



**ETERNAL  
IS  
EVEN  
NOW**

*Fr. Valentine Joseph*

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IS EVEN NOW

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Our Lady Queen of Heaven  
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## **1. Why Think About The Future?**

Live in the present! Do not worry about the future! Live fully in the present! – These are the slogans of “New Age” thinking. It is nice to hear. It makes people very happy. But, does it really work? Not really. In the times of being alone and troubled, looking at the meaning of life, a person is not satisfied with the present alone. He needs hope for the future. Where is my present life leading me? - That is a natural question for any person. Human faculties like intellectual capacity, emotional impulses and imaginative creativity lead one to dream of a future and to have a hope that shapes the present life.

People naturally lean towards the certainties of future realities and especially the realities after death. Then, in what way can one start thinking and developing hopes about the future? Does anybody have concrete proof about the realities after death? Are they mere imaginations and speculations? How can one proceed in thinking of the future and in what way can it help people to live the present meaningfully? In theology, there is a branch of study that deals with these questions. They are fascinating thought patterns developed from the realities of the Bible and faith experiences of the people throughout the centuries. These reflections are oriented towards the present life of people. They present a symbolic system that shapes the present life in the best way. Here on earth, one can live his or her present life fully when one has a great hope in the future - that is the core of these reflections in this small booklet.

My ministry to the sick, and my prayers with the dying, and my consolation to the victims of accidents and tragedies give me a great insight into the art of hope. Funerals, visiting the sick and healing prayer services have shaped my thoughts on life after death. The person who is in the web of death, as well as the one who is in the beginning of life can seriously join in thinking about the realities after death. The hope of eternal life can brighten a person's every moment. It will give enrichment and direction to his

life. What a joy I have when I think of a wonderful life after death! It makes me enjoy the taste of eternal life even now, here on earth! My teaching in the seminary has also greatly shaped my reflections. Please join me with trust in the journey of this beautiful thought process.

## **Being Entirely Human**

Faith in God is not mere imagination and speculation. It is based on experience. It involves much more thought. Faith includes intuition. It rejoices at new insights. It is an outcome of an entire human life and is inclusive of all areas of life. Faith in God flowers from the tree of life. It takes a person to a compelling future that is wonderful and creative. "Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen" – says the Bible (Hebrew 11:1). In faith, we not only see the present, we see the future in the present. "Already, not yet" is the actual dynamics of a faithful Christian as he passes through the different stages of life. Realization of the future in the present is the goal of Christian religious experience. That is the goal of the subject "Eschatology."

The word "Eschatology" may frighten some people. 'Eschaton' is a great word which signifies the last things. It is the study about last things in life. "The time has not yet come for me to think about them" –this is the reaction of many. Without having a proper view of the future, one cannot live fully the present life –that is my suggestion. Here, I am not frightening anybody to think about one's death. I want to give a comprehensive view of the present which includes the past and the future. It might be a new way of thinking for many. But, these things are not beyond comprehension. They are real; but not yet articulated properly. One may wonder at them, but not try to understand them correctly for what they are! Whenever there are celebrations of rites of passage in life, one asks these questions: What comes next in life? What would be the final consummation of all things? These are the natural concerns.

## **Present, Pastoral and Practical**

Many people approach these topics from the perspectives of sin and punishment. My perspectives are different. They are from the present, pastoral and practical.

**My first concern** is the present life. I am reflecting on the problems of my time and their relevance. I will not trap myself in the “New Age” thinking since I base my reflection on the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the inspirations of the Bible.

**My second concern** is pastoral. I am a pastor who participates in the important moments of human life. I am a minister of the Word of God who relies on the Bible in all the matters of life. My pastoral life becomes more enriched every time I participate in the blessing of sick people and funerals of the departed.

**My third concern** is practical. I want to focus on the unique situation of people. General theories in eschatology are symbolic languages for me. Symbols give multiple meanings and directions in a particular situation. The Greek word “sum” means bringing together and “pole” means the opposite side of reality. “Symbol” means that which connects two opposite poles. Symbols lead people to connect themselves with total reality with its multiple dimensions. As a student of theology, I would like to reflect on the symbolic concepts that connect the realities of life so as bring together a comprehensive and total view of it.

This work contains two parts. The first part is the destiny of the individual person. It deals with near death experience, death, the state of purification, and final reward or final condemnation. The second part is the destiny of the human race. It deals with the end of the world, judgment, the second coming of the Lord, and the final consummation of all into the Kingdom of God.

## **2. At The Moment Of Death**

Near Death Experiences are often spoken of in the media today. Even though science does not approve of these types of experiences, scientists differ in their opinions. But, there are some exceptional “NDE” expressions that lead a normal person to believe in a life after death. I have witnessed, on my own, some of the extraordinary expressions in my pastoral ministry and I have also learned from the experiences of others. The first thing I have witnessed closely is the near death experience of my own mother. She wanted to die without inconveniencing the family too much. She also expressed her longing to be one with the Lord several times during my visits. A week before her death, she asked me about my Christmas plans in that particular year. I told her my plans. She immediately told me that she would like to die before Christmas so that I could continue with my plans without any interruptions. “I long to be with the Lord in heaven and after my leaving throw this body away into the ground” – these were her own words. She died exactly a day before Christmas. We did all the funeral rites before Christmas Eve as she wished. I was joyful in sharing her faith experience.

### **My Own Experiences**

I have also witnessed some extraordinary expressions of the dying in my pastoral ministry. There are people who reflected eternal life on their deathbed more profoundly than before. There are people who blessed me on their deathbed gracefully and said good bye to the earth. There are people who transformed their pain into joy by their radiant faith. There was a native Indian woman in Mauston who visualized heaven to me a day before her death. She told me how her mother and her deceased sisters are calling her to great happiness. There was man from Necedah who asked me to come to see him a day before his death and expressed his conviction in an eternal journey. I followed the dying of Bob Holig, a farmer in his early age who was in a coma after a stroke. I could feel his thought patterns in my conversations with his family and I powerfully experienced his character in those days.

These experiences convince me that death is not the end of human life. These people expressed a new beginning, a new journey and a new mode of life.

One of my friends had a heart attack. He experienced the edge of human life. He recovered after a few months. He told me that his life in the world is a bonus from God and he wanted to live every minute meaningfully so that he can prepare himself for a beautiful life after death. A daughter of a Judge told me at the death bed of her Dad: “Without faith how we can accept this situation? How can we go through this process? My Dad started to pray at his end time in the world and we, his children, started to pray with him. During the time of prayer he departed from us” – what a wonderful way of facing death! Some people who have never practiced religion in their lives have called me to pray for them just a day or two before their death. These things happened not out of fear of death, but, out of their love for their family and society. They wanted their loved ones not to worry about their departure. My visits to the sick are great lessons for me. Each one that I followed until death has left great memories for me. Most of them have confirmed my belief in a life after death.

