

## XIX

### THE NEXT LIFE

#### DEATH

**F**OR every man the moment comes when the body has been so weakened or damaged that it can no longer respond to the life-giving energies pouring into it from the soul. This is the moment of death. The body proceeds to dissolve. What of the soul?

The soul, remember, did not receive its existence from the body; each soul is created directly by God.

The soul did not begin from the body; there is no reason why it should end with it. And once we have grasped that the soul is a spirit, and realize what a spirit is, we know that it cannot end. We are so accustomed to the union of soul and body that it is easy to feel that neither can exist, still less function, without the other. In the conditions of this life, the mind gets knowledge by its action upon the information brought to it by the body's senses, and we feel that it would be helpless without them.

But closer consideration shows that the real strangeness lies not in the soul's separation from the body but in the use the soul makes of the body while their union lasts. That a spirit, whose very nature is to know, should be dependent in its knowing upon a material body, which itself knows nothing, is sufficiently mysterious. We do not know *how* the spirit takes over the information brought by the senses, only that in the conditions of this life it does. Nothing entitles us to

hold that in the totally different conditions of the next life it still must.

The philosophers will carry you further. Meanwhile let us concentrate upon what God has told us of what follows the separation of soul and body.

It could hardly be put more neatly than by a song of a century back:

John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave,  
But his soul goes marching on!

Marching on to what? Go back a further half-century to Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner":

The souls did from their bodies fly—  
They fled to bliss or woe.

Bliss or woe—what decides?

Where the soul goes at death is decided by what we love. There is a marvellous phrase of St. Augustine—"amor meus pondus meum"—my love is my weight. In material things he saw weight deciding their movement—the heavy things went downward, the lighter upward. In the person, love does the same. He continues with a phrase roughly translatable as "wherever it is that I go, my love is what takes me there." One remembers Scripture's grim phrase about dead Judas—"he went to his own place." His love bore him there, his love for Judas.

For by the end of life the will has made its choice. Our love is either for God, or for self as distinct from God. Love of God takes us to God. Love of self as distinct from God takes us to a separation of self from God. Our Lord (Matthew xxv. 41) condenses the reality of hell into two elements—departure from God, everlasting fire.

## HELL

There is a horror in the thought of hell which, unless we use our mind fully upon what it means, can bring a taint, a perversion, into our comprehension of God. It can in plain words damage or destroy our grasp of the supreme truth about God uttered by the beloved disciple—"God is love." The perversion can take two forms.

The commonest is a feeling that hell and a loving God cannot be reconciled; if hell exists God is not love or, alternatively, since God is love, hell cannot exist.

Less common, subtler, but if anything more dangerous is one that can be found among many devoted Christians—a whole-hearted acceptance of hell, an almost luscious delight in the invention of tortures to be inflicted by a raging God upon sinners (in whose number they themselves evidently are not). They will associate this with God's love, but in such a way that love has a meaning unrelated to any known among men.

They tell a story in Scotland of a preacher describing the sufferings of the damned: these are up to their necks in boiling pitch; suddenly an angel swoops down with a scythe; they bury their heads in the pitch, emerge with their eyes streaming and gasp (I spare you the Scottish accent): "But, Lord, we didn't know." Then the Lord, bending over them "with infinite mercy and compassion," says, "Well, you know now."

It is a jest, of course, an exaggeration. But the exaggeration is not wholly wild, and there is a streak of seriousness in the jest. It would be no gain to be right about hell and wrong about God. We must see both truths—hell's existence and God's love—together.

The first perversion—that hell is incapable of reconciliation

with love—is shown to be such by the single fact that hell's existence is taught us by Christ who was supremely love. We have referred to one phrase. Earlier in St. Matthew's Gospel comes the Sermon on the Mount which begins with the Beatitudes and continues through three chapters (v-vii). In it Our Lord warns His hearers of hell at least five times. He speaks of it seriously but not, to use our earlier word, lusciously. We must study it seriously.

Leaving aside fancy—especially the sort of lavish indulgence in the invention of horrors that Dante goes in for—what do we actually know about hell? That it exists; that it came into existence with the fall of Satan and the angels who joined him in rebellion; that it is a place of suffering; that it is eternal. Of details, we have the one word *fire*, used of it more than once by Our Lord. It clearly means great suffering, for there are not many sufferings possible on earth worse than fire can inflict. But it does not help us much as detail; it differs too much from the fire we know: since it torments spirits (souls separated from bodies at death, angels who have never had bodies), and it does not consume bodies (when these are rejoined to souls at the end of the world).

Approach it as profound mystery—the mystery not of God's cruelty but of man's power to hate God. I do not mean that in most sinners hatred of God is primary or that sin begins with it. Sin begins with a perverted love of self. But love of self can grow monstrous, a sort of idolization of self, crowding out the love of all else and capable of turning into hatred of God. That may occur in this life or at death: to self-love grown monstrous God will be hateful once He is seen as the rival to the adored self.

