

“Who Art In Heaven” The Dwelling Place of God

ISSUE: What is heaven? Where is it?

RESPONSE: Heaven is “a living, personal relationship with the Holy Trinity. It is our meeting with the Father which takes place in the risen Christ through the communion of the Holy Spirit.”¹ It is the fulfillment of God’s desire to be one with each man as God is one with Himself in the Trinity (cf. Jn. 17:20-24).

The Church does not know a specific place for heaven, such as in the clouds, except to know that heaven is union with God, face to face, without the mediation of any creature (cf. Catechism 1023-1029).

DISCUSSION: Because of our limited understanding, no amount of description will provide a satisfying understanding of heaven’s reality. Historically, various men have described heaven as both a place and a state of being. However, no man can capture the reality and essence of heaven until he has experienced it personally. As St. Paul wrote, “[N]o eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2:9).

Time and Space: The First Frontiers

Time and space are creatures. As noted in Genesis 1:1, “IN THE BEGINNING God CREATED the heavens and the earth” (original emphasis). There was a moment in which time began. This was an act of creation by God, who is not bound by time. At that moment, God also created space, namely the heavens and the earth. Though they are two separate creatures, time and space compliment one another. Space was created within time, and creatures of space (eg. Sun, moon and stars) provide a telling of time. When considering the topic of heaven, it is important to remember that man on earth experiences time and space simultaneously. However, as separate creatures, it is not necessary that they exist with each.

God created man within the limits of time and space. This has its benefits. When we sin, we have time to repent and turn to God for mercy. Because of time, we have opportunity to change our ways. Time and space also limit us. We depend on the experiences of time and space to grow in knowledge and understanding. We do not simply know things, we learn them by experiences with other creatures. When we express our knowledge and thoughts, we do so according to the limits of our experiences.

Say What?

Language is the most powerful symbol man uses to express himself. By use of language, other signs and symbols are explained. Yet language falls short of expressing realities we do not fully understand. Everyone experiences this. On one occasion or another, we grapple with the right words to use when describing an experience or idea. We simply do not know what to say.

Heaven is one of those realities we do not fully understand. It is not limited to time and space as we are. As a result, none of our experiences with other creatures on earth can reveal fully the nature of heaven. Nor can our languages or imaginations describe it perfectly (cf. 1 Cor. 2:9).

When describing heaven, man has traditionally taken one of two approaches. Either he describes heaven as a state of being or as a place. It seems that each approach depends on whether the person starts with the characteristics of God or the characteristics of man.

What State of Mind Are You In?

God is eternal and omnipresent. He is not bound by time nor space. He existed before their creation. Because heaven existed as the dwelling of God before time, it must be eternal as well. This leaves us with two considerations. If we consider heaven as a created space, it must be a space “eternally created” by the very presence of God. This concept of

“eternal creation” makes no sense to our human understanding.² If heaven is not a creature, then it is simply His eternal presence. In either case, heaven would be both eternal and omnipresent. If omnipresent, can we really call it a place? With this line of reasoning, it is easy to see that heaven is far different than any place comprehensible to man on earth.

Explaining heaven as a state of being eliminates the confusion between created space bound by time and created space apart from time. Such an explanation appeals to the characteristics of God, particularly His eternal and omnipresent nature. As a state of being and not a place *per se*, our inheritance of heaven is understood as the fullness of communion with God. Traditionally, this is known as the beatific vision; the seeing of God.

However, heaven must contain space, because it contains the glorified body of Christ (Mk. 16:19; Lk. 24:51), as well as the bodies of Enoch (Gen. 5:24), Moses (Jude 9), Elijah (2 Kings 2:9-12) and the Blessed Virgin Mary (Rev. 12:1). At the end of time, it will contain the glorified bodies of all the saints. However, its reality is not a place bound by time and space as we know it, and this is incomprehensible to us. Its spatial reality is a reality of God’s glory, not a reality of the created world.