### **Near Death Experiences**

I have also read about so many near death experiences in different books and articles. Dr. Eben Alexander recently wrote an article in the last issue of Newsweek on his near death experience. He writes: “There is no scientific explanation for the fact that while my body lay in a coma, my mind—my conscious, inner self—was alive and well. While the neurons of my cortex were stunned to complete inactivity by the bacteria that had attacked them, my brain-free consciousness journeyed to another, larger dimension of the universe: a dimension I’d never dreamed existed and which the old, pre-coma me would have been more than happy to explain was a simple impossibility. But that dimension—in rough outline, the same one described by countless subjects of near-death experiences and other mystical states—is there. It exists, and what I saw and learned there has placed me quite

literally in a new world: a world where we are much more than our brains and bodies and where death is not the end of consciousness but rather a chapter in a vast, and incalculably positive, journey.” It is stunning to see a doctor write about his near death experience.

In the book “Heaven is for Real“, Todd Burpo speaks about the experience of his son, Colton. It is amazing and hard to believe. But, recently, in a television interview, Todd introduced another book “Heaven Changes Everything.” I am convinced that the experience of the NDE changed the life of that family. As a pastor, he has great strength to witness the realities after death. The reality of heaven changes the very perspective of life itself. He says: “Because of my experience, I am now sharing with everyone I know that miracles are possible in your life everyday. After what I have seen, I realize that absolutely anything is possible, and that we did not come here to suffer. Life is supposed to be great, and we are very, very loved. The way I look at life has changed dramatically, and I am so glad to have been given a second chance to experience “heaven on earth.”

In the book “Dying to Be Me,” Anita Moorjani beautifully writes how her near death experience healed her from her cancer. “The state I was in during my NDE was way beyond the mind, and I healed because my damaging thoughts were simply out of the way completely. I was not in the state of thinking, but a state of being. It was pure consciousness – what I call magnificence! This state of Oneness transcends duality. I was able to get in touch with who I truly am—the part of me that’s eternal infinite, and encompasses the whole”.

The experience of heaven changes life itself – that is the point of view of many people who express their near death experiences. Heaven is not a place as we imagine. It is a state of life. It begins in this life itself. It goes on an everlasting way into the future. It is a journey. It is a process. If one begins to start the process, everything changes in life. It is a great treasure for the one who

joyfully sells everything he has. It is the pearl of great price for which one risks one's whole life. How do we acquire such an experience? Are we all supposed to undergo near death experiences?

## **Peak Experiences**

It is impossible for everyone to undergo a NDE experience. There are some experiences in life that lead us to glimpse eternal life. They are called peak experiences. In those experiences, one is beyond time and space. In these experiences, one reaches a depth in oneself where one could see a connection and a harmony with the rest of the realities of life. On 27<sup>th</sup> of November 2013, CNN News channel had an interview with two women who had near death experiences. It was really interesting. One woman was a social worker and another woman was a nurse in the hospital. One of them did not believe the stories about NDE before her own experience. Both of them affirm an ineffable experience of love and acceptance and light. For them, death is a miracle. It is the peak experience of human life. Both of them agreed that they were forced to come back into the world for some particular purpose. We all have different experiences that reflect eternity. They may be deep love experiences; motherly sacrifices for their children; experiences of patriotism etc.

Religious experience is one of them. They are always fascinating. One forgets himself in the ecstasy of the Divine. The symbols of religion, both verbal and nonverbal, rituals, myths and sharing persons or community could lead one to these experiences. They are not the privilege of a few people. If someone has an attitude of transcendence, that person could see these visions in ordinary things. They bring enlightenment in the life of people. Symbols like heaven, hell, purgatory and the second coming of the Lord are expressions of religion. Our approach to these symbols should be based on religious experience. We cannot come to these symbols for scientific information nor out of curiosity. We who have faith in God and have some questions regarding the future state of life can approach these symbols. For them, the insights of eternal life in the future not only bring them great joy, but, they also bring great energy for the present life. That allows people to live with enthusiastic hope and not only in the "mere present" as proposed by the "New Age" authors.

### **3. Death – A Great Miracle**

All human experiences stop at one point; All human efforts fail totally at one point and all human attempts to challenge life end at one point – that is the time of death of a human person. No hospitals, no medicines, no forces can predict the moment of death or stop death. Is there any death for death itself? That has been the yearning of human society for ages.

What happens in death? – that is the question that proceeds from our reflections. Is it a total annihilation of a person? Is it a totally hopeless situation in human life? Human science speaks of death as a gradual process. All the functions of the body gradually die out. The final factor that determines death is brain death. Even in accidents, brain death is a slow process. Cells of the brain die gradually, giving a person a chance to accept his own condition and gradually give away his life.

A person knows that he will die some day. This is the thing that differentiates a person from an animal. Animals struggle to survive, but they have no knowledge of their death. Only a person knows his destiny. Even though, he does not know the time and manner of his death, he is reminded about his death during his life in so many ways. The pain of loss that emerges from the departure of one's dear ones indicates one's own death. Every funeral is the celebration of the death of the person who attends it.

#### **The Experience of Dying**

Elisabeth Kubler Ross in her classical book “On Death and Dying” speaks vividly about the death experience that she had witnessed in her patients. The first reaction of a person in the wake of death is denial. No one accepts the fact of death in the beginning of one's own death process. Even though one accepts the dying process of others, he or she does not accept one's personal reality at first. In the beginning of the death process, a person has a strong feeling that he would like to prevent it. That may be a fighting instinct. A person makes an effort to prevent

death in both the thinking process and in the body. Dr. Ross gives another aspect to this denial; a dying person experiences isolation from others. Denial and isolation go together.

The second stage is an irresistible anger in the dying person. They do not want to hear somebody speaking directly or indirectly about their imminent death. They express this anger in so many ways. They are not happy with anything in the world. They are critical about everything. They do not want to be at peace with others.

This anger sometimes leads the dying person to the third stage called bargaining. They begin to do good things to others in order to prevent death. They begin to go to Churches or Temples. They are the first persons to go to pilgrim places. They believe strongly in miracles and they long for miracles to happen to them. They strongly believe that their good deeds will reward them with health and healing. I happened to meet one man in India who was terminally ill. I met him at the famous Shrine of Our Lady of Good Health in South India. He was sure that he would get well soon because of the feeling that he experienced during the church service. It became true. His faith prolonged his life. He lived five more years than the time given to him by his doctors.

The stage of bargaining has both positive and negative ways. As a positive way, it leads people to believe in God and to do something good for society. On the negative side, it sometimes leads people to superstitions and unnecessary exaggerations of ordinary events as extraordinary. It also leads some people to chase after everything good that they hear of.

The fourth stage is “depression” according to Dr. Elisabeth Ross. They feel that they are defeated. A sense of loss surrounds their being. Their facial expressions, their words and concerns reflect their depression well. This depression can cause great problems to the family members, nurses and doctors who care for them.

The fifth and final stage is a stage of acceptance. This stage brings people serenity and peace. In this stage, they wish good things for their dear ones in the world. “I am going away, please live your life happily” – that is the wish of many people. But coming to this stage is not a normal thing. Many do not even progress to this stage of dying.

