Reasonableness of the Church’s teaching on the particular and general judgments, Purgatory, Hell, Limbo, Heaven

The Last Things : *De novissimis*. Death, judgment, Hell (to which we can add Limbo and Purgatory) and Heaven. [Reference: *Life Everlasting* by Fr. G-L]

**1) Judgment**

Death is defined as the separation of the soul and the body. Now the soul, as we saw in a previous podcast, is immortal. So the question must be posed : what happens then to the soul after it is separated from the body ? Good question, very important question, in fact, the only important question ! That is what we are going to see in this podcast.

PARTICULAR JUDGMENT

The answer to this question is very simple : after death the soul is *judged.* As Saint Paul bluntly puts it : "And as it is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgment:” (Heb. 9:27)

The general idea of some kind of judgment after death is immediately consequent to the recognition of the existence of right and wrong and the moral responsibility that follows that. Once one recognizes this, one must also recognize that there must be some sort of "reckoning" that rewards the good and punishes the wicked. This, however, must happen after death, since it is obvious that many men who do evil prosper in this world and many who do good suffer.

Various religions and philosophies have different scenarios of what exactly happens to work this out. In general they agree that according to the merits of its life on earth the immortal soul is given a certain destiny after death. But they disagree on how this works exactly.

Some say that if the soul sinned it will be condemned to take on another body, more or less noble according to the gravity of its sins, or if it was just, then it will be freed from the body entirely (Plato speaks of this very clearly). For some Eastern religions the ideal is not only to be freed entirely from the body but from existence itself : thus the ideal is to disappear completely into the All from which we came.

The Christian answer to this question (the question of all questions !) is very simple : as Saint Paul says, the soul is judged and that is it. Once one sees, as we have seen before, that the soul is simply the form of the body, and so is naturally united to the body, we can dispense with the idea of some sort of reincarnation or disappearance in the All. If it is natural to us to have a body, then we didn't exist before and we won't be united to some other body other than the one we had : there remains a natural order and a consequent natural desire for that body, which, according to the Christian revelation, will actually be satisfied at the resurrection of the body.

However, in the meantime, the soul is still "there" : it exists. So what happens to it ? Well, it simply accepts the good to which it chose to adhere during life. If it chose the true good, it will be happy forever, if it did not, it will be miserable forever, because it won't have this true good that it didn't choose, choosing instead of it, some other good that was not its true good. The declaration of this fact is what is called "the particular judgment".

Saint Thomas, as usual, spells this out very clearly :

If the way to arrive at a certain goal is determined, those who take a different way, or leave the right way, cannot attain that goal : for the ill person is not healed, if he uses the contrary means which the physician has prohibited. (...) Now the determined way to arrive at felicity is through virtue. For something does not attain its end unless it does well what is proper to it : for neither does a plant bear fruit, if the natural way of operation is not followed in it ; and neither does a runner attain the prize nor the soldier victory, unless both act rightly according to their proper role. Now for man to perform his proper operation is to act according to virtue, for the virtue of every thing is that which makes good the one who has it and which makes his work good. Since, therefore, the ultimate end of man is eternal life (...) not everyone will arrive at it, but only those who act according to virtue [[1]](#footnote-1).

So if we act according to virtue, or, in other words, if we do "what makes us good", that is, that brings our nature to its perfection, like the "good" operation of a plant brings it to its perfection, we will attain our end. The "judgment" is simply the declaration of this fact at the end of life.

Now a very important thing to see about this to start with is that this particular judgment at the end of our lives is definitive. The reason for this is that the will cannot change its fundamental choice after its separation from the body. That is what makes this "particular judgment" definitive – as in *eternally* definitive : *forever*. Why is that ? Why can't the will just change after death, especially once it sees that it made the wrong choice and that it will be miserable forever ?

In fact, the thing that really needs to be explained is how the will can change at all once it has chosen the good to which it will subordinate all other goods. Once it has chosen *the* good, the good because of which it chooses everything else, the universal good, (the only good because of which, in the end, an intellectual nature can act at all) how can there be any other thing that will make it change its mind ? [The first act of a child when it makes its first act of reason.]

The answer is that, in fact, it can't, in so far as it is intellectual. But while we are here below we don't have a purely intellectual vision of things  : we know firstly through the senses and then we *abstract* universal knowledge from the particular knowledge provided by the senses. Thus we do not see all at once all the various aspects of things and so we are always able to see things from a different angle, as it were, for good or for bad.

