

Faith Affirms Life After Death

Church Teaching Clarified in Letter

Pope John Paul II recently ordered the publication of a letter from the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on several questions currently being raised about the resurrection and the afterlife.



That letter, dated May 17, and signed by Cardinal Franjo Seper, the prefect of the congregation, and Bishop Jerome Hamer, OP, secretary, is being sent to bishops around the world.

Following is an excerpt from that letter, pertinent to the stories which follow.

The Sacred Congregation, whose task is to advance and protect the doctrine of the faith, here wishes to recall what the Church teaches in the name of Christ, especially concerning what happens between the death of the Christian and the general resurrection.

The Church believes in the resurrection of the dead.

The Church understands this resurrection as referring to the whole person; for the elect it is nothing other than the extension to human beings of the Resurrection of Christ itself.

The Church affirms that a spiritual element survives and subsists after death, an element endowed with consciousness and will, so that the "human self"

subsists. To designate this element, the Church uses the word "soul," the accepted term in the usage of Scripture and Tradition. Although not unaware that this term has various meanings in the Bible, the Church thinks that there is no valid reason for rejecting it; moreover, she considers that the use of some word as a vehicle is absolutely indispensable in order to support the faith of Christians.

The Church excludes every way of thinking or speaking that would render meaningless or unintelligible her prayers, her funeral rites, and the religious acts offered for the dead. All these are, in their substance, loci theologici.

In accordance with the Scriptures, the Church looks for "the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ," believing it to be distinct and deferred with respect to the situation of people immediately after death.

In teaching her doctrine about man's destiny after death, the Church excludes any explanation that would deprive the Assumption of the Virgin Mary of its unique meaning, namely the fact that the bodily glorification of the Virgin is an anticipation of the glorification that is the destiny of all the other of the elect.

In fidelity to the New Testament and Tradition, the Church believes in the happiness of the just who will one day be with Christ. She believes that there will be eternal punishment for the sinner, who will be deprived of the sight of God, and that this punishment

will have a repercussion on the whole being of the sinner. She believes in the possibility of a purification for the elect before they see God, a purification altogether different from the punishment of the damned. This is what the Church means when speaking of Hell and Purgatory.

When dealing with man's situation after death, one must especially beware of arbitrary imaginative representations: excess of this kind is a major cause of the difficulties that Christian faith often encounters. Respect must however be given to images employed in the Scriptures. Their profound meaning must be discerned, while avoiding the risk of over-attenuating them, since this often empties of substance the realities designated by the images.

Neither Scripture nor theology provides sufficient light for a proper picture of life after death. Christians must firmly hold the two following essential points: on the one hand they must believe in the fundamental continuity, thanks to the power of the Holy Spirit, between our present life in Christ and the future life (charity is the law of the Kingdom of God and our charity on earth will be the measure of our sharing in God's glory in heaven); on the other hand they must be clearly aware of the radical break between the present life and the future one, due to the fact that the economy of faith will be replaced by the economy of the fullness of Life: we shall be with Christ and "we shall see God," and it is in these promises and marvellous mysteries that our hope essentially consists. Our imagination may be incapable of reaching these heights but our heart does so instinctively and completely.

Some Scientists Claim 'Proof'

San Diego — For several years now, Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, an authority on death and dying, has been trying to give Christianity something she thinks it has always needed, but with few, if any, takers.

What Christianity has always needed, says the Swiss-born psychiatrist, is proof for one of its most cherished beliefs, the existence of an afterlife. Dr. Kubler-Ross is convinced she has such proof. But Christians have in the main responded with at best polite indifference.

Dr. Kubler-Ross, who only a few years ago did not even believe in God, now says she has proof not only that there is a God but that there is an afterlife in which everyone goes to Heaven, so to speak, because God is too good to send anyone to Hell even if such a place existed.

She gets her "proof" from dozens of so-called "near death" experiences of patients whose souls supposedly left their bodies and caught a glimpse of the hereafter before being returned to earthly life.

These are similar to experiences reported by Virginia psychiatrist Raymond Moody except that Dr. Moody is more tentative in his conclusions, whereas Dr. Kubler-Ross takes them as proof positive for the existence of a hereafter.