Religious practices can lead people to this fifth stage of acceptance. “Know the truth, it will liberate you” says the Bible. Accepting death is the crown of human life. It is the fruit of psychology and psychotherapy, and different ideologies of life. In my opinion, all the treatments in the medical field are aimed at this final stage of accepting one’s own death.

Death is both mystery and miracle. It is a mystery since no one exactly knows what happens in death. Science can tell us the physical side, but what is going on in one’s mind and soul, nobody can predict. It is mystery because we have some evidence from people who underwent NDE. They predict more things than a human person can actually think. In death, there is an enormous energy to bring all the events of life together. A person sees all his personal history, like seeing a movie. He decides his own fate. He judges things and people in a right way. His lifelong struggle to choose right or wrong comes to an end.

For some thinkers like Deepak Chopra, death is a miracle. In life, we see some miracles, extraordinary things that are beyond the laws of nature. In death also a person experiences this miracle. He sees a reality that is beyond his comprehension and expectation. He encounters a wonderful light. He sees all the events of life from outside. He experiences compassion, love and acceptance to the maximum. All his negativity goes away. All his judgments are filled with forgiveness and joy. It is a miracle, indeed. To explore more about the nature of human death, we go to the Bible. It is the source revealed to us; it is the path that is given to us.

#### **4. Biblical Enlightening on Death**

It is commonly believed among Christians that death is the wage of sin. People quote the book of Genesis to affirm their point of view. I think the truth of Genesis refers more to spiritual death than physical death. Adam disobeyed God's command and that caused humanity to undergo spiritual death with all its struggles in life. Here, by spiritual death, we mean the separation of man from God's relationship both in this world and after death. The sentence, "Death is the wage of sin" has to be understood properly as spiritual death. When Adam was in the garden, he could share the Divine life without any difficulty. He was walking with the Lord and speaking with the Lord. After his disobedience, he felt the evil in himself and in his surroundings. He could not have direct access to God. That is an important point one could derive from the stories of Genesis.

#### **Consequences of Sin**

The fact of sin and its consequences are well confirmed in different books of the Bible, and in a special way, in the writings of St. Paul. In Romans 5:12 – 14, Paul speaks of Adam's sin: "therefore, just as through one person sin entered the world, and through sin, death, and thus death came to all, inasmuch as all sinned, for up to the time of the law, sin was in the world, though sin is not accounted when there is no law. But death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who did not sin after the pattern of the trespass of Adam, who is the type of the one who was to come." The main focus of this passage is sin and spiritual death. Adam's own sin releases into the world the power of sin. The power of sin produces personal sin in man. Sin in every human person brings spiritual death.

It is clear that the death Paul mentions in the above passage is not a physical death. It is a separation from God through sin. In one place, Paul beautifully speaks about the work of the Spirit in human life: "For if you live according to the flesh, you will die, but if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will

live” (Rom 8:13). We die spiritually because of our sins. We live forever by the grace of God. Physical death is a natural one. But, it does not mean it is an annihilation of life itself. Then we question: Why is there suffering at the time of death? There are violent deaths. There are sickness and pain during the time of death. Why does humanity suffer if physical death is the passing from one stage to another stage of life? To better understand the relationship of death and suffering one has to go to the very death of Jesus.

## **Death of Jesus**

In a recent best selling book, “Killing Jesus,” the authors Bill O’Reilly and Martin Dugard analyze the historical reasons for the death of Jesus. As an ordinary man in Palestine, who had neither political nor economical power, Jesus challenged the very basis of the Roman Emperor and the Jewish authorities by his speech and deeds. The Roman Empire wanted to promote Caesar as God; the Jewish authorities wanted to safeguard their power and positions by indirectly supporting the Roman Empire, and at the same time, make use of the religious sentiments of the people to justify their leadership and power. Jesus radically rose up against the oppression and cheating of these two great powers, universal and local. He projected the concept of the “Kingdom of God” against these two powers. His threat to the existing powers caused him to endure a violent death on the cross.

The death of Jesus could be a political one, but, the way he took his own death is something unique in the history of mankind. He took his death experience as a transition from darkness to light. He passed on from faith to an actual experience of the Divine in his death. He knew the political situations of his time very well. “Give Caesar what belongs to him and at the same time give God what belongs to Him” – that was his political strategy. For him, the power of God alone leads people to their final destination. The love of God leads humanity into the fullness of life. Jesus was bringing the reality of God’s reign over the reign of Caesar in Rome. To bring about God’s reign on earth

was the main purpose for his death. He chased the merchants from the Jerusalem temple to reinstall the temple as the house of God. That was the immediate cause for his death. The Jewish religious leaders considered Jesus to be a direct threat to their authority.

Jesus' death was a tremendous spiritual experience for him. From his early age, he believed very much in the unconditional love of God for him. In baptism, he had an extraordinary spiritual experience which opened heaven for him. "You are my beloved son, I am pleased with you" – these were the encouraging words that he received from heaven. From that day on, Jesus wanted to serve his Father in heaven more faithfully. He discerned his Father's ways through prayer and made doing his Father's will his goal in life. Jesus revealed the power of God to the people by miracles and healings. He brought the word of God to the people by his preaching and he organized a team according to the plan of God. Jesus' radical commitment to God the Father drew him to a death on the cross.

His death was a great test of faith. He was not only suffering acute physical pain, but, the faithless scorn and the contempt of the crowd undercut his trust in God. In this acute time of suffering, he began to recite Psalm 22 as a prayer. The verses "My God, My God, why have you abandoned me" expressed his real condition of mind and body on the cross. He chose an appropriate psalm. He continued his prayer. Jesus' final words on the cross were Psalm 22:11: "Into your hands Lord, I commend my spirit". During the time of such a terrible fate, no one could do other than this. He expressed his radical trust in God the Father. He felt the silence of his Father very much. But, he did not lose hope. One can see his true attitude of prayer on the cross.

### **Glory of God in Death**

The descriptions of the evangelists on the death experience of Jesus are very fascinating. Both Mathew and Mark refer

to Jesus' painful cry on the cross which was totally misunderstood by the onlookers. They thought Jesus was calling for the Prophet Elijah to come and rescue him. Actually in deep pain, Jesus was crying the psalm words "Eli, atta". People heard it as Elijah. Mathew focused very much on the silence of God the Father in the agony of Jesus. He also has described some unusual natural events which testified to the cry of nature along with Jesus. "At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people." (Mt. 27:51 – 53) God broke his silence in the death of Jesus. He responded to Jesus in an astonishing way. Mark speaks about the darkness that surrounded the earth. Both Matthew and Mark mention the death of Jesus as extraordinary and the people who saw that event believed Jesus to be the son of God.

The darkness that covered the earth ceased at the moment of Jesus' death. The pain and the mourning were passing events. Jesus had crossed from darkness to light at the moment of his death. God the Father was not silent at the death of Jesus. He acted powerfully. He changed the suffering of Jesus into a blissful light. For Jesus, the moment of death was his moment of resurrection. His faith was changed into experience. His fidelity to his Father was finally crowned with splendor. Glimpses of this experience happened to him on Mount Tabor. He was shining like the sun. The disciples heard the voice "You are my beloved son in whom I am extremely pleased." That experience was fulfilled in Jesus' death on the cross. In the gospel of John, this reality is very clear. For John, death and resurrection are two sides of the same reality. In death, Jesus was glorified by His Father. "Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory which I had with you before the world was made" (Jn 17:5) – that was the prayer of Jesus. His prayer came true at the moment of death. God raised him from death. Darkness was only a beginning and eternal light was the end.