However once the soul is separated from the body, that is no longer the case. We have an immediate intuitive knowledge of everything and so the choice we have made, for the true universal good or otherwise, becomes fixed. Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange gives an image to explain this and then a Scripture text to confirm it :

16:12-16:58 Pause to find his spot.

Entrance into the state of separation from the body fixes forever the freely determined choice before death, just as in winter frost fixes moisture on the window in varied figures. But the best image is that of Scripture: "If a tree fall to the south or to the north, in what place soever it shall fall, there it shall be." (Eccles.11:3) ["They have had their reward", as Our Lord says in the Sermon on the Mount.]

This is why conversion is easier for sensual sins, because it is enough to remember that, after all, this sensual good cannot be *the* good (however that isn't easy either once you are plunged down to that level: you become like an animal who only sees that immediate good of pleasure). Intellectual sins are harder to change, because they are already closer to this moment when we see everything and choose in the light of that.

Ultimately the reason for the mutability of our will before death is that it only knows the good as a universal *idea* : we necessarily will to have *the good* but we can choose which particular thing will be that good. So as long as we are in this body, we can choose as our good the true good, which is the universal good which "is what all call God", as Saint Thomas says, or we can choose our own private, egotistical good. But at death this manner of knowing stops and in the place of this inclination to a general, indeterminate good begins the final, determined, irrevocable choice that can never change.

That is why, in fact, hell is eternal (and for that matter, why heaven is eternal too) : it is because the will cannot, or rather *will* not, change any longer. Hell isn't eternal by some decree of God, it is by the very nature of the spiritual being whose will is now fixed concretely on a good it has taken as its supreme good by a choice that will not change. This very fact is their punishment, as Saint Thomas explains :

The very disorder of the will is a certain punishment and the most afflicting : for, in so far as someone has a disordered will, things which are right displease him, and it displeases the damned that the will of God is fulfilled in all things, to which will they resist. Therefore the disordered will is never taken from them [[2]](#footnote-2). [Fr. Bottacelli : "Let him do what he wants !]

[Saint Thomas explains how this works :

He who errs about principles cannot be corrected by other more certain things, as when a man is corrected about his error with regard to a conclusion. And similarly neither can someone be seduced to give up the true acceptance of principles by some greater appearance. Therefore it is the same with what regards the end. For everyone naturally has the desire of the ultimate end [[3]](#footnote-3).

And it follows natural reason, it is true, with regard to the universal, that it desire beatitude : but that it desire this or that as beatitude and last end happens by reason of a special disposition of nature ; and thus the Philosopher says that *such as everything is, so does the end appear to him.* [[4]](#footnote-4) Therefore, if that disposition by which something is desired by someone as the last end cannot be removed from him, his will will not be able to change with regard to the desire of this end [[5]](#footnote-5).

Now that is exactly what happens to the soul after its separation from the body. It has chosen what will be its last end and it won't ever change. It is like a drunkard who will forever be a drunkard for he has totally decided to be one and has thus become such that the bottle really seems to him to be his ultimate good and he will never give it up. Thus Saint Thomas says, in the same place :

Therefore when the soul will be separated from the body, it will not be in the state of moving towards the end but in resting in the end attained. Therefore its will will be immovable with regard to its desire of the last end [[6]](#footnote-6).

This is why this idea today that somehow hell will one day end is wrong (e.g. Jacques Maritain believed that, even for the devil himself!). It is wrong because the eternity of hell simply follows from the very nature of the will itself, for the very nature of the will is to be an inclination which follows the intellect, intellect which has universal knowledge. Our universal knowledge here below is imperfect, it consists in a simple abstract knowledge of the *idea* of good which we cannot help loving. But the precise thing in which we place that idea of good while we are here below depends on our choice, according to the different aspects of the thing. However when we die, that choice can no longer change : and our destiny depends on whether we had chosen the true good (which is God, who is the true good of the universe, that for which it was made and for which it exists) or a merely apparent good (our own excellence, pleasure, etc.).

Related to this error is the idea that the essence of free will consists in being able to choose between good and evil. The problem with this is that in that case God Himself would have to be able to sin in order to be free ; also the angels and saints in heaven would have to be able to sin as well in order to be free, or in other words, heaven would not be necessarily eternal because one might always end up choosing evil after a while... And this mere possibility itself would make heaven not be heaven any more, a place of perfect bliss, part of which is precisely the security of knowing that it is absolutely certain that it will last forever.

The truth is that the possibility of choosing evil is not essential to freedom but is rather a defect of freedom. For the will is essentially ordered to the good and so any deviation from it is a defect of the will : when we choose evil our will is failing, like when you are skating and you fall down. Being able to fall down is not part of the art of skating, on the contrary : once that art is perfected one never falls down (except if pushed or tripped, but that is exterior to the art).

