

FEAR AND DESIRE: THE LAST THINGS

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THOUGH THERE is currently a great deal of pastoral care in the Church at 'grass-roots' level for the sick, the aged and the dying, there is a curious silence on the part of the theologians concerning the 'Last Things' — particularly concerning Judgment, Purgatory/Hell, and Heaven. Boros and his 'moment of truth' seems either not to have reached the ears of the average Catholic, or to leave him or her unmoved. How does the average catechist handle this topic today? Such is the title and the brief for this article, with which I have been presented.

First, it will be as well to recall the understanding of the 'Last Things' which most catholic catechists inherited, and then to see what factors have tended to undermine the old understanding before considering how the topic is handled today. Any catechist over the age of forty, and many catechist younger than that, were brought up on a 'body/soul' philosophy and one that was very 'time-bound'. I use the word 'philosophy' here very loosely, since in my own case, when I came to study scholastic philosophy, I discovered that 'body' and 'soul' meant something quite other than I, and my childhood teachers, had always supposed. There we were, body and soul. The body was corruptible, the soul was immortal. At death, the body died and was buried in the ground. The soul went to heaven, where it faced God and received a Particular Judgment. Then it went to its place, Heaven (for ever), Hell (for ever), Purgatory (for a time) or Limbo (for ever), until the end of the world, when it was summoned again for the General Judgment, along with all the dead. On this Last Day, at the General Judgment, the bodies were raised from the dead and given out again; whereupon each soul went to its place once more, but this time with the body. It was never actually stated, but was generally understood, that purgatory came to an end at the time of the General Judgment. Probably, we are so used to hearing of the souls in purgatory, we cannot visualize bodies being there.

Hell was a place of eternal punishment, heaven a place of eternal

reward, purgatory a place of temporary fire and punishment, limbo a place of everlasting natural joy. Nobody could describe heaven, because St Paul said 'The eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man, what things God hath prepared for them that love him'. Everybody, on the other hand, could describe hell. We were given the general idea of the range of torments which may be found in Chaucer's *The Parson's Tale*, or James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Judgment was on a basis of rewards and punishments: rewards (eventually) for those whose thoughts, words and deeds had been good or at least not mortally sinful since their last confession, punishments for the rest.

Some teachers and catechists have not moved on from this understanding, as one can discover from conversation with their pupils; but the average teacher and catechist has moved a long way. One of the first radical changes which came about along with the new post-catechism style of religious teaching was the tacit and almost universal decision to drop the language of 'body and soul' and to talk instead about 'people' or 'person'. This quiet revolution happened in many quite different corners of Catholic life at the same time. Young priests, especially those who were naturally gifted in philosophy, became impatient with the limitations of scholastic philosophy in a world where every other philosopher had given up talking about body and soul or substance and accidents roughly three hundred years ago, in favour of other ways of describing reality. The climate of openness in seminaries was conducive to a sympathetic study of more modern philosophies. In schools and catechism classes, once the teacher no longer relied word for word on the catechism but began to speak from the heart, the language of everyday took over. Such language has differed from that of scholastic philosophy for several generations. The researches of Piaget and, say, Ronald Goldman, showed teachers the pitfalls of using abstract concepts like 'body' and 'soul' with young children, since a child will always make a concrete picture, and imagine the soul as something with a shape and size and colour, inside his body somewhere. (Most teachers even today would not recognize that 'body' is just as much an abstract concept as 'soul', when the two are spoken of together. They would think it means simply the physical, visible, body, which of course it does not, nor ever did, in scholastic philosophy, where body is 'informed' by soul.) Simultaneously, the reform of the liturgy has brought about the systematic dropping of the body-and-soul language: and, to some extent, the

language of 'this life' and 'the next life'. (We shall return later to a discussion of 'eternal life'.) The official prayers of the Church in the english liturgy have stopped talking about 'all that we need for soul and body' almost completely. The exceptions, strangely enough, are mostly in the funeral rites, which still tend to talk about burying this body which will one day be reunited with the soul.

Other factors have contributed to a change in language and understanding about the 'Last Things' in this past generation. One major factor has been the Catholic rediscovery of scripture; another has been the simultaneous discovery by Catholics of modern scriptural criticism, and the existence of different literary forms in the bible; yet another the rediscovery by many Catholics that God's love is free. This rediscovery of the Good News has been helped by the abandonment of the old catechism, by the reading of scripture, and by the general decision to let heart have more say than head, in such matters as mortal sin, and hell and devils. Limbo has been quite happily dropped altogether, with never an Infant teacher to mourn its passing. The words eschatology and eschatological, so beloved of scripture scholars, nearly put the average catechist off 'retraining courses' for good and all. None the less a more scriptural understanding of the 'Last Things' has been the result. It has also been possible, by degrees, to encourage teachers not to take fright but to gain confidence when confronted with less literal interpretations of some parts of scripture. The Old Testament passages like Jonah and the whale caused less anxiety than, say, the Ascension; but nowadays most teachers would be open to guidelines asking them not to treat the Ascension as if it were a space-shot, with heaven 'up there' and physical clouds hiding a physical body from physical sight. Another factor of change in attitudes which deserves mention here is the official acceptance by the Catholic Church of the practice of cremation. This, as much as anything, has weaned the imaginations of teachers and children away from pictures of revived corpses, and towards some kind of notion of what St Paul might mean by risen bodies 'being spiritual bodies, not physical bodies (1 Cor 15, 44). Children in school are very conscious these days of the whole notion of our one world being limited in its resources, and everything material being recycled and used again, not least of all by people in their bodies. All generations could not be physically present at the one time, so the general resurrection must mean something other than physical presence.

Such, then, is the background against which the average catechist

of today has grown up, and through which he or she has matured, as regards the Catholic doctrines about death, judgment, purgatory, heaven and hell. How does the same average catechist handle the topics today? Suppose we take them in the reverse order, and start with hell. Some teachers have dismissed hell from their minds altogether, probably not so much because they do not believe in the possibility of such a state, as because they find the teaching of it impossible to cope with. For a while there was a popular libel that 'the new catechetics' had done away with hell altogether. This misunderstanding came about because the catechetical guides strongly advised parents, teachers and catechists to be positive in their teaching, and to come away from stressing sin, mortal sin especially, and hell. Since children under the age of eleven are certainly incapable of mortal sin, they are certainly incapable of understanding hell. Hence adults were requested to avoid mentioning either topic with younger children. Eleven was the age at which, in England at the time, most children moved on to Secondary School. In Secondary school, as the new syllabuses of religious education were gradually introduced, some teachers were probably a little startled to find that hell was still mentioned. It is described as a state, not a place. The state is one of permanent hatred of God and of all goodness. No one is 'sent' there by God. We do not know if any dead person is 'in hell', not even Judas Iscariot, or Adolf Hitler. All we know from Jesus and from the Church is that this life is serious, and our choices have a permanent effect on us; and that it is a real possibility to choose evil for ever instead of good. The main agony of hell is, or would be, my own rejection of love, of the very God I was created for, and who loves me.

A story which was used locally for a while was the Korean legend of the hero who was conducted round hell in a vision, and saw the wicked tormented by the sight of mountains of food, which the guardians prevented them from eating except with chopsticks six feet long: an impossible feat. Then the hero was conducted to heaven, which looked exactly the same, except that the good people there looked contented. 'Ah, so here they may use their fingers to eat food?' 'No', said a guide, 'these too must use the chopsticks six feet long. But these are they who have learned in their lifetime that if you feed another person, he will probably feed you in return'.

