

THE FOUR LAST THINGS III: “THE HOUND OF HEAVEN”

“I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; I fled Him, down the arches of the years; I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears I hid from Him...” These words were penned by Francis Thompson in his 1893 A.D. poem entitled *The Hound of Heaven*. It is a beautiful, even if haunting, account of a man’s ultimate search for God. Its most poignant aspect to me is that it is the story of God’s relentless pursuit of us. God Himself is the “Hound of Heaven,” never giving up on us, never tiring of seeking out the lost.

Generally speaking, I am rarely eager to “go out on a limb” and when discussing this week’s topic of heaven, I am especially inclined to remain conservative. “Speak what you know and know what you speak,” is sage advice. So when it comes to discussing heaven, I’ll be brutally honest and admit that we are all speculating to one degree or another. That heaven exists is a matter of Catholic dogma; in what heaven consists is much more difficult to delineate, much less define dogmatically. So what exactly can we know with some degree of certitude? First of all, we believe that those who die in God’s Grace (i.e. without an unrepentant mortal sin on their souls) and who are perfectly purified (i.e. following any necessary purification in purgatory) are indeed living with God forever in the blessedness of heaven. Of this much, our Catholic faith is quite clear.

To presume to know the realms of heaven is tough enough, to “picture it” without using our normal categories of perception is nearly impossible. How can I describe something without using the usual categories of human speech, without referencing the dimensions of time and space? Pope Benedict XVI touched on this point in a homily on the Solemnity of the Assumption in 2010, noting that in speaking of heaven, “we are not referring to somewhere in the universe, to a star or such like; no. We mean something far greater and far more difficult to define with our limited human conceptions. With this term ‘Heaven’ we wish to say that God, the God who made himself close to us, does not abandon us in or after death but keeps a place for us and gives us eternity. We mean that in God there is room for us.” Our Catechism very wisely states: “This perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity - this communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, the angels and all the blessed - is called ‘heaven.’ Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness.” (CCC paragraph # 1024)

Nor is heaven merely a “state of mind,” as some mistakenly claim. It is truly the fullness of life. Saint Ambrose wrote, “For life is to be with Christ; where Christ is, there is life, there is the kingdom.” While the Catechism notes in # 637 that by his descent to the realm of the dead, Jesus “opened heaven’s gates for the just who had gone before him,” it is equally true that the figures of Enoch (Gen. 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11) were ushered into heaven prior to the coming of Christ. On a matter such as the nature of heaven, an appropriate reserve, one might even say a certain “vagueness” pervades. This is good, lest we falsely think that we can solve and comprehend every mystery of faith. The Catechism adds in # 1029, “In the glory of heaven the blessed continue joyfully to fulfill God’s will in relation to other men and to all creation.” Could this signal that in heaven we maintain our relationships with others? I have long believed that since we were created to live in community that heaven would be difficult to comprehend if it consisted solely in a one-on-one vision of God, absent of the relationships that bound us to gather while on earth.

The contemplation of God in his heavenly glory is traditionally called the “beatific vision.” Described in the 14th century by Pope Benedict XII, these souls “see the divine essence with an intuitive vision and even face to face, without the mediation of any creature by way of object of vision... in this vision they enjoy the divine essence.” True enough, but again, as Pope Benedict XVI said in the homily referenced earlier: “Christianity does not proclaim merely some salvation of the soul in a vague afterlife in which all that is precious and dear to us in this world would be eliminated, but promises eternal life, ‘the life of the world to come.’ Nothing that is precious and dear to us will fall into ruin; rather, it will find fullness in God.” That more accurately captures my personal belief, and frankly, it was comforting to read. As time marches on, I

have fewer memories of my deceased loved ones, some of whom died when I was very young. My maternal grandfather died when I was just eight. His memory has largely faded, reduced to a few recollections. I largely recall him through the stories my family related after his death. In heaven, we need no longer speak of faded memories, but rather that God has made room for us in His presence, an eternal present, where memory and encounter meet. (Next week: Hell)

- In a document (*Misericordia et Misera*) signed at the conclusion of the Year of Mercy, Pope Francis extended the faculties of the Missionaries of Mercy indefinitely. I had received a letter from Rome last month reminding me that my term of service would end last Sunday, so this was an unexpected development. The commission includes the ability to remit the ecclesiastical penalties associated with particular sins (e.g. the desecration of the Eucharist or the breaking the seal of the confessional).
- The title of the document comes from a phrase used in the writings of Saint Augustine (On the Gospel of John XXXIII, 5), who when describing the scene of the woman caught in adultery, related that after those carrying stones had departed, only two remained, “mercy and misery.” In this context *misera* refers to the woman, miserable and rejected, and yet forgiven by Jesus who restores her dignity as a daughter of God.
- Henceforth, all priests throughout the world may remit the ecclesiastical penalty associated with abortion, something American priests have had through the local bishops for some time. That said, Pope Francis was quick to clarify: “I wish to restate as firmly as I can that abortion is a grave sin, since it puts an end to an innocent life. In the same way, however, I can and must state that there is no sin that God’s mercy cannot reach and wipe away when it finds a repentant heart seeking to be reconciled with the Father.”
- We were furiously running off additional copies of our Holy Door prayer cards given the large numbers who visited last weekend. The Vatican reported some key stats from the Holy Year: 21 million entered the Holy Doors in the four basilicas, and Archbishop Fisichella estimates from reports he received that likely between 56% and 62% of Catholics entered a Holy Door in their home diocese. Santiago de Compostela shattered its 2010 record for pilgrim visits, Krakow Poland estimates 5 million entered that Holy Door, and Guadalupe saw 22 million. The totals are amazing.
- See the sidebar to the right on page 5 for an exciting new item available as a gift for this Christmas.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector