought to earth.

The catechism question, "Why did God make me?" is still a valid question. To know , to love, and to serve Him, and to be happy with Him forever in Heaven. Where and what then is heaven? Heaven is not a material place to be located on a map; but a

supernatural existence incomprehensible to the human mind and experience. It is a supernatural knowledge of the Divine Essence in this eternal existence. The souls in heaven possess an immediate intuitive knowledge of this Divine Essence; but even then, not in its totality which takes forever. The souls of the damned, at the judgment, get but a glimpse of this perfection which is forever denied to them. Hell then could well be described as the acid of self-recrimination; the soul seeing only an intimation of what it could have had, and the understanding that it is never to achieve the purpose of it's creation. It is the death of the soul.

We cannot then let human experiences dominate this supernatural experience, such as expecting to have a grand family reunion up in the sky. The ability to see God face to face will be so absorbing, nothing else will matter, as we will be totally focused on the Beatific vision of God. All else pales against this experience.

How do we get there? You don't do it on your own! In a sense it is by invitation only. You get invited! Life on this earth is the invitation; love of God and neighbor is the invitation. Respect for our life and our soul is the direction. It is not an arbitrary choice; God's merciful judgment will decide which we have chosen based on truth. Will God the Father recognize His Son in us at the moment of death?

We are composed of both body and soul so we actually live in both worlds even though our eternal existence is veiled from our mortal consciousness. The world is what we know through experience; eternal life is experienced through faith, a reality based in a faith which is rooted in truth. Realization of both worlds become apparent when the veil of death is removed and the truth about who we really are, is exposed. Everyone wants heaven, but no one wants to die to get there. At the sight of real truth, we will be measured. Love is the divining rod of our mortal lives. Judgment comes before eternal bliss.

At the moment of death we are made incomplete; the soul becomes an incomplete life; for we were created as body and soul. To be truly human we must be made whole again, so that both can share eternal heavenly bliss; or both must share the reproach. This is why there must be a resurrection of the body for both body and soul were responsible for the deeds committed in this life. The resurrection is for both the righteous and the wicked. All will know our deeds at the resurrection. The body of the just will be glorified along with the soul in the presence of God and His Saints and His Angels. The bodies of the condemned will also be resurrected and with their souls will forever be in distress.

Those with near death experience have had a unique glimpse at perfect peace; and all seemed to relish it. The fear of death had been greatly reduced as they wished to repeat the experience. However, they didn't yet reach the point of judgment, which is the deciding factor for permanency in this spiritual journey to heaven and glorification. They did not say anything about an experience of judgment. It seems that they were turned around before the judgment, therefore did not have the complete experience. How to achieve heaven is well stated in the Gospel by Matthew 25:31-46. Too bad some never seem to get the message and fantasize about easy solutions to the universal experience of sin, virtue and death.