The man, then, has chosen separation from God. The principal pain of hell results inevitably from the separation. Theologians call it the pain of loss. We were all made by God for union with Himself. Every one of us is a mass of

needs which only God can meet. It is no exaggeration to say that the soul needs God as the body needs food or water. To be deprived of these means agony, fearful while it lasts; but it will end in death. There is a like agony of un-met need for the soul deprived of God; and it will not end in death, for the soul is a spirit.

The lost soul has chosen self-sufficiency, and it is not sufficient. It has made itself its god, and a pitifully, desperately needy god it proves. This is the deepest torment of hell. What punishment the divine justice may inflict, we do not know. Theologians, seeing the pain of loss primary, speak also of the pain of sense. This may very well include punishment, and must in any event include sufferings of soul, and ultimately body, from the loss not only of God but of so much beside—the love and fellowship of other men and women, for example.

But being deprived of God is the essential pain, and this deprivation is willed by the self. It has nothing of God but His will to maintain it in existence. The God who alone could nourish it, it will not have.

When a man dies loving self to the hatred of God, what can God do with him? What He does do we know on His own word—He lets him go to his own place. It is hard to see what else He could do. He can hardly take him in to heaven, for that would mean an inconceivably close union with the God he hates, a ceaseless torment to the self he loves. Those who deny the existence of hell so confidently never seem to have considered this problem of the people who have made the choice of self against God (though there is nothing in our experience of life to make us feel it impossible). When their attention is drawn to it, they still do not consider it: they merely rap out the suggestion that God should simply annihilate such people—before birth perhaps, by withholding existence from those He knew would make the choice of

hatred. A study of the reasons God may have for not annihilating those who hate Him would take us theologically very deep. But quite apart from these, we have no reason of our own to conclude that condemned souls would want annihilation. To me it seems at least probable that love of self carried to that intensity would involve a clinging to self at all costs.

## PURGATORY

It is with some relief that we turn to the other possible love. At the end of life the will may have chosen to love God. As we have seen, the love of God will take the soul to God. The God-loving soul too will go to its own place, and its place is the presence of God.

In simple words, the soul is in sanctifying grace, whose very life-principle is charity, whose one purpose in the design of God is to bring men to the Beatific Vision. Yet it is possible for the soul, even supernaturalized by grace, to love God, yet not wholly. Its love of God is the decisive element in it, yet there may be lightless, lifeless elements in the way of that love's totality. There may be small things, unimportant things that we cling to, which are not according to God's will; along with the upward flight there may linger a certain downdrag to self, which may be no great matter yet *is* a defect in love, a defilement of love's purity. We learn from the Apocalypse (xxi. 27) that nothing defiled can enter heaven.

We might feel that faults so trifling might simply be overlooked by God, but He knows that perfection is, Himself aiding, within our grasp and He has given us the command: "Be ye also perfect, as my heavenly Father is perfect."

For most of us it is a plain matter of experience that our life is like that. We may really love God and try hard to serve Him. Yet we are conscious of venial sins, committed in the past and not repented, liable to be committed in the future;

we are conscious also, if we really think about it, of mortal sins repented yet not with the intensity that their foulness calls for; we feel that there are tendencies unconquered in us that could lead again, as so often in the past, to mortal sin. We make continuing efforts at improvement, but can hardly convince ourselves that we have tried our hardest. The state I have described is that in which a great many people live. The possibility is that in that state many will be found by death.

We may well believe that there are special aids at death. The prayers of others can bring actual graces. Extreme Unction, the Last Anointing, can cleanse us wholly—yet even that sacrament we can keep from complete fullness by some defect in the disposition with which we receive it. We may leave this life loving God, yet not perfect, not undefiled.

Observe that things of the kind I have listed are defects in nature, elements preventing total harmony between our nature and the supernature that has been infused into it. We love God, and there is no abiding place for love of God save the presence of God. But for that place we are still not ready. Purgatory exists to make us ready. The word is from a Latin verb meaning to cleanse; and cleansing is precisely what Purgatory is for. We gain no grace there, we emerge from Purgatory with no increase of supernatural life. It exists solely for the cleansing of our nature.

At this point one may suddenly remember St. John's phrase, "The blood of Christ cleanses us from all iniquity" (1 John i. 7). We may find ourselves wondering, if Christ's blood cleanses us from all iniquity, what there is left for Purgatory to cleanse us from. It is worth following up our wonder. It is true that nothing whatever can be cleansed in us apart from Christ's sacrifice on Calvary. Yet men may fail, totally or partially, to be cleansed by it. There is a part that they themselves must play if Christ's blood is to do that

cleansing which it alone can do. It is with this part that Purgatory is concerned. It may seem like labouring a truth already made sufficiently obvious to say that Purgatory does nothing for us that Christ's blood alone can do; it simply removes the obstacles that we have interposed to the cleansing power of His blood.

Far from being a lessening of Calvary's power, the existence of Purgatory means that this power can reach beyond the grave. If there is any spark of supernatural life in us, however overlaid by natural grossness, Our Lord's blood can still remove the grossness, and the supernatural life can at last reach its own true end.