The average catechist would find such an illustration reasonable, and be able to teach it with conviction. The average pupil, however,

is no longer as docile (in the sense of 'teachable') as he apparently used to be. A lot of children have definite ideas of their own about the after-life, gleaned not least from their parents who a generation ago sat there so docile, apparently taking it all in about the Four Last Things. There is a widespread belief in reincarnation, and an even wider belief that death is the end, that there is no personal resurrection. Fairly popular is the idea that the good will live for ever, and the wicked simply be snuffed out like a candle: which would be very convenient for the virtuous, who would then be spared the inconvenience of forgiving the wicked. There is a slow dawning among teachers, that the people Jesus saw as being in most danger of hell were the self-righteous good people, the 'elder brothers', the 'all-day-long labourers', who were unwilling to share the kingdom of heaven with the sinners God chooses to forgive.

Heaven too is generally taught now as a state or a process, rather than a physical place. Heaven is 'the joy of my Father', the joy of being God's child. We start to experience that joy here and now, but we believe that after death the joy will be unmixed with sorrow. There is still a fairly general effort by teachers and catechists to get children to think of heaven as a surprise gift, which we will never fully appreciate until we open it — mainly because children can get into such a hopeless tangle when they try to imagine heaven. They think of endless time, and think that is what eternity means. Some children are almost as afraid of heaven as they could be of hell! On the other hand, the more we become familiar with scripture, the more we find that it is full of pictures of heaven: going home after separation from parents; a party; a holiday; a wedding-day celebration; a happy ending; the end of a long journey; a spring day after winter; the sun rising after we have endured a long, sleepless night; health again after sickness; the finding of something precious we had lost; the arrival of a longed-for letter; the end of an ordeal; rest and triumph after winning a race or doing well; happiness after tears; being found after being lost; hard work over, time now to play . . . all these and many other symbols of heaven are within the children's experience. They can also appreciate that the more absorbed and happy they are, the quicker time goes — or rather, time stops. Heaven may also be thought of as a process of development, since God's love is inexhaustible: we go on seeing further and further into it.

Whether or not the children yet see heaven as their inheritance depends on the teacher's understanding. I would doubt whether one could safely say that the average teacher or catechist knows that

heaven is a free gift: God's free gift of himself to his child, to his children. Many teachers, I find, still believe and teach that heaven must be earned by good deeds. Children naturally believe this. In terms of the title of this article, they, teachers and children, would be surprised to find that heaven is mine if I desire it, and that the real enemy is fear, the fear which prevents a person from believing that God could be so foolish as to love him or her. One facet of heaven which is being understood differently by more and more teachers is the thought that 'heaven starts now'. The kingdom of heaven of which Jesus so often speaks as being here and now, is both identified and continuous with heaven-after-death. Eternal life starts now. There are things we can do which the moth and the rust can never destroy. We are now like unborn infants in the womb, developing the 'limbs' and the 'lungs' we shall need to live in God's air. 'He who is not busy being born is busy dying'. We are like butterflies at the chrysalis stage, seeds at the underground stage. All this is nothing new, of course; but what is new is the tendency to call this heaven as well as that. 'This life' and 'the next' are seen more as continuous. 'The joy of our Father' can start now.

Purgatory, likewise, tends to be seen as a continuous state or process starting now. Again, this is not altogether new. Catholics have in the past often said of people who have suffered a lot in their lifetime, 'surely they will go straight to heaven, because they have had their purgatory here'. Teachers, and many non-teaching Catholics, are making a conscious effort to cut out time-language in speaking about purgatory, since there is no time once we die. We have always recognized this truth in traditional Catholic philosophy; but at present there is a real effort to eliminate the 'time' element from our thinking about all the 'Last Things'. One hears teachers say that purgation can be a matter of intensity, part of the experience of dying, not necessarily to be measured in time at all. All the Catholic Church actually teaches is that there is purgatory, and that we help those in purgatory by remembering them in our prayers to God. Christians only gradually began to pray for their dead brothers and sisters, when the second and third generations of the early Church began to wonder if some of those who died were ready to see God.

About judgment, there have been many altered ideas which the average catechist has absorbed. The 'particular judgment' and the 'general judgment' are seen to be two ways of looking at the one judgment, according to whether we think of the individual or the community, the human being or the human race, my conscience or

our conscience. Since the risen body is so very different from my present body, that is, spiritual and not physical, then there is no saying that particular judgment, general judgment, and the resurrection of the body may not all coincide with the moment of death for each person who dies. There is, so to speak, no longer any need to wait around for the end of the world, for all the bodies to rise from their graves. I can still remember being shocked to find that Thomas Aquinas held that it was conceivable that the world would continue for ever, that there was perhaps no beginning and no end to time (eternity being something quite different from unending time).