And so the possibility for the will of choosing evil is not a necessary property of the will but a weakness. And in fact, as we've seen, even the possibility of changing one's mind, even from evil to good, is an imperfection of the will that is due to its imperfect knowledge while united to the body. When our knowledge becomes perfect, our will can no longer change.

"If a tree fall to the south or to the north, in what place soever it shall fall, there it shall be."

Saint Thomas (CG IV, 93-95) gives four reasons why it is fitting that the possibility to merit (or demerit) should cease at death :

1) Otherwise man would never attain his end : there would always be more to do, like a race that never ends.

2) Beatitude would be impossible, for it must be perpetual.

3) The soul, once it is separated from the body, adheres perpetually to what it has chosen definitively as its last end. So merit, which is essentially this movement towards the end, is over because one had definitively attained it, whatever it is.

4) The soul is thus deterred from sinning.

33:16 - pause

GENERAL JUDGMENT

Then comes the question of the general judgment, that is, the fact that at the end of the world there will be another judgment of everyone together. Saint Thomas poses as an objection to this the text in Scripture (Nahum 1:9 according to the Septuagint) : "God will not judge the same thing a second time." He has already judged every man at his particular judgment so there won't be another one at the end of time.

His response is that man can be considered as an individual or as a part of the whole human race. At death a man receives the reward he deserves as an individual, or at least as far as the essential reward or punishment goes, which is for his soul, for his body will not receive its reward or punishment until the resurrection of the body.

For, as we saw, at death a man's will is fixed on the good he has chosen as his end and so, Saint Thomas says :

Just as in bodies are found heaviness and lightness, by which they are borne to their (proper) place, which is the end of their motion, so also it is in souls with regard to merit and demerit, by which souls arrive at their reward or punishment, which are the ends of their actions. (Supp. 69, a. 2)

So at the moment of death souls receive what they have loved : and this results in the beatitude of those who have chosen the true good, which is God, and the eternal misery of the others who have chosen something else (and thus Our Lord says : '(they) shall be cast out into the exterior darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth' Mt 8:12).

This is the essential reward because the essential merit comes from the soul, obviously, and not the body. The body will receive its reward (or punishment) at the end of time, but it will only be an accidental reward : the essential thing happens at the moment of death.

But man is not just an individual, he is part of a whole, the whole human race, and more immediately he has relations to the people he knew and influenced during his life and even after his life (e.g. by his writings, or works, for good or for bad : Saint Thomas, Saint Dominic, Luther, Stalin). This responsibility will be weighed and judged when everything is over and one will receive the accidental reward or punishment that follows that judgment ("accidental" because it won't affect the essential reward - the beatific vision according to the degree of charity one had at one's death - or punishment – the privation of the beatific vision).

Also this general judgment will serve for the publication of the merits of every single person to everyone else. As Saint Thomas writes :

Although before that (general) judgment each one will be certain of his condemnation or reward, he will not be cognizant of the condemnation or reward of everyone else. Hence the necessity of the general judgment.

HELL

So much, then, for the judgment. Now we have to see the different places to which the judged soul go, according to their merits. First of all : Hell.

The existence of such a place of punishment is a idea common to all religions, more or less, in different ways. Fr. Piolanti, explains :

The *Wisdom of God* requires that he who sins be tormented by that in which he sinned : the wicked chose creatures instead of God, may they suffer now an eternal affliction and may it appear how vain and insane it is to lift oneself up against the Divine Spirit and choose something other than the Infinite Good. The *Sanctity of God* requires that sin and virtue not be counted as the same. For there is an essential difference between good and evil. Indeed, if all attain the same destiny what difference is there between the Blessed Virgin and prostitutes, between Gabriel and Satan, between martyrs and their persecutors ? These reasons are so cogent that because of them all peoples are convinced that some future punishment awaits the wicked [[7]](#footnote-7) »

This "punishment" which is called Hell is, in fact, as we saw, really just the natural consequence of the freedom of the will to choose good or evil. And its eternity is just a consequence of the nature of the will itself. That is the response to people like Maritain who imagine that Hell will end one day : that is to not understand the nature of the will itself.

Others take another approach and say it exists but perhaps no one is there. To hold this position one must imagine that no one dies in the state of mortal sin, that is in this state we spoke of where one has chosen an other good other than God. This certainly flies in the face of the evidence. Also, for Christians, it is hardly possible, for Our Lord speaks very often of Hell and it is not just an empty threat. He also says of Judas "It were better for this man that he had not ever lived", which can hardly be understood to be compatible with Judas ever attaining eternal life.

