

## **What Happens When We Die? A Catholic Perspective**

### Introductory points

1. God & Creation
  - a. God—revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit => “Trinity”—creates all and maintains the existence of all through his will.
  - b. Humans are created for eternity, we will exist forever. Once created, there will never again be a time that we do not exist.
2. Extremes to avoid when speaking about “What happens when we die?”
  - a. At death we will simply cease to exist.
  - b. No matter what we believe or do in our life, all people will be saved in the end.
    - Catholicism takes a “middle position” between these two extremes.

### What Happens When We Die? (Catechism, #1021-1022)

1. At the moment of death, the body and soul separate. Body/soul separation is the theological definition of death.
  - a. The soul does not cease to exist, it continues to exist (live on) after death
  - b. The body ceases to exist as a physical entity, it decays or is burned.
    - 1) “Ashes to ashes and dust to dust ...” (see Gen. 3:19) => The recognition that we came from nothing and that our bodies will return to “ashes” ... until the resurrection
    - 2) Cremation (see “optional notes” at end)
  - c. Clarification #1: Different Christian churches have different teachings about what happens after death. Some churches maintain that after the body and soul separate, the body decays and the soul remains in a state of unawareness, a type of “hibernation,” until the end of the world.
  - d. Clarification #2: No Christian church teaches reincarnation, or the belief that humans come back (and continually come back) to life as a different person or life form.
2. Individual (particular) Judgment
  - a. We “meet” God face-to-face immediately after death
    - 1) At this “meeting” we will have to render an accounting to God for our lives => our faith, how we loved/didn’t love others, our use of the gifts/talents/abilities that God gave us, our actions—what we did/didn’t do ... and why
    - 2) God will judge us at this time
  - b. One of three things will happen as a result of our individual judgment: heaven, hell, or purgatory

### Heaven (Catechism, #1023-1029)

- a. A state where one exists in full communion with God.
  - 1) One experiences God as God is, this is the “Beatific vision” or the “contemplation of God in his heavenly glory.”
  - 2) One has been “perfectly purified” from sin and the effects of sin

- 3) One is “incorporated” into the Trinity (Father, Son, and Spirit) and fully share in the Trinity’s “eternal exchange of love.”
- 4) Heaven (salvation) is eternal. One will remain in full communion with God forever.
- b. A state where one exists in full communion with all other people who are in heaven, the community of those “perfectly incorporated” in Christ – i.e., the saints.
- c. What is a saint?
  - 1) A saint is any person who is in heaven.
  - 2) A person with the title “saint” (St. Augustine, St. Teresa of Calcutta, St. John Paul II, etc.) is a person who has been officially declared by the Church to be in heaven. The process by which one is declared a saint is called *canonization*.
  - 3) Catholicism maintains that every person’s ultimate destiny (or destination) is heaven, thus the goal of all Christian believers is to become a saint.
    - “Be a saint, what else is there?” – Patrick Coffin

### Hell (*Catechism*, #1033-1037)

- a. State of eternal separation from God
  - 1) Misconception: Hell is not a place where we party or do whatever we want => “Better to rule in hell than serve in heaven” – *Paradise Lost*, John Milton
    - Human sin is a perversion of the good, there is no “good” in hell.
  - 2) Hell is a state of “definitive self-exclusion” from God and all that is good.
    - a) “The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God” (*Catechism* #1035).
    - b) One chooses to separate oneself from God, the source of all goodness, and from all others who have chosen to accept God.
  - 3) Hell (damnation) is eternal.
- b. God does not will or wish that anyone goes to hell
  - 1) God does not predestine (determine in advance) anyone to hell.
  - 2) Important: God wills the salvation of all people, but the gate that leads to heaven is narrow (Matthew 7:13-14).
- c. If God desires salvation for all, how does one end up in hell? Hell results from ...
  - 1) One’s “willful turning away from God” – freely choosing to reject God, atheism.
  - 2) Unrepented mortal sin, or sin of a very serious matter that results in the ‘death’ of the soul.
- d. How does one “turn away from” or reject God through one’s actions?
  - 1) God is goodness. God creates everything as good and is the source of all goodness in the created order.
  - 2) Humans use their capacity to reason (rationality) and their free will to either (a) accept God’s goodness and reflect it thorough their lives, or (b) reject God’s goodness which results in sin.
    - a) “Choose life (good) or death (evil)” – Deut. 30:15-17 and Sirach 15:15-17
    - b) This is why human reason (rationality) and free will are so important, we use them to choose either good or evil.
  - 3) Sin results when one rejects God’s goodness:

- a) I use (misuse) a created good for an evil purpose, or
- b) I reject what God reveals about morality and determine for myself what is good and evil
  - Genesis 3:1-6 – “fruit”
  - Individualism & relativism of Western culture
- 4) God holds each person accountable (responsible) for how he/she uses the gifts of reason (rationality) and freedom. We will be judged, in part, on the decisions we make and the actions we perform throughout our lives.
- 5) God respects our free will and ultimately will give us what we choose. In this sense, our salvation (heaven) or damnation (hell) is dependent, in part, on what we choose during our lifetime on earth. We “chose” our own eternal destiny.

“Is there really a heaven? Is there really a hell?”

- There are only two possible answers to these questions: yes or no. We can live as though heaven and hell do not exist, or we can live as though they do. But if we are not quite convinced, it makes much more sense to live as though they do. Think about what is at stake. If we choose to live as though there *is* a heaven and a hell and we are wrong, we have lost nothing – at death, it’s lights out. But if we choose to live as though there is *no* heaven and hell and we are wrong, one day we might well find ourselves at the beginning of our eternal destiny only to realize too late that, by failing to pursue heaven, we have lost it forever. As author Albert Camus said: “I would rather live my life as if there is a God and die to find out there isn’t, than to live my life as if there isn’t and die to find out there is.” – Curtis Martin, *Made for More*

#### Purgatory (*Catechism*, #1030-1032)

- a. Purgatory is a transitional state, not a permanent one. One does not spend eternity in purgatory.
  - b. If one is “sent” to purgatory, his/her salvation is assured. The person ultimately will be welcomed into heaven.
  - c. What happens in purgatory? Purgatory can be understood as a state where ...
    - 1) One is purified of one’s attachments to sin, a purification necessary in order to experience heaven
    - 2) One makes reparation for the temporal effects of sin that one has committed during life (see also *Catechism* #s 1471-1473)
  - d. Biblical justifications for purgatory: 2 Maccabees 12:38-46, Isaiah 6:1-7, Matthew 12:31-32, 1 Cor 3:10-15 and 1 Peter 1:3-8
  - e. Purgatory in the Tradition of the Church (see [newadvent.org/cathen/12575a.htm](http://newadvent.org/cathen/12575a.htm))
    - 1) Church Fathers: Tertullian, Cyprian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Ambrose, Augustine, etc.
    - 2) Teachings on purgatory were affirmed by the Council of Florence (concluded 1445) and the Council of Trent (1545-1563)
3. General Judgment, also known as the “Last Judgment” or “Final Judgment” (*Catechism*, #1038-1050)
- a. “All will rise ...”

- 1) Catholicism teaches that everyone's body will be resurrected at the General Judgment, this includes non-Christians.
    - All people's souls will be reunited with their bodies, just as Jesus' soul was reunited with his body at his resurrection
    - Jesus resurrection is the "model" for our resurrection
  - 2) Following the resurrection of our bodies, we will exist eternally as an incorruptible body/soul union, just as Jesus does.
- b. "... on the last day"
- 1) "Last day" is at the end of world, the Parousia (Christ's return)
  - 2) Christ will judge all people one final time (Matt. 25:31-46 – sheep and goats)
  - 3) Following the General Judgment, humans will exist as a resurrected being either (1) in eternal full communion with God (heaven), or (2) eternally separated from God (hell).

### **Optional notes**

#### Cremation in Catholic Church

1. Cremation is permissible, but it is essential that all parties involved recognize and profess belief in the resurrection.
2. Cremation of the body should only happen after the funeral mass/service. Reasons for this include so that the body can be viewed by loved ones, and because the funeral mass/service includes blessings over, and an anointing of, the body.
3. Cremated remains should be treated in a proper and respectful way, the same as one would treat a body. They should not be comingled with the remains of other people nor divided up among family members. They also should not be sprinkled over a favorite spot or maintained at home on a shelf. The remains may be buried in a marked grave or maintained in a mausoleum or columbarium.