How are the defects of nature removed in Purgatory? By direct action upon them, the most direct action possible, namely suffering. Twice before in this book we have dwelt upon what we may call the organic connection between accepted suffering and healing; we have seen that suffering of this kind is not the vengeance of an angry Judge, but the remedy of a Physician who understands us perfectly. We see the same truth in operation in Purgatory. Of the nature of the suffering, we have no revelation. But two elements in it seem obvious enough. The first is the soul's realization, surpassing any that could possibly be had in this life, of the evil of even venial sin, still more of the mortal sins which in this life it repented but not sufficiently. The second is the soul's longing for the vision of God, which it may not yet have.

But, as we have already shown, the acceptance of suffering is a reversal of the process of sin. For sin is the thrust of one's own will against God's. The total acceptance of God's will at whatever cost to the self brings sure healing.

One final matter seems worth mentioning. The Church teaches us that souls in Purgatory may be speeded towards healing, and so towards entry into heaven, by the prayers of us who remain upon earth. There is a special joy for the



Catholic in praying for his dead, if only in the feeling that there is still something he can do for people he loved upon earth.

#### HEAVEN

When the downdrag of self has all gone, whether at the moment of death or after the suffering of Purgatory, the soul speeds to God. It attains that total union with God for which He created all men.

At this point, what is said of the Beatific Vision in Section IX should be read again carefully. Observe how the very heart of life in heaven is expressed in *seeing*. Our Lord says that the guardian angels "see the face of My Father continually"; St. Paul says that in heaven we shall "know as we are known", shall "see face to face". St. John says "we shall see Him as He is".

Just as the knowledge of God by faith is the root of the supernatural life here below, the knowledge of God by sight is its very essence in heaven. Everything else flows from that. The Church has worked out in careful detail the meaning of this seeing. Thus Benedict XII tells us that the souls in heaven "see the divine essence with an intuitive face-to-face vision". All the great theologians have worked upon the distinction between the intellect's natural knowledge by way of idea and the direct vision of God in heaven—God Himself taking the place of the idea of God.

We shall see God as He is, see Father, Son and Holy Ghost in the distinctness of Persons. Mystery there will still be, for we shall remain finite, limited, and the finite mind cannot wholly contain the Infinite God. But the mystery, too, will be a cause of bliss.

The contact of the intellect with God means, of course, contact of the whole soul. The intellect, as we have seen, is not simply a part of the soul, which might be in direct contact

with God leaving other parts of the soul out of contact. The soul has no parts; it is, in the sense we have explained, simple. The will too is in direct contact with God, loving Him with nothing between; and this is true of the whole of man's being.

Every power in us, in fact, will be working at the fullness of intensity upon God who is the fullness of reality. Here we have the very heart of happiness.

In this contact, the soul does not cease to be itself, but is more wholly itself than it has ever been. It is not merged in God, like a drop lost in the bucket of the Infinite. The Infinite, one need hardly say at this stage, is not a bucket; the Infinite too is wholly simple and cannot receive admixture. God will always be Himself, man will always be himself, always God's image. Nor, remaining eternally distinct from God, does man, as some pious writers seem to suggest, lose all consciousness of self. One assumes that, thus writing, they intentionally exaggerate, their object being to emphasize the glory of the Infinite. But every man is the work of God, and God's glory is not served by ignoring any part of His work, even the part that happens to be oneself. God still deserves praise for having created us of nothing, still deserves gratitude; to lose all consciousness of self is no good basis for praise or thanksgiving.

There is another result of the desire to glorify God. We must be gratefully and delightedly conscious not only of ourselves but of all the other souls in heaven who are of God's workmanship. He loves them, they are united with Him; we must love them and be in the closest union with them.

Of those we shall thus know and love as we have never known or loved anyone on earth, the first is evidently Christ, God the Son in His human nature, and the second, as evidently, His mother. These two alone, before the Last Judgment and the end of the world, will have their risen bodies. There will be other human souls; there will be the angels.

Our love for those still upon earth will not have perished; love is not meant to perish. So far as God reveals their condition to us, we shall be profoundly concerned, and shall pray God to aid them. If the objection is raised that all this concern with other people seems to involve too much distraction from the direct vision of God, Our Lord Himself has answered it. For it was of the angels entrusted with the guardianship of small children here upon earth that He said: "They see the face of My Father continually."

For many, most of us perhaps, the first reaction to a straightforward statement of this sort about heaven is a feeling that there seem to be a lot of earthly pleasures we shall miss rather badly. We imagine ourselves as sometimes looking back to the dear dead days before we were raised to eternal bliss.

Two immediate considerations follow this. The more obvious is that we have no awareness of what the *pleasures* of life in heaven will be. There is no way of realizing a pleasure until one has enjoyed it. The most eloquent analysis will not tell one with no experience of it. You cannot convey the delight of colour to a blind man. There are a host of adult joys that cannot be conveyed to children. In heaven the blindness of earth will be gone; we shall at last be grown up.

The other consideration is that we have taken pleasure in things or happenings in this life either for the reality in them or for what we delude ourselves into imagining that they possess. The second sort will cease in heaven, for there is no place for delusion or illusion there. But the first sort we shall have in greater measure, because whatever reality is in any created thing is there by the gift of God. It is, therefore, in infinite perfection, in God Himself, and with Him we shall be in living contact.