**Life after Death**

One of the most challenging aspects of being a parish priest is coming up with something new to say to the congregation every Sunday. (I have heard, however, that we are really repeating: “God is Love,” in a thousand different ways.)

What I like to do, on occasion, is to “open up” the homily to the congregation. While it can be somewhat unpredictable, it is always worthwhile to listen to all the thoughts, experiences, and wisdom that gathers every Sunday for Mass.

I had an opportunity to do this recently at Mary, Star of the Sea Church in Tortola, British Virgin Islands. We were celebrating the Ascension of the Lord and I briefly mentioned how moving it is to think that Jesus, even after his Resurrection, still bears his wounds. I shared that to me it means that our woundedness; whether it be spiritual, emotional, or physical, has tremendous value. We join our wounds to Christ and by his wounds we are healed.

Then I asked for the thoughts of the people who were gathered. Without any hesitation, one of the young woman in church asked how do we know, without the help of the Bible, that there is really life after death?

Fortunately for me, another young woman from the congregation came to my rescue. She quoted St Paul’s reading to the Ephesians (1:17-20) that says:

Brothers and sisters:

May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory,

give you a Spirit of wisdom and revelation

resulting in knowledge of him.

May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened,

that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call,

what are the riches of glory

in his inheritance among the holy ones,

and what is the surpassing greatness of his power

for us who believe…

“For us who believe…” The knowledge of God always involves a stepping out in faith, a movement into an unknown territory that has no blueprint of what comes next. Whether we use the Bible or not, our belief in God involves acceptance of a Mystery that we cannot see or fully understand.

So how do we know for sure that there is life after death without the help of the Bible? Peter Berger, a sociologist and former professor at Boston College and Boston University wrote in his book, A Rumor of Angels, that the human person can know that there is something more than this life by play and humor. In our play, we often create an imaginary world with its own goals and rules. It is a way for us to accept that this life is not all there is. We make these artificial games and sports to help move us to explore the possibilities that there is something which lies beyond our physical world and its limitations.

Humor is another way that we allow ourselves to hold lightly even serious situations that could cause our deaths. Humor allows us to step back from reality and view life more objectively. Again, it is a way that helps us to move forward even when the outcome of our lives may seem arbitrary or even tragic.

Pope John Paul II explored these boundaries in his wonderfully honest, “Letter to the Elderly,” which he wrote when he was 78 years young. Read an excerpt from the pope’s 12-page letter:

“In our human condition touched by sin, death presents a certain dark side which cannot but bring sadness and fear. How could it be otherwise? We have been made for life, whereas death – as Scripture tells us from its very first pages (cf. Gen. 2-3) – was not part of God’s original plan but came about as a consequence of sin, as a result of “the devil’s envy” (Wis 2:24). It is thus understandable why, when faced with this dark reality, a person instinctively rebels. In this regard it is significant that Jesus, “who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15), also experienced fear in the face of death: “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me” (Mt 26:39). How can we forget his tears at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, despite the fact that he was about to raise him from the dead (cf. Jn 11:35)?

However rationally comprehensible death may be from a biological standpoint, it is not possible to experience it as something “natural.” This would contradict a person’s deepest instincts. As the Council observed: “It is in the face of death that the riddle of human existence becomes most acute. Not only is a person tormented by pain and by the advancing deterioration of his or her body, but even more so by a dread of perpetual extinction.” This anguish would indeed be inconsolable were death complete destruction, the end of everything. Death thus forces men and women to ask themselves fundamental questions about the meaning of life itself. What is on the other side of the shadowy wall of death? Does death represent the definitive end of life or does something lie beyond it?

For us who are on this side of the shadowy wall of death, we will never see clearly what lies beyond. That is why our main Christian virtues are: “Faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13). St. John said it this way: “God is love, and the person who abides in love abides in God, and God in that person” (1 Jn 4:16).

May our Holy Redeemer and the Blessed Virgin Mary help us to realize the hope that belongs to God’s call and the riches of God’s glory that await all who believe.

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