## **A New Meaning to Death**

In Christ, death has taken on a new dimension. Jesus has transformed death into a new source of life. Jesus did not free humanity from the necessity of undergoing death, but he made death a paschal experience of reaching another mode of life. Physical death is a gateway to eternal life. John 11:25 -26 clearly tells how a believer participates in the death and resurrection of Christ: "Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die." This faith gives a new dimension in Christian life. It takes away the fear of death. Sufferings during the time of death are physical, not spiritual. Hanging on the cross, Jesus could forgive the people, he could share divine life with the repentant sinner. He could have the great sense of fulfillment of doing the will of God the Father. Such a great freedom is enjoyed by Jesus during the time of his death on the cross.

We could summarize the new perspective the death of Christ brought to human life in the words of Paul: "None of us lives for oneself, no one dies for oneself. For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For this is why Christ died and came to life, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living" (Rom 14: 7-9). In death, a human person does not become a victim, rather, he becomes a victor over the forces that decay his body. He meets the Risen Lord in a definitive way and experiences paradise with Him.

## **5. Judgment at Death**

Does God judge people according to their deeds? What type of judgment does God write after the death of a person? Does the judgment of God have extraordinary features? – These are the questions very often raised in theology classes. God knows everything and he loves every person. In the light of God’s love and mercy, a person judges himself during the moment of passing from this world. At the moment of death, a person has a great capacity for envisioning his life from his birth to that moment. God is providing him with a light to see what was going on in his life. A person judges himself and submits himself to God for mercy. That does not mean God does nothing. Even though a human person submits himself before the judgment seat, God has a criterion. His sharing of divine mercy is totally dependent on Him. What would be his logic in judging individuals?

### **Different Religions**

People of different cultures and religions have myths and stories about the judgment of God. Hindus believe in a god “Jaman” who judges the individual according to his karma, the actions done in his life. Muslims submit themselves to the hand of Allah, the Almighty God and believe his judgment is totally different from that of human standards. Believing in the revelations of Mo-hammad will shape the judgment of those individuals.

Christianity believes in the judgments of God. In literally reading the Bible, it is unclear how and when we undergo both a personal, individual judgment at the time of death, as well as a general judgment at the end of time. Here, our concern is the individual judgment that takes place immediately after death.

### **The Logic of Judgment**

The logic of God’s judgment in the Bible is different from the ordinary judgments of the courts and laws of government. God’s judgments are based on the covenant he made with humanity. The covenant - relationship he has with humanity through the People of Israel colors his judgments. He has made an everlasting covenant with the people in which he promised them a share in His divine life. “You are my people and I am your God”–

that is the content of the covenant. He gradually wanted to elevate humanity as participants in eternal life. In Jer 31:31-34, one could see a promise of God for a new covenant "... not according to the covenant I made with their fathers ... but this shall be the covenant I make ... I will put my law in their inward parts and write it in their hearts ... and they will be my people ... for I will forgive their iniquity and will remember their sin no more." This ties in with Isaiah's prophecies concerning Messiah – Christ – and His New Covenant, and was quoted in part by the writer of Hebrews when contrasting the old covenant under the law of Moses and the new covenant in Christ (CP Isa 42:5-7; 49:7-9; 55:3-5; 59:20-21; 61:8-11 with He 8:6-13; 10:16-17; 12:24; 13:20). He took several initiatives in history which culminated in the revelation of Jesus Christ. How do human persons respond to this revelation? That is the basic criterion of judgment. "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world and men loved darkness more than light" (Jn 3:19).

### **Judgment at the Time of Death**

At the time of death, the light of Christ comes to an individual in a powerful manner. It is up to the person to be open to the light, or not. The saving power of God encircles him during the moment of death. If a person accepts it, he is saved. The judgment of God is more action than pronouncement. It is unbelief that makes the judgment worse. God cannot treat virtue and sin in the same manner. Sin is a total contradiction to his virtuous nature. "Do not be deceived. God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, he will also reap" (Gal 6:7).

But, his light gives one an opportunity to judge one's life and surrender oneself to the God of light. There are examples in the New Testament regarding judgment after death. On the cross, Jesus says to the good thief "Today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk 23:43). We have another example in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. Lazarus is taken immediately after death into the "bosom of Abraham" and the rich man is taken into the place of punishment and fire. (Lk 17:22). But, the truth is

this. At the time of death, one sees the light of Christ and the events of ones' life pass by like a picture. A person is given a capacity to evaluate his own life and accept the light. If a person opens himself to God, he is judged by God as a person of light. If he closes himself to the light, he is condemned to eternal darkness.

### **Judgment of Non-Christians**

The light of Christ that one experiences may be different for people who do not know Christ and yet follow their conscience. Christians know and believe in Christ. They are really fortunate. They can easily identify the light of Christ. There are people who believe in the god of their own religious background. They will also experience the light of God. There is no doubt about that. Then there are non-believers, people who do not believe in God but live a good life. They will also experience the light. They will recognize the person of God in their judgment. Then, what is the difference between Christians and non-Christians? It is the intensity of the struggle in submitting themselves to the light. For Christians who recognize Jesus, it is an easy process. For non-Christians and non-believers, we do not know, it is up to God and them. We cannot make any assumptions about their judgment. We leave it in the hand of God. But, I am sure, we will appreciate the revelation of God in Christianity very much in the moment of our death.

### **Charity is the Measurement**

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1022, summarizes the personal judgment of an individual in the following way: "Each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven--through a purification or immediately, -- or immediate and everlasting damnation. At the evening of life, we shall be judged on our love".

We have another clue in the Bible about the Judgment of the Lord. He will ask about our attitude of charity. "Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'" (Mt 25: 32 – 40). It is very interesting! More than faith and hope, charity becomes the criterion for judgment.

### **Last Judgment and Judgment at Death**

The last judgment painting by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel attracts many people both as art and message. The image of the "coming of the son of man in clouds" brings different interpretations. The description in the Bible is purely apocalyptic, but we can draw a particular message from that.

After death, everyone is in front of the judgment seat of God. His judgment is both personal and relational. It is beyond time and space. God's judgment brings salvation to individuals and gathers all the people into His Kingdom. In some places in the Bible, the personal dimension is given importance and in other places, the social dimension of judgment is given importance. There are not two judgments, as if one can be judged one way at the time of death, and judged another way at the end of time. Our final state of being will be determined at the time of our death. But, God will see our actions in relation to the actions of everyone else. This relational dimension is given to us in apocalyptic language as 'last judgment'.

