What happens when we die?

What an interesting question to ask and one that has perplexed people probably from the beginning of time. The most difficult mystery that most human beings ponder is why we suffer and what death is really all about. We are intrigued by wondering about death because the reality is that all of us at some point will have to confront death, both of those we love and care for, and ultimately, our own.

As Catholics we have a fairly clear understanding about what will happen after we die. We will come face to face with our loving God. In that moment, we will face what is called our particular judgement. God will determine, or judge, where we desire to go—heaven or hell. God will look into our heart and discern whether or not we have accepted the salvation that Jesus won for us through his death and resurrection. Remember that we cannot earn or merit heaven. We will never deserve to be in heaven. We can get to heaven only because Jesus chose to die for us, as He took upon himself our sins and nailed them to the cross for us. Jesus’ death is the only reason we can get into heaven. But, to gain the salvation Jesus won for us, we must truly be contrite for the wrong we have done. We must have acknowledged our sins, rejected them, and repented for what we did. In doing that, we have embraced the gift that the cross offers us. Going to heaven is not about living the perfect life; it is about putting our faith in Jesus and what He has done for us.

If God judges that we have truly accepted Jesus’ act of salvation, then we will go to heaven or purgatory. And if we have not, then we have essentially rejected God’s love for us, and we will go to hell which is simply eternal and permanent separation from God. (If one is not Christian it does not necessarily mean they have rejected Christ.) If we go to heaven, we will spend the rest of eternity in God’s loving embrace. We will join the saints and the angels in worshiping God. Essentially, we will participate in the eternal wedding banquet (what we call the Mass on earth). If we are not quite ready for heaven but have accept Jesus in our heart, then God will give us time to get ready, in purgatory. Purgatory is simply a state of being with God where we love Him but are not quite ready to embrace his love fully, and so we are given the space and time to heal. Ultimately God wants all people to go to heaven and be with him through all eternity, but where we go will be determined solely by what’s in our heart.