Finally, one can understand the eternity of Hell as being necessary as a just punishment for having turned away from the infinite good which is God. Just a sin deserves an infinite punishment, and since a finite creature cannot endure a punishment that is infinite in intensity, it must be at least infinite in duration.

In this punishment one can distinguish :

1) the punishment of loss, that is the fact of not ever seeing God, which is an infinite punishment

2) the punishment of the sense, that is the suffering endured in proportion to the illegitimate pleasure one has taken in disobeying God in order to enjoy it.

LIMBO

Before going on to speak of heaven (and the preliminary stage to enter it which is Purgatory, just a brief word on what is called "Limbo". In English to be in "Limbo" means to be in sort of intermediary state between two options and Limbo does have this character, because it is to be neither in heaven nor in hell, at least not in the hell of the damned. One distinguishes two places :

1) where the just were before Our Lord's Passion and Death

2) the final abode of the souls of persons who died without any personal sin but only original sin

◊ 2) This is only for children who have died before the use of reason, for the first act of reason is either for or against God.

Now the first thing that occurs to a man to think about then, is to deliberate about himself. And if he then direct himself to the due end, he will, by means of grace, receive the remission of original sin: whereas if he does not then direct himself to the due end, and as far as he is capable of discretion at that particular age, he will sin mortally, for through not doing that which is in his power to do. (I-II, q. 89, a. 6)

For the first thing that occurs to a man who has discretion, is to think of himself, and to direct other things to himself as to their end, since the end is the first thing in the intention. Therefore this is the time when man is bound by God's affirmative precept, which the Lord expressed by saying (Zach. 1:3): "Turn ye to Me . . . and I will turn to you." (Reply to Objection 3)

PURGATORY

Purgatory is simply the place where the temporal punishment due to sin is expiated if it has not been expiated before during life. For, as we said, the illegitimate pleasure of sin has to be recompensed by an equal measure of punishment.

[This is all that is left to do and that is all that Purgatory is for. It is *not* a place where one has to be purged *subjectively*, as is sometime said, as if by the fires of Purgatory our will had to be changed and turned to the good by suffering. This happens during life e.g. by fasting we repair for gluttony and at the same time become temperate. But at the moment of death our will turns away from sin completely, from *all* sin, not only mortal but venial sin. For, as we said, it begins to see clearly the end of life and will it fully and irrevocably and by that very fact the *fault* of venial sin is wiped out, that is this inconsistency of our will that wills the true good that is God but doesn't will all the means that lead to it. All that remains to expiate is the *punishment* of sin, this debt of suffering necessary to repair the disorder of the illegitimate pleasure one took in creatures.

Now this disorder is so objective that it need not be repaired necessarily by the person who subjectively caused it in the first place. That is why the sufferings of Our Lord or Our Lady or the saints can be applied to the souls in Purgatory to expiate their sins, and also why we can even suffer for them. This is possible because of the communion of the saints, that is this charity that unites all the members of the Mystical Body together in Christ in such a way that the sufferings of one member can be counted as the sufferings of the other.

a. 12 Obj 3 : Conditio pauperum esset peior, quod est contra Lc 6, 20 : « Beati pauperes, quoniam vestrum est regnum Dei ».

qm ad expiationem poenae C

® {

qm ad possessionem regni caelorum N cui comparatum hoc quasi nihil est

HEAVEN

Finally, there is heaven, which essentially consists, objectively, in God alone, that is to say, He is the good object in the enjoyment of which Heaven consists. For beatitude means a perfect good in which our desire rests perfectly. Now this can only be the universal good, that is Goodness itself, for the object of our will is precisely not just this or that good, but goodness itself. But Goodness itself is God alone, who is not only good but "*the* Good".

[Q. 3 a. 8 explicat quod ideo desiderium naturale beatitudinis est desiderium visionis essentiae Dei, quia, viso effectu, intellectus vult ipsam causam videre : « et sic perfectionem suam habebit (intellectus) per unionem ad Deum, sicut ad obiectum, in quo solo beatitudo hominis consistit ». Advertendum est, vero, ut P. Daffara explicat (p. 790-791), hoc non probat *necessitatem* elevationis naturae humanae ad visionem supernaturalem essentiae Dei (qui non potest exigi quia transcendit ordinem mere naturalem) sed eius *maximam convenientiam*.]