So much for the 'mechanics' of judgment day. As for the things that will be judged, here too there are changes — or are they changes? Perhaps they are as old as the gospel, and it is only that another generation hears the Good News and thinks that nobody else ever heard it before. At all events, Jesus said 'Judge not, and you shall not be judged', which is very simple. I promise not to judge you, and you promise not to judge me; that is all there is to judgment.

Teachers are still a bit hesitant over taking Jesus at his word about judgment (or about non-judgment), partly because of his parable concerning the sheep and the goats. There is still the uneasy feeling at the back of many minds, that Jesus has already seen the last judgment, and that in this parable he was giving an almost photographic picture. It needs to be pointed out again and again that the story is a parable, that none of us alive is either totally 'sheep' or totally 'goat'. We are all a mixture of both. For every little one we feed, we leave another to starve. For every sick person we visit, we leave another unvisited. We are right hand and left hand. Jesus is not dividing human beings into good human beings and bad human beings: he is dividing up the good and the bad in every human being, and stating which are the actions which will live for ever.

The Day of the Lord (and with it, eternal life and the kingdom of heaven) has come already. The day Jesus rose from the dead by the power of God, on that day all those were vindicated who trust in God as their Father, and who are willing to share the inheritance with their brothers and sisters, worthy or unworthy, since God has forgiven them and us. The vindication is not yet clear to all, but it is real, and it is here.

About death, what are we to say? The brief for this article observed that Ladislaus Boros and his 'moment of truth' seems either not to have reached the ears of the average Catholic, or to leave him unmoved. Boros argued the following hypothesis: *Death is*

man's first completely personal act, and is, therefore, by reason of its very being, the place above all others for the awakening of consciousness, for freedom, for the encounter with God, for the final decision about eternal destiny. Many of the arguments he uses, particularly the philosophical ones, involve analysing present experience and then projecting it to the moment of death. They all seem to stand up well as philosophical arguments, but if one tried to make popular use of them, the child in the desk would repeat (even though Boros proves that he should not repeat), 'But how do you know? No one has ever died and come back to tell us about it'. Children, I think, would be frightened at the thought of so much depending on one moment, even though Boros makes it clear that 'the final decision is in part determined by the preparatory decisions taken during the course of a lifetime'.

I am sure, however, that the 'grass-roots' pastoral care for the sick, for the aged and for the dying can be connected with much that Boros is saying. As the curve on our graph indicating 'physical vigour' moves towards zero, the curve of spiritual growth reaches up ever higher. Death is the moment of greatest dignity. Death is the last page of an epic poem, the writing of the last bar of a great symphony. Jesus redeemed us all by his death. All love is a death to self. All trust is blind. God is saying, 'Jump! I will catch you', and that means letting go of whatever we hang on to. If ever the popular mind is ready to accept Boros's contention that *Death is a sacramental situation* it will be because of a grass-roots willingness to help one another to face death, and a constant effort to invest death with the dignity of a 'moment of truth'.

Death fascinates a lot of children. The catechist assures the child that there is no real need to be afraid: Jesus will be with him, and this is a gate through which we all have to go to gain our final freedom and be with God. Most teachers of religion have spent twenty years trying to get away from 'preparing the children to die well', and have instead tried to inspire them to live well. The main catechesis on the subject of death, old age and sickness must surely always be directed towards the sick, the aged and the dying themselves and those who care for them. Youngsters need to be taught to trust, and to live. 'Reach for the stars: I will catch you if you fall', is God's attitude to the young, and should be our attitude to them as well. Each time we invite them to another step forward, and even more so each time we support, forgive and console them when they fail, we are rehearsing them in the moment of truth, though we need not tell them so just yet.