## **6. Purgatory: A State of Purification**

Everyone in the world knows the reality of sin. Everyone struggles until the end of their lives against selfishness and sin. No one has escaped from the darkness of life even though that person is regarded as a saint. Blessed Mother Theresa is a good example. She speaks about her dark moments in life. There is an inner paradox in every human being, a longing for God as well as an inclination to sin. This internal contradiction will be ratified only in death, where one has a direct encounter with God.

The reality of struggle one experiences in life easily leads a person to the understanding of the reality of Purgatory. This doctrine has been totally misunderstood in the Church and outside the Church for centuries. Some people made use of this doctrine wrongly to make money for themselves and as a means of fund raising for the Church. Reformers went to the extent of denying this doctrine on the basis of their biblical interpretations. To counteract the Protestants, some of the Catholic preachers went to the extent of describing the nature of fire in Purgatory which frightened people. I would like to explain the doctrine of Purgatory from my own understanding as one who believes in the Catholic Church as my teacher and guide.

### **The Reality of Sin**

The reality of sin has cast such deep roots in man that he cannot be entirely cleansed instantly. Everyone experiences it in their own life. I know people coming to confession very often experience this. They confess their sins and ask for absolution. They believe in the mercy of God, but after a while, they feel the root of sin again in their innermost being. There is the inner paradox. We are longing for God and at the same time attached to sin. St. Paul expresses this struggle in his writings: "For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good..." (Rom 7:14-16).

This inner contradiction will be ratified only in death, when one has a direct confrontation with God.

### **Will Anyone Assist?**

Assistance in this struggle comes from the Church, because the Church is a pilgrim community traveling towards God. The final goal of this community is beatific union with God. The Church is the praying community which asks for reciprocal assistance from all its members, whether alive or dead. The Church also believes in the communion of saints. Nobody is alone in this journey of life. Life is a communal event. In the faith life also, nobody is alone. The Church is the Body of Christ who assists its members in their struggle and pain. The prayer of the Church is a powerful reality, not mere speculation. When two or three gather in the name of the Lord, Jesus is present. In the time of death and after death, the Church prays with all sincerity for the redemption of its members who are in trouble.

### **Scriptural Evidence**

People often ask for scriptural evidence for prayers for the dead. In 2 Maccabees 12 :39 – 46, we have evidence of prayer and sacrifice offered in Jerusalem for the soldiers killed in battle (“that the sin which has been committed together might be wholly blotted out “ 12:42). Post mortem prayers are evident in the customs of Israel. Of course, we do not have many scriptural proofs, but scripture does not contradict this reality. The thinking and philosophy of the Old Testament Hebrews had not yet been developed very well on reality after death. Even in the time of Jesus, some groups such as the Sadducees did not believe in life after death. For them, life in the world was everything.

## **In the Early Church**

In the early church, Christians celebrated the Eucharist in the Roman catacombs. All the people who were buried in the catacombs were not Martyrs. There were ancient writings like “Peter and Paul pray for us” in the cemeteries. Even in the Eucharistic prayers written in the early centuries, there were prayers for the dead. Praying for the dead was a post-scriptural development. Church fathers like John Chrysostom testify to it (Cf. St. John Chrysostom, Hom. in 1 Cor. 41, 5: PG 61, 361; cf. Job 1:5). Later St. Augustine developed it as a doctrine. “But by the prayers of the holy Church, and by the salvific sacrifice, and by the alms which are given for their spirits, there is no doubt that the dead are aided, that the Lord might deal more mercifully with them than their sins would deserve. The whole Church observes this practice which was handed down by the Fathers: that it prays for those who have died in the communion of the Body and Blood of Christ, when they are commemorated in their own place in the sacrifice itself, and the sacrifice is offered also in memory of them, on their behalf. If, then, works of mercy are celebrated for the sake of those who are being remembered, who would hesitate to recommend them, on whose behalf prayers to God are not offered in vain? It is not at all to be doubted that such prayers are of profit to the dead; but for such of them as lived before their death in a way that makes it possible for these things to be useful to them after death (Sermons., 172:2).

## **East and West**

There is a difference in the theological development of the doctrine of Purgatory in the Western and Eastern Churches. In west, the aspect of satisfaction and expiation for sins is very much focused upon. For example, a person with wounds in his body can be healed by medicine. But the scars are not easily healed. Likewise, sins have scars. They are totally healed and eradicated in purgatory. In the Eastern Church, however, purification and maturation of the soul

is very much insisted upon. Purgatory is a final stage of spiritual growth. It is a state of maturation, a final cleansing of sins. It is neither a “place” nor a fire of punishment.

The Council of Trent develops the doctrine of purgatory as a reaction to the Protestants who totally denied it. There were some malpractices among the clergy who did not understand the very doctrine itself. A modern translation of the Decree on Purgatory by the Council of Trent, 25th session, 1563 states: “The Council simply affirms the existence of purgatory and the great value of praying for the deceased but sternly instructs that preachers not push beyond that and distract, confuse, and mislead the faithful with unnecessary speculations concerning the nature and duration of purgatorial punishments. The Catholic Church, instructed by the Holy Spirit and in accordance with sacred Scripture and the ancient Tradition of the Fathers, has taught in the holy Councils and most recently in this ecumenical Council that there is a purgatory and that the souls detained there are helped by the acts of intercession (suffragia) of the faithful, and especially by the acceptable sacrifice of the altar. Therefore this holy Council commands the bishops to strive diligently that the sound doctrine of purgatory, handed down by the Holy Fathers and the sacred Councils, be believed by the faithful and that it be adhered to, taught and preached everywhere.”

### **Purifying Encounter**

Purgatory is a purifying encounter with the Lord. We meet the glorified Jesus and God’s fire consumes and purifies a person at the time of death. All engrained egotism and selfishness that still cling to us after death are burnt away. Finally, we attain the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:13). Suffering is a part of this stage. Cleansing involves suffering. Maturation and growth are achieved at the cost of acute suffering and pain. Purgatory is also viewed as a meeting with the glorified Lord Jesus who is fire as described in the book of Revelation (Rev 1:4). Encountering the Lord leads a person to eternal bliss. All struggles will go away in this stage. The pull in opposite directions will end. But, this is a gradual process. We cannot speak about time in this stage. But, at the same time,

we cannot deny it is a gradual process. Persons can reflect God only when they are totally freed from sin. In other words, it is the final baptism of the Holy Spirit and of fire (Mt 3:11). It is like the event of Pentecost when fire came upon the people. It is the stage of simultaneous joy and pain. It is the final touch of the work of art, as St. Catherine of Genoa says.

The only thing the Church wants us to do is pray. Prayer has an aspect of the eternal now. When we pray we are connected with the eternity of God. Our prayer is an expression of our love for our departed brothers and sisters. In 2 Peter 3:8, we read “But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.” So, our prayers to the Lord for the departed not only purify them to meet the Lord, but also purify us for eternity.