## *ARTICULUS III*

## AN BEATITUDO FORMALIS HOMINIS CONSISTAT IN ALIQUA OPERATIONE

#### I-II, 3, a. 2 :

Beatitudo hominis = eius ultima perfectio = eius ultimo actus = operatio eius

Ad M1 : Unumquodque intantum perfectum est, iqm est actu : nam potentia sine actu imperfectus est

ad M2 : Unde et actus secundus nominatur (II De anima). Nam habens formam potest esse in potentia operans, sicut sciens est in potentia considerans

### THESIS : Beatitudo formalis hominis essentialiter consistit in solo actu intellectus, qui dicitur visio Dei

### I-II, 3

### a. 4 Si (beatitudo) sit operatio intellectivae partis, utrum sit operatio intellectus an voluntatis

qm ad id quod est essentialiter ipsa beatitudo N

® Est operatio voluntatis {

[qm ad quod est quasi per accidens eius, sct delectatio et adiuncta C]

Beatitudo (essentialiter) = consecutio finis ultimi = non actus voluntatis

lata in finem absentem, cum ipsum desiderat

Ad M : voluntas = {

requiescens in fine praesente (delectans)

(quia) est motus ad finem

= non consecutio finis {

(quia) delectatio advenit voluntati ex hoc quod finis est praesens : non autem e converso ex hoc aliquid fit praesens, quia voluntas delectatur in ipso [[8]](#footnote-8)

1) desiderium pecuniae quae absens est

E. g. actus voluntatis est { 2) consecutio ipsa per hoc quod manu ipsam apprehendit

3) delectatio in pecunia habita

1) a principio volumus consequi finem

Similiter circa intelligibilem finem { 2) consequimur ipsum per hoc quod fit praesens nobis per actum itellectus

3) tunc voluntas delectata conquiescit in fine

#### Objectiones

ad 2m : Primum objectum voluntatis non est actus eius : sicut nec primum objectum visus est visio, sed visibile. Unde ex hoc ipso quod beatitudo pertinet ad voluntatem tanquam primum objectum ejus sequitur quod non pertineat ad ipsam tanquam actus ejus.

1. – *Compendium theologiae*, C. 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. – CG lib. 4 cap. 93 n. 3 *Ipsa inordinatio voluntatis quaedam poena est, et maxime afflictiva: quia, in quantum habet inordinatam voluntatem aliquis, displicent ei quae recte fiunt, et damnatis displicebit quod voluntas Dei impletur in omnibus, cui peccando restiterunt. Igitur inordinata voluntas nunquam ab eis tolletur.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. – *Contra Gentiles*, lib. 4 cap. 95, n. 2 *(...non) qui errat circa principia, revocari potest per aliqua certiora, sicut revocatur homo ab errore qui est circa conclusiones. Et similiter nec posset aliquis a vera acceptione principiorum per aliqua magis apparentia seduci. Sic igitur et se habet circa finem. Quia unusquisque naturaliter habet desiderium ultimi finis.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. – E.g. for a drunkard, the bottle of whisky in front of him seems to him to be the ultimate good because of his disposition of being a drunkard. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. – n. 3 *Et hoc quidem sequitur in universali naturam rationalem, ut beatitudinem appetat: sed quod hoc vel illud sub ratione beatitudinis et ultimi finis desideret, ex aliqua speciali dispositione naturae contingit; unde philosophus dicit quod* qualis unusquisque est talis et finis videtur ei*. Si igitur dispositio illa per quam aliquid desideratur ab aliquo ut ultimus finis, ab eo removeri non possit, non poterit immutari voluntas eius quantum ad desiderium finis illius.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. – *Quando igitur erit a corpore separata, non erit in statu ut moveatur ad finem, sed ut in fine adepto quiescat. Immobilis igitur erit voluntas eius quantum ad desiderium ultimi finis.* (Ibid. n. 5) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. – "*Sapientia Dei* exigit ut per quae quis peccat per eadem et torqueatur: elegerunt nefarii creaturas magis quam Deum, experiantur nunc afflictione sempiterna et ex creaturis parte quam vanum, quam demens sit se contra Divinum Numen erigere et aliud quam Bonum Infinitum gestire.

   *Sanctitas Dei* requirit ut peccatum et virtus non in eodem numero computentur. Viget enim discrimen essentiale bonum inter et malum. Profecto si omnes eundem finem consequerentur quae differentia inter Virginem et lupanaria, inter Gabrielem et Satanam, inter martyres et persecutores ?

   Adeo huiusmodi valent rationes ut omnes exinde populi alte sibi figerint persuasionem de quadam futura paena impios manente. Piolanti, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. — Ita bene dicit Medina : « Beata vita non est amare quod habes, sed habere quod amas ». [↑](#footnote-ref-8)