The experiences they report are quite similar. Typically, they begin with a seriously ill patient who hears a hissing, loud ringing or other uncomfortable sound and feels himself pulled through a long, dark corridor.

He then finds himself outside his own body, much as the soul presumably does after death, viewing it and other people as from afar. Next, he meets a warm, loving spirit, variously identified as God, Christ or an angel, who compassionately, non-judgmentally and non-verbally invites the wandering soul to evaluate his life, warts and all.

The soul then reaches a barrier of some kind and learns its time has not yet come, that it must return to its earthly body and existence.

For Dr. Kubler-Ross, such reports prove that dead persons — or at least "near dead" persons — can indeed tell tales.

But most Christian churchmen remain skeptical. They say either that belief in the hereafter is a matter of faith rather than scientific proof, that her patients never really died and that her evidence is more apt to prove life after resuscitation than life after death.

"Only one person has ever come back from the dead to tell us authoritatively what lies beyond and that was Jesus Christ," says Protestant evangelical theologian Carl F.H. Henry

"All sorts of fantastic experiences may be possible in a near-death experience or when we merely approach the outer gates. But after all is said and done, we're still dependent on Biblical revelation for what lies beyond death."

Other Scientists Have Other Theory

New York (RNS) — Claims of life-after-death experience by resuscitated persons may have a perfectly natural explanation — memory regression to the experience of birth, an eminent American scientist postulates.

The dying process may somehow trigger the hidden memories of birth, according to Dr. Carl Sagan, who has become widely known for his writings popularizing science.

He writes that "every human being, without exception, has already shared an experience like that of those travelers who return from the land of the dead: the sensation of flight; the emergence from darkness into light; an experience in which, at least sometimes, a heroic figure can be dimly perceived, bathed in radiance and glory. There is only one common experience that matches this description. It is called birth."

The Pulitzer Prize-winning science writer and Cornell University astrophysicist offers his theory in a recently published book of essays, *Broca's Brain*.

He writes that he arrived at his position wondering how it could be "that people of all ages, cultures and eschatological predispositions have the same sort of near-death experience?"

Dr. Sagan says that the "experiences may be just what they seem and a vindication of the pious faith that has taken such a pummeling from science in the past few centuries." But, he adds, other explanations can't be ignored.

Psychedelic drugs, he continues, induce the same sort of mystical experiences reported by dying persons.

For instance, the writer points out that drugs known as ketamines cause persons to think they have had "out of body" experiences. Similarly LSD induces a "sense of union with the universe."

"If something like ketamine is released in times of mortal danger or near-death," Dr. Sagan asks, "and people returning from such an experience always provide the same account of heaven and God, then must there not be a sense in which Western as well as Eastern religions are hard-wired in the neuronal architecture of our brains?"

Dr. Sagan draws heavily upon the research of Dr. Stanislav Grof, a physician and psychiatrist in Baltimore, MD., who has been experimenting for 20 years with LSD and other psychedelic drugs in psychotherapy. Dr. Grof, the science writer says, has led persons to re-experience suppressed memories of events around the time of their births.

Dr. Sagan cites four stages in the birth process, as recounted in psychedelic therapy. The first stage is one of "blissful complacency of the child in the womb, free of all anxiety, the center of a small, dark, warm universe." This, Dr. Sagan suggests, may be imperfectly remembered years later as "being one with the universe."

In stage two, uterine contractions begin. The fetus becomes "an innocent whose cosmos has turned upon it." Stage three is the end of the birth process when the child perceives "a tunnel illuminated at one end" and senses the "brilliant radiance" of the world.

"The discovery of light for a creature that has lived its entire existence in darkness must be a profound and on some level an unforgettable experience," Dr. Sagan writes.

"And there," he continues, "dimly made out by the low resolution of the newborn's eyes, is some godlike figure surrounded by a halo of light — the Midwife or the Obstetrician or the Father."

The reliving of that birth, he suggests, may be the less-than-mystical basis for the reports of life after death.