Thus Says the Church

In Magisterial documents, the Church falls short of stating “where” heaven is or defining it solely as a state of being. However, the Church does describe what happens in heaven, namely, union with God and with all His angels and saints (cf. Jn. 17:20-26, Catechism, no. 1023, 1024). Though in union with God, man does not lose his distinct nature and identity (cf. Catechism, no. 1025). He remains human, but becomes fully human in Christ as intended by God. It is this perfect union with God and transformation in Christ that is most important, not arguments about whether heaven is a place or state of being.

The Magisterium does not favor one theological approach over another. It does emphasize what happens in heaven, and uses common language to help describe different characteristics of heaven. In his edict *Benedictus Deus* (1336 AD), Pope Benedict XII uses the term “will be **in** heaven” to describe the destiny of the faithful departed. “In” can refer to a place or a state of being without favoring one over the other. Most recently, Pope John Paul II stated: “Today, personalist language is better suited to describing the **state** of happiness and peace we will enjoy in our definitive communion with God.”³ While he uses the term “state,” he does not qualify the term to “state of being,” “state of mind” or “state of body.” To further explain the concept, he quotes Catechism 1026 and explains:

The life of the blessed consists in the full and perfect possession of the fruits of the redemption accomplished by Christ. He makes partners in his heavenly glorification those who have believed in him and remained faithful to his will. Heaven is the blessed community of all who are perfectly incorporated into Christ.⁴

As St. Augustine wrote, “You made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”⁵ Heaven fulfills the desire of our hearts for God. Our lives on earth must be directed to seeking that perfect union with God that He meant for us from the beginning. When we reach that heavenly beatitude, our hearts will be filled with an intense love and joy that can only be described as God Himself.

Heaven on Earth

Many have tried to compare earthly experiences to heavenly realities. In Sacred Scripture, one of the most compelling signs of heaven’s glory is marriage; that is, the union of a man and woman in a covenant of love with God (cf. Rev. 21:1-4, Gen. 1:26-27). As intended from the beginning, marriage involves a total and free sacrifice of self for love of the other in the love of God. When this love is returned by the spouse, the mutual love of both brings unspeakable joy for life and hope for the future. The ecstasies shared by the couple in their love foreshadow the ecstasies of heaven and our union with God. This is why St. Paul, when writing about marriage, could say, “this mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32).

In addition to marriage, the liturgies of the Church and the other sacraments foreshadow the realities of heaven’s glories. This is particularly true of the celebration of Mass and the sacrament of Holy Eucharist. The liturgy of the Mass draws from the elaborate and beautiful images given to us in the Book of Revelation. In that book, St. John describes heaven and the praises of the angels and saints before God (Rev. 4-5). When we participate in the celebration of the Mass, we are

mysteriously drawn to the unending praises of God in heaven. Within time, we participate in worship that is outside of time. Because the Holy Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Jesus, our Lord and God, when we receive this sacrament, we experience the greatest physical and spiritual union with God on earth. In this, we share in a mysterious way the union God intends for us in heaven.

Our participation in the liturgies and sacraments of the Church are nothing less than our participation in the Communion of Saints. As the saints and angels worship before God in heaven, so on earth we participate in their glorious praise of His Name. The glory given the saints in heaven is our the hope as we yearn for God during our earthly exile. God has given us on earth a glimpse of heavenly realities that we may not lose heart. Let us find in our marriages, families and daily work the encouragement to keep our vision on God; a vision He calls us to in heaven's glory.

¹ John Paul II, General Audience of 21 July 1999, as quoted in *L'Osservatore Romano*, N. 30 – 28 July 1999, p.7, no. 4.

² Some theologians use the term “aeviternal” to explain this concept. Cf. *Theology and Sanity* by Frank Sheed, and *Summa of the Summa* edited by Peter Kreeft.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ St. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, 1,1,1. Trans. William A. Jurgens, *Faith of the Early Fathers* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1979) 56.

Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

1. How is heaven described in the Bible?
2. What makes heaven a difficult reality to understand?
3. How can I live my life in anticipation of heaven's glories?
4. What circumstances and events do I encounter every day that remind me of heaven?

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