

## LIFE & DEATH

Much of life and death remains for us a mystery; we cannot grasp it completely. We do not fully know or understand exactly how a new life is created but we know that as a child leaves its mother's womb, he or she moves from a familiar world to a new world; a world of life outside the safety of the womb. Life is changed, but the child is still the same person.

In the same way, we do not fully understand exactly how a life in this world ends in death. We know the facts of death, just as we know the facts of life, but there is much that we do know and a great deal we do not understand.

### MAKING SENSE OF DEATH

Individual Christians, like any other group of people, show various attitudes towards death. These range from outright terror, through fear to gentle acceptance and even, sometimes, longing expectation. Death remains a unique challenge to all people. It loses none of its finality, suddenness or cruelty. Death comes to Christians just as it comes to everybody else, but Christians meet death in a special way. The scriptures see death as an inevitable part of being human. There is a link between our sinful condition and our death. However, this law of sin and death is dramatically affected by the saving death of Jesus. The death of Jesus stands as the turning point in the history of death. In dying and rising, Jesus gave a new meaning to death.

The whole purpose of the life and death of Jesus Christ was to show clearly that there is more to life than we experience here on earth. Our faith gives us a guide to understanding death because it is based upon the words and life of Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus came to reassure us of God's deep love and commitment to each and every person in this world. He showed us, too, how our lives and our futures are caught up with one another; we cannot live in isolation - we belong to the family of God. This means, of course, that we are also victims on one another, just as Christ himself was a victim of the people and the times in which he lived. Many people at that time, and in the years since, have wondered why, if Jesus was the Son of God, he didn't use his power to control and contain evil. But because God's love is complete and entire for all his people, good and bad alike, he is not prepared to step in and solve the problems of the world in a worldly way. If he did so, he would take away from people their responsibilities and the opportunity to change and to grow in goodness.

The Kingdom of God is the kind of kingdom that grows slowly, like a small seed in the earth. It is to grow within each of us, good and bad, so that we may become more and more like Jesus Christ. In this way the values of the world will be transformed and renewed so that the love of God will be clear to everybody. God is not prepared to write off even the greatest sinner because he loves each of us so very much.

### THE FINAL PURIFICATION – PURGATORY

All those who die in God's grace and friendship are indeed assured of their eternal salvation – but they are still imperfectly purified or cleansed of the effects of their sins. After death they undergo purification so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven and the presence of God.

The Church gives the name **Purgatory** to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned. The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence and Trent. The tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts in scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire. This teaching is also based on the practice of prayer for the dead, again mentioned in sacred scripture. From the beginning, the Church has honoured the memory of the dead and offered prayers

for them, particularly during the Mass, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God. The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead.

Let us help and commemorate them. If Job's sons were purified by their father's sacrifice, why should we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and offer prayers for them.

On All Souls Day (2<sup>nd</sup> November) we profess that we truly long to be with our Father in heaven. We also acknowledge that in Jesus Christ we must be completely purified of all the effects of sin if we are to enter into the divine presence. We pray for all those who have gone before us "marked with the sign of faith", asking Jesus to complete the work begun in our departed brothers and sisters at their baptism.

*"Father, we ask that you look lovingly upon our brothers and sisters who have died and long to be with you. Through the blood of Jesus, cleanse and purify them of sin and its effects. Allow them to gaze upon your face, the face they long to see, and reveal to them the glory of your Son, Jesus Christ."*

## CATHOLICS AND DEATH

Catholics, in common with other Christians, believe that death is not the end of life. It is an important move towards a greater and richer fulfillment of life and all that is good. In the certainty of Christ's death and resurrection we see the complete triumph of Jesus over death. In baptism, every Christian is united forever with Jesus Christ and therefore shares in his triumph over death in this world.

For a Catholic, then, death means that life is changed, not ended. Our sorrow and loneliness at the loss of a loved one carries in the midst of our tears our sure and certain belief in the resurrection of the body from the dead and life everlasting. In the prayers of the Mass, we pray for those who have died using these words:

*"To our departed brothers and sisters  
and to all who were pleasing to you  
at their passing from this life,  
give kind admittance to your kingdom.  
There we hope to enjoy for ever the fullness of  
your glory  
through Christ our Lord,  
through whom you bestow on the world  
all that is good."*



Brothers and sisters in faith, we entrust you to the God who created you.  
May you return to the one who formed you from the dust of this earth.  
May Mary, the angels and all the saints come to meet you as you go forth from this life.  
May Christ, who was crucified for you, bring you freedom and peace.  
May Christ, the Son of God, who died for you, take you into his kingdom.  
May Christ, the Good Shepherd, give you a place within his flock.  
May He forgive your failings and purify you and keep you among his people.  
May you see your Redeemer face to face and enjoy the sight of God for ever, **Amen.**

*Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them.  
May they rest in peace. Amen.*