On All Souls day in 1966, Pope Paul VI gave a beautiful homily on the obligation of the living to pray for the dead: “let us pause here for a moment to reflect that this tribute of love for the deceased may be a duty for a number of reasons – a duty of gratitude. How much we owe our dead! We are debtors for such a heritage of love, memory and examples. Then, there is a duty of fidelity, for life is history, and history is tradition. For the believers and civilized, tradition must be reasonable, must tend to continuity and development, must see to it that the lessons, experiences, undertakings, and sacrifices of our forebears on our behalf are not made futile. Moreover, there is a duty of love and reverence. Few other duties are more compelling than the classical remembrances of the departed. Few others so ennoble the heart in its fulfillment”. By “few others”, he means prayer as members of the mystical body of Christ. As the Catechism beautifully says: “ From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God. The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead” (1032)

Purgatory is a state of purification. It happens after the death of an individual. It manifests the mercy of God even after death. God gives individuals a chance to realize His great love and submit themselves to His ways. What is important for people who are living is a prayerful communion with the dead. The pain of departure of dear ones is reduced in this prayerful communion. It takes away fears and doubts in the case of the sudden and tragic deaths of loved ones. It also prepares a person for death. Every prayerful communion is mutual and reciprocal. It purifies a person from sin and increases hope in eternal life.

## **7. Eternal Punishment Called Hell**

The concept of “eternal punishment “ is difficult to grasp. How can God, who loves each person unconditionally, create a state of eternal punishment called “hell“? We always speak about the unlimited mercy of God. How, then, is it possible to think of eternal condemnation? Does anyone speak of hell when we read about eternal life offered by God in the Bible? If God has sent his only Son to redeem the world, will he not do anything to prevent his beloved people’s eternal destruction?

There is a beautiful saying: “God does not create hell in spite of man, it is man that creates hell in spite of God.” God has given total freedom to human beings. A person can choose to live any kind of life. Sometimes, he can choose his own death. We see people committing suicide. It is their choice. God allows them. Likewise, if a person chooses to totally reject God’s love, God does not forbid him even though he could overrule it. It does not undermine his absoluteness. To be in the love of God eternally is heaven and the exact opposite of that, to be away from God, is hell.

### **Jewish Concept of Hell**

Jewish people had developed two concepts when they thought about the destiny of souls after death. One is “hades“ and the other is “gehenna“. The souls of the just go to “hades,“ a dormant state of life. Their life will be a life of shadow. They will not have an active life. In our Apostle’s Creed, we recite the words “...was crucified, died and was buried; he descended into hell; on the third day he rose again from the dead;” Jesus descended into “hades“ to resurrect the people who were in shadow and to bring them into heaven. This is typical Jewish thinking. The early Christians wanted to emphasize the role of the Risen Lord in bringing salvation to the people who had died before.

The other concept, “gehanna,” refers to the punishment of bad people. For them it is the lower room underneath. It is a place of punishment and fire. There will be wailing and grinding of teeth as explained in the parables of Jesus. These people have no redemption. They are doomed to destruction. For Jewish people the state of living in the world is far more dynamic and preferable than these two stages after death.

## **Description of Hell**

Jesus used the concept of hell in his parables. In the parable of wheat (Mt 13:42) and in the parable of the fish (Mt 13:47 – 50) we have references to both heaven and hell. “They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” “Weeping and gnashing of teeth” is an expression which refers to a terrible negative stage of life.

But, in the parable of ten virgins, we see a development. Jesus uses this sentence to avoid the five foolish virgins entering the wedding hall: ‘I do not know you’ (Mt 25, 12). That is a typical word for the rejection of God. And in the scene of last judgment he uses these words: “Depart from me you, cursed, into eternal fire” (Mt 25:41). The words “eternal fire” could be referring to the state of hell.

In Mark’s gospel, hell is referenced as a place “where the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched”( Mk 9: 46). It is more a symbolic expression of the punishment one undergoes in hell. It is more an apocalyptic language which tells the reality in symbols. In the gospel of John, we read of the “wrath of God” (John 3:36). John often uses the words “eternal life, everlasting glory and light”. He does not mention the word “hell”. Acceptance or denial of the offer given by God depends on the person. Those who believe in Jesus will have eternal life. But, if one does not believe, what will happen? John does not explain it, but it is very obvious: God and sin cannot go together. Paul speaks about sin and death. He says: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:23).

## **Fire in Hell**

In the Bible, fire is a great symbol of both life and death. In Isaiah 9:18 – 19, we read the following: “Surely wickedness burns like a fire; it consumes briars and thorns, it sets the forest thickets ablaze, so that it rolls upward in a column of smoke. By the wrath of the Lord Almighty, the land will be scorched and the people will be fuel for the fire.” Fire here means man’s irrevocable separation from God. It is an internal burning that happens if someone disobeys God totally. It is both physical and psychological. It is an internal pain in a person’s conscience produced by the loss of God.

## **In the Teaching of the Church**

The concept of hell developed gradually in the teachings of the Church even though it is not very evident in the scriptures. In the early profession of faith, the themes of judgment and eternal life are found very often, but, not the concept of hell. Only in the fifth century do we have a reference to hell in the profession of faith. Then, in the year 1215, in the 4<sup>th</sup> Lateran Council, we see an elaborate discussion on hell. Punishments in hell are not temporary and transitory, but interminable. The Catechism of the Catholic Church summarizes the teaching in the following way: “The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, “eternal fire.” The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs”(1035).

## **Hell is a Reality**

Hell is the outcome of man’s self-determination and free responsibility. It is a final act of rebellion against God. There is a beautiful saying, “Thy will be done in hell as it was on earth.” It is a total rejection of God. People, out of freedom, deny an unquenchable attraction of God within themselves. It is an eternal destruction and exclusion of God’s presence in their lives.

Does anybody go to hell in spite of great chances given by God to repent? Many theologians say “probably not.” But, the Bible speaks about the “Anti-Christ”. An Anti Christ could be any one who is totally against the values of Christ and totally against God. It is unnecessary to frighten people by the reality of Hell, but at the same time, no one can deny its reality. Evil forces come into society in different forms. Even though we speak about the mercy of God, justice will be done. That is what we understand from the insights of the Bible. Pope John Paul II in his book “Crossing the Threshold of Hope“ gives a clear vision: “It was unlikely that God’s infinite justice could allow terrible crimes to go unpunished, and so, final punishment would seem to be necessary to reestablish the moral equilibrium in the complex history of humanity.”

In speaking about hell, one should not forget to mention the love of God which penetrates even into the darkest sides of human life. Edith Stein believed, as Teresa Benedicta beautifully says: “God’s love is so overwhelming that it finds a way to overcome the resistance of even the most obscurant sinners”

## **8. Heaven is Real**

Heaven is a symbolic word that expresses the reality of the survival of a person after death. It expresses an everlasting happiness a person enjoys. It is not only a personal joy, it is a blissful communion of all. "Today, you will be in paradise with me " – these are the words of the Lord to the good thief on the cross. These words reflect very much the nature of heaven. It is not a place, it is a state of life with God. It is a state of happiness that cannot be disturbed by any kind of sufferings. It is an experience that starts in this life and gradually reaches its fulfillment in God.

