

CONFERENCE TWELVE

OUR DESTINATION

The Gospel which priests preach is the most profound, lofty, comforting, and practical of messages. It is not intended to take the place of counsel, reason, deliberations, and decision-making for which it does not provide the answers. But what it does provide is a basis for deliberations, counsel, and decision-making. And it provides a way for human beings, whose formation to human life through parental and educational influences is never complete, to be healed, matured, strengthened, and to become more fully human. This is an enterprise that should have priority and which deserves an energetic and sustained pursuit.

The maker of systems gives the best directions on how to use them, whether these are computer programs, automobiles, furnaces, or sewing machines. The divine Creator has given us the instructions on how human beings should operate if they are to be truly human, and these instructions are contained in the Old and New Testaments and in the teaching of the Church.

We are rightly concerned about our future. Indeed we are living longer. The National Health Service of Great Britain, on the basis of its database which includes all citizens, has arrived at the conclusion that men reach old age today at the age of eighty and women at eighty-five. This is a bell curve; some reach this level earlier and some later, but most at the peak-plateau of the bell, which are the ages of eighty and eighty-five respectively.

We make certain provisions for our future: Social Security, IRAs, pension plans, investments. This foresight is good. God has created us with the power of providing for ourselves. The Old Testament tells us that we are placed in the hands of our own counsel. God's providence over us includes our providence over ourselves in such wise that if we fail to provide for ourselves we are hindering divine providence from providing for us. Jesus' injunctions such as, "Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof" and, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid, you are of more value than many sparrows" (Matt. 10:29-31 NRSV). Again Jesus says, "And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field how they grow, they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you that even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these." These teachings are to help us to eliminate worry and undue concern about the future and failure to live in the present. They promote generosity in serving others here and now and total dependence upon the goodness of the Father. They are not meant to make us improvident, but on the other hand they do not exclude heroic trust in God and voluntary impoverishment, such as that of St. Francis of Assisi and his first followers, and that of the first Jerusalem Community described by Acts; everyone sold what they had and laid it at the feet of the Apostles and the proceeds were distributed according to need. But when a famine came St. Paul made a collection from the Gentiles to help the impoverished Jerusalem community, which is how the Father provided for them in their need and in response to their complete dependence upon Him. Nevertheless, ordinarily each needs to provide for him or herself. St. Paul, to give an example to his followers,

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worked with his hands to provide for himself and his companions (Acts 20:34). It is not against the Gospel but in accordance with divine providence that we provide for our future.

Now if this is the case with regard to our older years, which we may never reach since we do not know when we will die, how much more should be our preparation for an eternity which is certain? For those who continue in and die in a state of grace, recovered or uninterrupted, eternity has already begun. It has begun in the sense that we already live by faith and by a love that is destined to live forever. Once created, our souls will never cease to be. They are simple, spiritual, without parts, and have spiritual faculties of intellect and will capable of existing in the absence of the body, and their life is the life of grace.

It is true that in our natural life, ideas in the intellect depend for their actuation upon the brain to supply an image. Thus, if we wish to think of a dog, we need an image, even if one that is generalized and without particular features.

Empirical knowledge of the activity of the intellect in the absence of brain activity is given in near-death cases where is a negative EEG and yet intellectual activity. It has long been well known that drowning persons often have a flashback of their entire life in a very short span of time. This is a characteristic of the near-death experience. The speed of this panoramic review is due to the fact that the memory is not dependent on the brain.

A young psychiatrist, Dr. Moody, reported these near-death experiences. A skeptical cardiologist, Dr. Michael Saboam, was induced to interview patients whom he resuscitated. He found that forty to sixty percent had near-death experiences. These follow a pattern which is widely known. As distinct from so-called astral out-of-the-body flights where the experiences of surroundings are not verified, near-death experiences relate details which their body cannot be aware of, details of the room in which the near-death experience occurs or nearby rooms where their soul travels. After leaving the body, ostensibly the soul passes through a dark tunnel. At the end of this tunnel the soul meets a being of light with which it feels completely at home. William Blake (1757-1825) painted such a tunnel being traversed by a soul towards an opening filled with light. This being of light, recognized by Christians as Christ, persuades the person to return to the body and resume life. After doing so, these persons are changed, they become other-centered and loving and devoted. These empirical facts manifest the reality of the spiritual realm, and of the soul and its capacity to function apart from the body. It also vividly reminds us that consciousness is centered in the soul and can continue through coma and death. This also warns us that we cannot make a judgment on the state of any dead person no matter how obstinately they refused the sacraments or continued in their selfishness and denial of the divine.

Jesus speaks of the second death. He tells us not to fear the first death, but the second. The first death is the death of the body. The second death is the death of the soul. The death of the soul is its separation from God, and all that is united with God. This is the loss of beatific, eternal life.

“The charity of God is poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us.” This charity is already the beginning of eternal life, and as it grows our participation in eternal life increases. The spiritual program, which has been outlined in these conferences, of good works, self-denial, the sacraments, prayer, and spiritual reading increase our faith, hope, charity, and our share of eternal life. Hence, among

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those provisions we make for our future the spiritual means should have a primary place. In the order of intention the end comes first, whereas in the order of execution, of activity here and now, material activities may be first: working, eating, sleeping, etc. They are done for the sake of the end.

St. Benedict exhorts his monks to have a longing for Heaven during Lent. A longing for Heaven is appropriate in every season. But there are a few obstacles that prevent us from having such a desire. One of these is that to get to Heaven one must die. Then there is the question of Purgatory; shall we have to spend time there? Then there is the long period between our death and the Second Coming of Christ. During this interval our souls will be unclad of our bodies. This is not an attractive prospect.

