

# CATHOLIC COURIER

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## Residents retreat

After eight years of effort, volunteers from the Diocese of Rochester were able to present the first Residents Encounter Christ program to take place inside Attica prison. Pages 10 and 11.

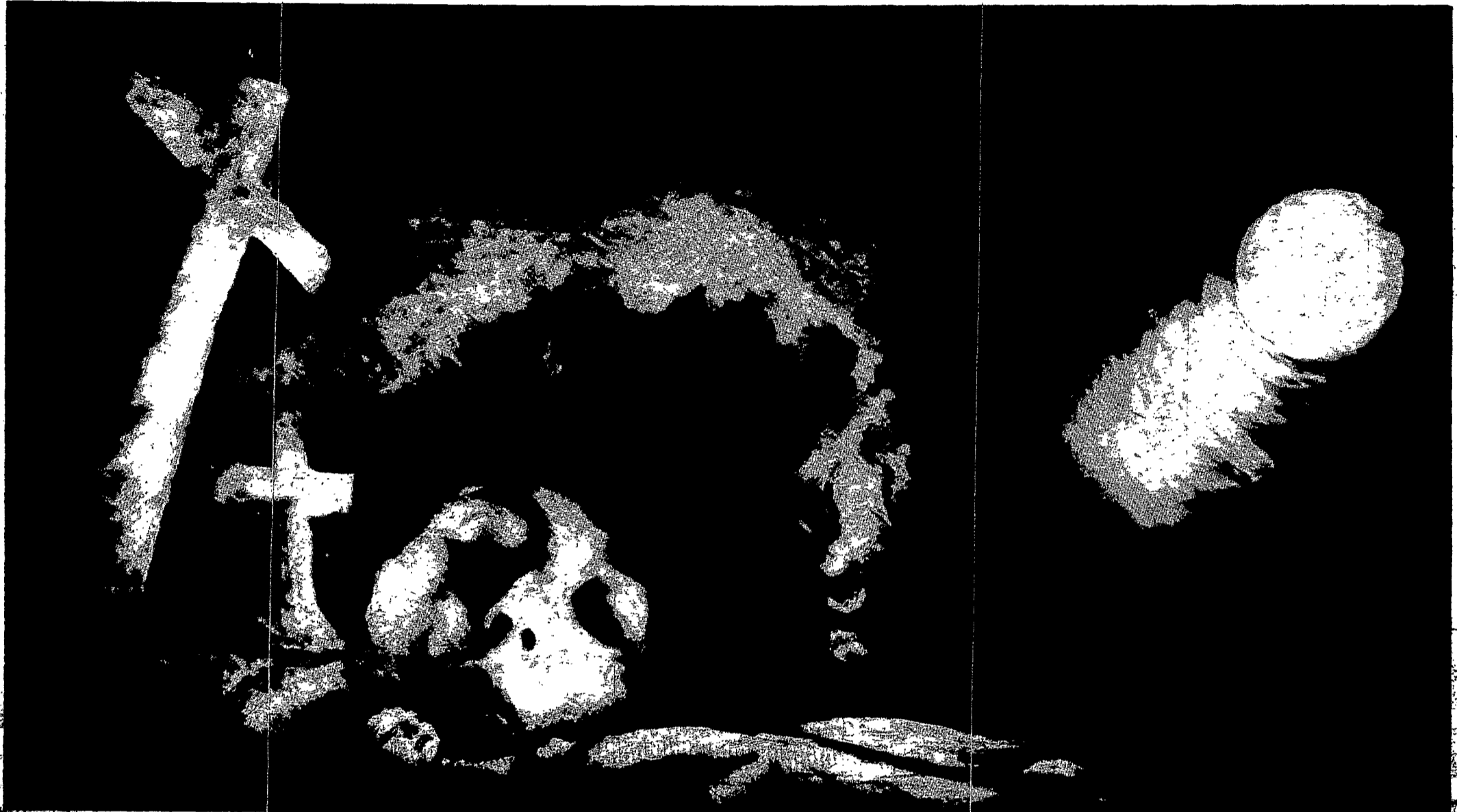


Photo Illustration by Babetta G. Augustini

## Every age has speculated on life after death

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

One day 11 years ago, Greece resident Tom Sawyer was working under his truck when the driveway beneath him collapsed. The two-ton truck fell on his chest, literally knocking the wind out of him and compressing his heart. After a few minutes, Sawyer became unconscious and experienced clinical death.