### **In the Old Testament**

In the Old Testament, this concept was not thoroughly developed. For the people of that time, the blessing of the Lord was a long life (Ex 20:12). God blessed the patriarchs with long life. Long years were considered as the favor of the Lord and they prayed for that. They were also anxious to live life fully in the present. For them, heaven was life on earth. But, the concept had a great development in the time just before the birth of Jesus.

In the book of Maccabees, we have a beautiful story of a mother and seven children giving their lives for keeping the commandments of the Lord in the time of persecution. "Our brothers, after enduring a brief suffering, have drunk of everlasting life " (2 Mac 7:36). In the times of persecutions, the concept of resurrection of the dead powerfully developed in Israel. Karl Barth beautifully explains this in his book "The Resurrection of the Dead" in the following way. "He who has not yet understood that life is a gift of God.... Who does not grasp the beauty of this life, cannot possibly understand what resurrection means." God is faithful to the end – that was the firm faith of Israel from the beginning. They understood it very well during their difficulties in life, especially during the times of persecution. All their faithfulness to God was not rewarded in this life. So, they started to believe in a life with God after death.

## **In the Teachings of Jesus**

In Jesus, one can see a definitive and clear understanding of heaven. It is a life of resurrection. In the controversy among Pharisees and Sadducees on the resurrection, he beautifully explains the states of life in heaven: "The children of this age marry and remarry; but those who are deemed worthy to attain to the coming age and to the resurrection of the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. They can no longer die, for they are like angels; and they are the children of God because they are the ones who will rise" (Lk 20:34 – 37). The state of life in heaven is more surprising than one could imagine. Jesus supports faith in resurrection after death.

In the gospel of John, we see a unique event in the raising of Lazarus from death. For John, the raising of Lazarus is less important than the life of resurrection in Jesus. In John 11:25 – 26, Jesus beautifully tells us: "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" Lazarus was raised from death. But, he died again sometime later. His being raised from the dead was just a physical miracle. The spiritual miracle that Jesus performs is a permanent cure for death.

## **Eucharist, a Foretaste of Heaven**

Jesus is not satisfied with merely stressing the eventual flowering of faith into life everlasting with words. He offers another ritual as a channel through which one can attain this eternal life. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever" (John 6:54-57). In the Eucharistic celebration, Jesus gives an experience

of the resurrected life through a participation in his glorious body. Luis Bermejo, an Indian theologian writes about this reality in the following way: “ Faith and Eucharist, to believe in Jesus and to eat his flesh: this is the twofold principle of life of the Christian’s unshakable faith in his own resurrection. Deep down, this is a mystery of life, a life that streams down from God to man through the double channel of faith and the Eucharist, a life that becomes in man like a spring that wells up into everlasting life.”

### **Paul’s Experience of the Risen Lord**

Paul speaks about his conversion as an encounter with the Risen Lord. He saw the risen Lord on his way to Damascus. He heard his voice. That turned his whole life upside down. After that, Paul’s main teaching conveyed the reality he experienced; the life of resurrection. He developed his experience with the risen Lord in so many different ways, and it is interesting to note his different channels of conveying this message to the Christians and to the people of the world.

The first one is his preaching on resurrection. As a Pharisee, he believed in the resurrection of the body before his encounter with the Lord. But, meeting the risen Lord gave him a new depth of understanding. He continued on preaching with conviction in spite of different controversies and persecutions. The non-Christian world that heard about this unique message was first curious, then furious. They mocked him and threw him out of their cities and even attempted to kill him. Paul was strengthened every moment by this faith.

The second channel is his preaching to the Christians on the experience of Christ in their lives. “Who (Jesus) by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body”. (Phil 3:21) Paul shares his experience of the risen Lord very often with the first Christians. Jesus will change your mortal bodies into his glorious body –that

is the promise he gives to the Christians. When and how will it happen? In answer, he refers to the transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor. It is a mystery of God. God the Father transformed the earthly body of Jesus into a luminous body even before the miracle of the resurrection. It was both present and future reality. In every experience of Christ, it happens to his followers.

The third channel is that of sacraments, and in a special way, Baptism. In Baptism one is in communion with the intimate source of the glorious light and life. Through the Holy Eucharist, one dies with Christ and rises with Him. One is partaking in the body of Christ, the risen Lord. Christian rites are channels of the experience of resurrection in the participants.

The fourth channel is the power of the Holy Spirit. "And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit in you." (Rom 8:11)

The fifth channel is his curiosity for the second coming of the Lord. Like any other Christian, Paul was interested in knowing how that would happen. But, all his curiosities were washed away when he spoke about the joy of being with the Lord. He was longing for his death and his complete union with the risen Lord.

### **Experience of Heaven**

For a person who dies, heaven is concrete and full even though one experiences glimpses of the life of resurrection on earth. In death, one's soul vivifies, one's personhood is strengthened. It is a unique experience. Some people call it a miracle. Every death is a miracle. In every death a person reaches a state of fullness of life. One's body may be distorted. But, one's self shines with radiance in the presence of God.

The scriptures speak about this experience of heaven with great certitude. We can summarize them in the following way: it is more than bliss, beauty, love and peace. No one can explain the happiness in human words and no human will understand that reality. It is beyond our mind and emotions. It is the state of being with God for eternity. God promises this reality to every person. God leads a person toward this reality. But, all our imaginations about that reality are not of value. It is God's gratuitous gift to people. This gift is promised in one's baptism. The Holy Spirit unfolds this gift gradually in the individual by its gentle power. And it reaches its fullness in death.

The Psalms gives us a taste of this experience. In Psalm 16:8-11, one reads the following: "I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay. You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." Filling a person with the joy of God's presence is heaven.

In Psalms 36:7-9, there is another description: "How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light." Heaven is seeing light in His light.

Psalm 73:23-26 provides another imagery: "Afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." When we are in the spirit of these psalms, we can at least have a drop of the ocean of heavenly bliss.

## **Entering into the Banquet of Christ**

In the New Testament, the image of a banquet is used in different places to signify heaven. It is entering into the banquet of the Lord with Christ Jesus. (Mt 22:21) The risen Lord is the center of heaven. "We shall be with the Lord" (I Thess 4:17). The early Christians personified heaven as Christ. They categorized three degrees of heavenly bliss. The first one comes through faith in the risen Lord; the second one comes through faithful participation in the banquet of the Eucharistic Christ; the third one is the hope and longing for the heavenly Christ. Personal experience, liturgical experience and hope-filled expectation are the three aspects of their heavenly glimpses.

Seeing God face to face, knowing the Lord, being joyful in the presence of the Lord, feeling the touch of the Lord, eternal communion of love and beatified vision are more imageries that come in different places of the New Testament. John considers knowing Christ as a heavenly experience (Jn 17:3). First Peter 2:9 calls Christ a "wonderful light".

The prayer of the Church beautifully expresses the longing of a Christian to attain heaven in these words: "It were my soul's desire to see the face of God; it were my soul's desire to rest in his abode; it were my soul's desire, when heaven's gate is won, to find my soul's desire, clear shining like the sun. This is still my soul's desire, whatever life afford, to gain for my soul's desire and see thy face O Lord" (hymn of the Liturgy of hours).