It is true that death is the entrance to real life. Dying means leaving behind everything we value now, including our bodily life and all that is familiar to us, our present world with all its beauty and attractiveness. And for what? For the vision of God. Once we enter into this vision we possess God altogether simultaneously and for eternity. Our present life is in dribblets, there is a past, which is gone, and a future that has not yet come, and we have only the present moment. But in eternity, all of eternity is present at once. In God we see the prototype of everything we value on earth. All the beauty of men and women and children, all their excellences are present in God in whose image they are made. And present in an infinitely supernal degree. All the joys and pleasure we have ever experienced are in God infinitely enhanced. All the vistas of sea, mountains, lakes, and forests are present in God in a ravishing beauty unknown to us. We will be at home; we will feel at home. And this will be without end, without sorrow, without fear. The riches of this life cannot be possessed without fear of loss, without anxiety and concern. But the riches of God are possessed securely and forever. Then there are the human delights of seeing Jesus, Mary, relatives, and friends, and seeing them in their beauty and in their happiness.

St. John of the Cross says, "In the evening of our life we will be judged by love alone." One's place in Heaven is not determined by our state in life, whether priest, monk, married, or single. It is determined by the degree of love one has at one's death. It is like a baseball game at which all in the ballpark are present and see the action. But those in the boxes and grandstands see more of the action than those in the bleachers. What determines whether one is in the grandstand or the bleachers is the price of the ticket. So those who have more love will see more of God for all eternity.

Our Lord said, "In my Father's house there are many mansions." Are these mansions arranged like ranch houses along a street? I think they are one above the other, according to the different degrees of love of their residents. In other words there are plateaus in Heaven. If your friend has more love at the time of his death than you, he will be able in charity to come down to visit you, but you have reached your limit and cannot go up to visit him. So let us strive for the highest places in Heaven and we will be able to visit all the lower places. Those who are there are eager to help us; there is plenty of room at the top.

But it is common among Catholics to say, "I just want to get in." Since we usually fall short of our mark, what if we fall short here? So let us seek as high a place in Heaven as we are destined by God to occupy and act accordingly.

On earth there is a gradation of being. There is the inanimate sphere: mountains, lakes, oceans, and earth. Then there is the animate sphere, vegetation including flowers,

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which grow and reproduce, but lack sensation and motility. Then there is the animal sphere, which has motility, sensation, and emotions. Then there is the human, which combines a spiritual soul with a material body. Finally, there is the angelic sphere of pure spirits. Now on each of the inanimate, plant, and animal levels there are more possibilities than exist on this earth. But the various possibilities of gradation are all represented: inanimate and animate, plant and animal, man and angel.

Scripture says that there will be a new Heaven and a new earth. Heaven may indeed contain all the gradations existing here, and with different species too. Father O'Connor, a former professor at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, NY, in his book *Land of the Living*, for which Cardinal O'Connor wrote the preface, reports the saying of St. Augustine, "Put in Heaven whatever you wish so long as it has no imperfection." St. Thomas adopted this saying but restricted the speculation on Heaven by his thesis that motion was an imperfection. Contemporary theologians are again speculating about what is in Heaven with the freedom that characterized the early Christians. We might say that God would put in Heaven whatever will make His children happy. If this is so, there will be many surprises in Heaven, much that will be appropriate to our human nature. For example, eating is a social event as well as a means of nourishing the body. There will be no need to nourish the body in Heaven, but the social event may remain. Consider that Jesus, after His Resurrection, asked the disciples if they had anything to eat, and ate some fish.

Now the attractiveness of Heaven from this point of view may be dampened by the two thoughts. One is that we will not have our body until the General Judgment. But once we see God our concept of time will be altered by our experience of eternity. Plato had already said that time compared with eternity is like the snap of a finger. The early Christians thought in terms of laying down their body at death to sleep and picking it up in the morning at the Resurrection. Once we see eternity the time before we pick up our body will by comparison seem short.

Still, the concern about a stay in Purgatory before reaching Heaven remains. It is God's plan that we do our purgatory in this life. Our spiritual program should lead to that if seriously and earnestly embraced. If we lovingly accept the frustration, difficulties, humiliations, and diminishments of this life, they will be our purgatory. Purgatory is simply an emergency station for those who do not follow God's plan.

The pains in Purgatory are more intense than the sufferings in this life, and they are not meritorious. The pains in this life are not so severe, and lovingly accepted they expiate our sins, increase our virtues, and lead to a greater love and greater possession of God for all eternity. St. Paul says, "These momentary tribulations work a weight of eternal glory." We should repeat this to ourselves when we are faced with unavoidable suffering. This is what makes Catholicism such an all-embracing philosophy – whatever happens has a meaning, or we can give it a meaning. Whatever happens can be turned to our good. We need to use it while we have it. As St. Paul says, "For those who love God, all things work together unto good." St. Augustine adds, "Etiam peccata" – even sins – that is past sins. We do not sin that good may come out of it; this is the additional sin of presumption.

Immediately after our death comes the particular judgment. Facing Jesus we will see at once what our life deserves. With this in prospect St. Therese said, "At the moment of death I will not ask you to take into account my good works, for I know that all are

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tarnished, but I will come to you with empty hands and throw myself upon your mercy.” We should indeed let our light shine through our good works upon men that they may glorify our heavenly Father. But we need not depend upon them, but on the mercy of Jesus at the particular judgment.

He has promised that when He comes at the General Judgment at the end of time He will separate the sheep and the goats. All will see what each has done, good and evil, but also the repentance and expiation. To the goats He will say, “Go away from me, with your curse upon you, to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt. 25:33-34). Jesus has said He Himself is the way, the truth, and the life. This is the way that we take in pursuing the spiritual program set before us by the Church. It is the way of the heart of Jesus, of His truth and of His life.



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