He regained consciousness when the truck was lifted off him 15 minutes later, but only during subsequent years did he begin to recall all that had happened to him while he was clinically dead.

Since then, Sawyer has been asked dozens of times to repeat his experience of "death" to journalists and professors, Catholics and born-again Christians.

Sawyer's encounter with the hereafter is known as a "near-death experience," or NDE. Millions of Americans claim to have had NDEs, though the experiences described by those who have survived clinical death reportedly vary somewhat.

Many of those who have had NDEs assert that they have had a foretaste of the life that follows death — a life more than 70 percent of all U.S. citizens believe exists, according to a Gallup survey commissioned by the Princeton Religion Research Center in New Jersey.

Earlier this year, Sawyer told Rochester's *DAKA* magazine that after becoming unconscious, he awoke in darkness feeling "euphoric" and as if he were "floating."

His senses intact, Sawyer noted that the darkness "gradually took the shape of a tunnel" through which he began moving toward "a little speck of light ... to infinity. It was the most beautiful thing that I had ever experienced in my life."

Sawyer told *DAKA* that he com-

municated with the light, which indicated he could stay with it or go back to live on earth. Sawyer chose to go back.

A baptized Catholic, Sawyer had left the church in his teens and had basically become an agnostic. Two weeks after encountering the light he considers to have represented God, Sawyer, who was then 33, went to Mass at Our Lady of Mercy Parish. Prior to attending Mass that day, he recalled attending church only on holidays.

"It was the first time I experienced the Mass," Sawyer said in an interview with the *Catholic Courier*. "I participated in the Mass as opposed to watching it." Sawyer said he experienced an ecstatic feeling of

how they treated others during their lives on earth.

The Roman Catholic Church maintains that heaven is the state of happiness of those who have died in Christ, and that hell is the state of those who have died unrepentant of mortal sin.

Purgatory is the state of those who have died in a state of grace, but who are not yet free from all imperfection, the church contends. The experience of purgatory purifies forgiven sinners who are engaged in somehow making up for their sins.

With the exception of purgatory, this understanding of the next world is common to most Christian denominations. Yet no

*'I would guess that there's a greater interest now (in the afterlife) because of the disappointment of the material world, the failure of materialism to provide a more satisfying life.'*

— George Gallup Jr.

divine unconditional love, or "grace" he said he now experiences continually, especially when he is deep in prayer.

Many people would scoff at Sawyer's claims, but almost 2,000 years ago, similar skepticism greeted the reported resurrection of a Jewish preacher crucified by the Roman authorities.

Indeed, before he went up to Calvary, Jesus predicted his resurrection from the dead. On occasion, he also explicitly spelled out that all men and women would someday enter into eternity and there live in a heavenly or hellish state, depending on

single explanation — in either Protestant or Catholic circles — has held sway when it comes to the events of Last Judgment or the Resurrection of the Dead.

The Catholic Church teaches that bodily resurrection will take place at the Final Judgment. But Nathan Kollar, professor of religious studies at Rochester's St. John Fisher College, noted that "the official magisterium of the church has not really indicated in one way or another" what is meant by the concept of bodily resurrection.

St. Paul described the resurrected body

as a spiritual entity, and said the bodies of those Christians alive at the time of the resurrection would be changed "in the twinkling of an eye."

Whether such a transformation would happen so quickly for those who died prior to the Last Judgment was debated for the first several centuries of Christianity. Would the dead immediately attain their eternal rewards, or would they awaken into their destined states only at the end of time? The question was solved for Catholics in 1336, when Pope Benedict XII decreed that the dead go to heaven as soon as they are worthy of doing so.

For many Catholics confident of eventually passing through the pearly gates, expressing gratitude would be the first order of business. According to a 1983 survey conducted by *U.S. Catholic* magazine, many Catholics plan to "hug God" as soon as they behold Him in paradise. Others plan to enjoy family reunions with loved ones who died before them.

Many of such reunions would take place in "a peaceful green pasture in the country beside a crystal clear lake," the survey revealed. "Cottages with ever-blooming flowers, grass always green, meals ready when desired," were among the other heavenly features expected by *U.S. Catholic* readers.

One of the most enduring depictions of the afterlife is painted by Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in which the poet narrated a journey through hell, purgatory and heaven.

Describing hell as a realm divided into nine circles, with the milder punishments administered in the outer circles, Dante indicated his views of treachery by placing Satan in the innermost circle eternally chewing Julius Caesar's conspiratorial

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