

Faithful service, effort are keys to eternal life

By Father Richard C. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

For centuries, the church has professed its faith and hope in God's promise of eternal life.

The Nicene Creed concludes with the words: "We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come, Amen." But not all Christians take such words seriously. The Easter issue of *Newsweek*, with its cover story on heaven, reminded us of that.

"The prevailing opinion," one liberal Protestant theologian is quoted as saying, "is that when you die you're dead but God still cares."

Another observed: "It seems to me

we've gone through irreversible changes. I don't think there can be any future for heaven and hell."

And finally, "Dead is dead." *Newsweek* described these positions as "a way of having God without an after-life," in contrast with reincarnation, which is a way of having an afterlife without God.

But even among those who share a common belief in eternal life, there remain sharp differences of opinion about which of us — and how many — will get into heaven and which of us — and how many — will not.

There are Catholics, for example, who seem completely convinced that hell is full to overflowing, and that many, if not most

of its inhabitants are "bad Catholics" such as dissenters, homosexuals, people who miss Mass, pro-choice women and other disreputable types.

In fact, nothing seems to make these Catholics more unhappy than the suggestion that God may, in the end, *save everybody* — or at least almost everybody, or perhaps most people, or, finally, even many people.

In the eyes of some of these so-called traditional Catholics, heaven can't be worth very much if just about anybody at all can get in. They're hoping that God is grading our lives on a very steep curve, with few A's, lots of F's, and a generous sampling of D's and C's.

ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

In their private, sad world of theological imagination, hell is overcrowded and purgatory is doing a land-office business. Not even Paul's assurance in First Timothy can dissipate their deep-seated anger and brooding pessimism; namely that God "wills everyone to be saved" (2:4).

Contrary to their view, Jesus never said a word about excluding dissenters, homosexuals, people who miss Mass and pro-choice women from eternal life, but he did provide some explicit clues about who would be welcome in the heavenly kingdom.

The "poor in spirit" will make it (Matthew 5:3). And so will those who are insulted and persecuted for Christ's sake (5:11-12). Even one who "breaks one of the least of (the) commandments and teaches others to do so" might make it. At worst, he'll be called "least in the kingdom of heaven" (5:19).

On the other hand, not everyone who invokes the name of the Lord will make it, "but only the one who does the will of (the) Father in heaven" (7:21). Indeed, we aspirants to the kingdom will "become like children" (18:3).

But getting into heaven involves more than child's play. "If you wish to be perfect," Jesus said, "go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven" (19:21). Not easy, but at least it's clear.

And even more pointedly: "Amen, I say to you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (19:21, 23). That's not one of the Bible-quoters' favorite passages.

The parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 offers perhaps the most comprehensive set of guidelines. The kingdom has been prepared for those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, or visit the sick and the imprisoned (25:31-46).

Those who reject Christ in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned have a different destiny. So, too, the one who "blasphemes against the holy Spirit" (Mark 3:29).

The *Newsweek* cover story of this past Easter referred to "the studied evasions emanating from most American pulpits (which) leave a real void for laymen seeking some assurance that being human has more than transitory significance."

"The idea of life after death is clearly an embarrassment to modern thinking," Jacob Neusner, a Judaism scholar at Brown University, told the magazine, "but it is just as clearly the touchstone of all religion."

"Religion says that being human has eternal meaning. If religion announces that life is over at the grave, then it is not talking about what people expect religion to discuss."

But getting people to believe again in eternal life isn't enough. They've got to be brought to see the odds as God and Jesus see them: short rather than long.

For some Catholics, that may be more difficult than believing in eternal life itself.

One might be surprised by who enters heaven

By Father Albert J. Shamon
Courier Columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 17:5-10; (R1) Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4. (R2) 2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14.

All the readings for next Sunday deal with faith. Habakkuk says, "The just man, because of his faith, shall live." Paul urges Timothy to "guard the deposit of faith." And the apostles ask Jesus, "Increase our faith."

Habakkuk wrote about 605 B.C., after Assyria had been conquered by Babylon in the decisive battle of Carchemish. Violence was everywhere. Ruins rampant. Judah cried out, "How long is this going to go on?" The prophet answers that God is involved in history, but He writes straight in crooked lines; all He asks is that you have faith in Him, trust Him. "The just man (he who does God's will) because of his faith (his confident belief in God's justice) will live (to see a better day)."

In the New Testament, this statement of Habakkuk's is quoted three times (Rome 1:12; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38). There, it is given a newer meaning: "The one who is

righteous (he who is pleasing to God) by faith (in Jesus Christ) will live (eternally)."

When Paul wrote to Timothy, Paul was a prisoner, guarded by a Roman soldier. Christians, too, were to guard their faith. It is a rich deposit of truth that leads to life, and, like all other riches, it too needed guarding.

Some would rob that faith by direct assault, like false teachers; others more subtly, by public dissent. Today some abandon the rich deposit of the Catholic faith for Bible-toting and quoting cults. Others, abandon it for the fleshpots of Egypt, teachings that permit sexual immorality. Faith demands courage, not "a cowardly spirit" that shrinks from the demands of the Gospel and abandons it for the easy life promised by false teachers.

One of the best ways to preserve the faith and live it is by prayer, especially to the Holy Spirit. The apostles prayed to Jesus. "Lord," they said, "increase our faith." Our Lord replied that it is the quality rather than the quantity of faith that needs revitalization. "If you have faith the size of a



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and transplanted in the sea,' and it would obey you." Mulberry trees are so large, it is impossible to transplant them. Jesus was saying that persons of faith can do the impossible, for nothing is impossible for God.

Then Jesus told a parable about a farmer and shepherd. The parable has two possible points.

The first point is that a person of real faith realizes that salvation is a free gift of God, that all is grace! Infant baptism drives home the same point. Also the fact that Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem to obtain salvation by His passion, death, resurrection and ascension, should have driven home the same point to His disciples.

Therefore what we do ought to be done in gratitude to God for all that He has done for us, rather than in thinking we deserve or can earn a special reward because of our service. If good work is expected of a servant as an ordinary part of his duties, why should the followers of Jesus think faithful service is not a basic requirement of following the Master?

A possible second point to the parable could be: never stop working. Never think you have arrived. St. Thomas said that there is no one so perfect who cannot become more perfect. "Forgetting what lies behind," wrote Paul, "but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God's upward calling" (Phil. 3:13-14). Paul likens life to a race whose goal is heaven. The runner does not stop running till he reaches the goal. A saint is a sinner who keeps trying, striving, to the end!

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