## **A New Vision of Heaven**

What does heaven mean for life today? That is the question that occupies our mind now. If one has the right perspective of heaven it changes life itself. Actually, heaven is the reality of enjoying the wonderful light of the Lord. That light is shining in the risen Jesus who is present in every aspect of our lives. In theological terms, we can speak about heaven in three ways: it is the re-animation of life; it is the re-orientation of the spirit and it is a resurrection of the body.

It is a re-animation of life as a whole. We were created by God at our birth. When we see a child, we enjoy the wonder of God's creation. There is life, joy and wonder. In the experience of heaven, the same life is re-animated by God. The self of a person is re-animated for an extended life, a life with God for all eternity. It is God's re-creation of a person. It is a re-birth from above as Jesus speaks in John's gospel (Jn 3:1-5). This reanimation of life begins in this life itself. A person who is born of the Spirit of God is re-animated to a higher life. In death, that higher life reaches its culmination. Some of the religious leaders call it "consciousness". A person rises from the level of body, emotions and mind to reach the conscious state of life where one becomes a part of God himself. He is living in an eternal now. He is "Jeeva Muktha" (fullness of life), a person who begins his divine life even in the world.

It is also a re-orientation of life. A person is oriented toward God who is the author of life. Self-centeredness is gone in the heavenly experience. Since a person is God-oriented, he naturally becomes other-oriented. It is easy for him to forget himself in love, in beauty and in truth. It is easy for him to forgive others as Jesus did on the Cross. It is easy for a person to transcend the very ordinary situations of life with great dreams and wonders. He becomes a person of surprises and thankfulness.

The vision of heaven is also an experience of the resurrection of the body. The human body is the medium of life. A person who is fully alive makes full use of the faculties of his body. He is happy and makes others happy. His joy is not merely from his physical body, but from his vision about his glorious body after death. A body grows and reaches its youthfulness and it decays gradually. But, after death, a person has a glorious body. The resurrected body of Jesus is of that type. As God, he could manifest his glorious body to his disciples. Even before his death, he manifested it in the time of his transfiguration. The disciples saw his glorious body shining on Mount Tabor. The vision of gracefulness, the vision of one's own transfiguration makes life more dynamic and vibrant.

## **9. The Manifestation of Lord at the End of Time**

The resurrection of Jesus is a reality that transcends time and space. It is not a mere past event that happened two thousand years ago. It is a present reality and it reaches its full manifestation during the time of one's death. Then, what is the meaning of the second coming of the Lord? What do we mean by the end of time? What do we mean by final judgment? – These are concepts spoken of very often in religious circles. I have already mentioned the apocalyptic language in the Bible. It is a special type of literary form that gives a specific message. Here, I would like to take specific apocalyptic words and explain their meaning for our life today.

### **Parousia – The Manifestation of the Lord**

The word "Parousia" means the triumphal entry of a king to his own capital city after a victory in battle. People of the city come together and celebrate the victory of the king with dancing and music. Early Christians made use of the term to signify the final manifestation of the Lord. They first thought that Jesus would manifest himself as the victor one day in their own lifetimes. "Maranatha!", "Come Lord Jesus!" was their liturgical word. In the course of their life, they saw the death of the great Apostles. That made them modify their hopes. They thought the second coming of the Lord would be at any time. Nobody could predict it. The living would join the dead at that time. They included belief in the second coming in the Creed and they began to expect it. It was a later realization that the Parousia would happen primarily at the death of an individual and in the world at one point. The Lord would manifest himself fully. This manifestation would be gradual, but actual. He will triumph over the forces of evil. He will gather all the people into the Kingdom of God. The Lord is already present in the world. He has clearly said that he will be with us until the end of time (Mt 28:20). Then, what is the meaning of the ascension of the Lord? In the eyes of the disciples. It is merely the disappearance

of the glorious body of Jesus. In Acts 1:11, we see the promise of Angels: "This Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." This refers to the final theophany of Jesus, the last of his post-Easter appearances. Jesus' final brilliance will burst forth from the heart of the Church, tearing apart the mist of her faith and enveloping her in paschal splendors. It is the Church that will be transfigured when it sees the face of Jesus.

## **The End of the World**

Many people think that the Bible predicts the end of the world. That is not true. The apocalyptic language uses frightening stories to describe the end of the world. But, the message is concerned with actual life, not the end of time. Here, the term "end of the world" is symbolic language. Concern about the end of the world is the work of science, not religion. There are so many theories like the "Big Bang" theory in the scientific world. But, they are theories. Of course, the end of the world is in the hand of God. The Bible goes to the extent of saying "even the son of man does not know the end of time" Mk 13: 32).

The concern of the Bible is the end of the life of a person. In death, the world ends for a person. He has no senses to experience the worldly realities; he has no mind to understand things that are happening around him. But, he has a self, a consciousness that embraces all the realities of the world with love and compassion. One need not worry about the end of the world. One need not believe in different predications that frighten people. There are natural disasters, there are terrible accidents and there are sudden deaths due to heart attacks, and other complications in the body. They indicate the possibility of death for anyone at any time. The message of the Bible is this: "Stay awake!" That means, walk in the light of God.

## **Anti-Christ**

The Bible speaks about the appearance of the Anti-Christ before the Parousia, the manifestation of the Lord. Matthew 24:11 speaks of false prophets: “and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people.” In Mk 13:22, we also read the following: “For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.” Is the Anti-Christ an individual or a collective force? We have both views in the Bible. In I John 2:19, there appear to be many individual Anti-Christ: “Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.” John goes to the extent of saying that the Anti-Christ are already in the world (I Jn 4: 3). But for Paul, the Anti-Christ is a single person whose activities will be accompanied by a general apostasy, a widespread defection from faith, a denial and rejection of whatever is religious, etc. 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 says the following: “Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he can set himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God.”

Whether it is an individual or a collective force, the Anti-Christ has an unquenchable thirst for power and a proud self-glorification to the point of self-divinization. These forces may attack the Church from within or from the outside. They cannot be eradicated by us. Only in the final manifestation of the Lord, will they be eradicated. Then, the lie of the Anti-Christ will be exposed to all.

## **The Role of the Church**

The vision about the Church is also subjected to the vision of the manifestation of the Lord in the final times. We understand the term “one shepherd and one flock“ as the vision of the church of the future. We dream that the whole world will come under the Pope, the head of the Church. But, the Biblical vision of the church is different. It is the command of Jesus to the disciples to go and preach the gospel and baptize people in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19). The disciples went to different cultures and races and built Christianity. But, Church is not to triumph in the world. In Luke 21:13-17, we have the following verses: “But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. And so you will bear testimony to me ... You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. Everyone will hate you because of me.” The Church is destined to share the totality of the paschal mystery of Christ, his death and resurrection. It has to undergo persecution. It will not be accepted by many. In my view, the Church will be a minority at the end of the world.

The role of the Church is to participate in the sufferings of Christ. Paul beautifully puts in his Second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 4:8 -12: “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal bodies. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you”.

## **10. The Hope That Sustains Life**

As I conclude my reflections on life after death, I would like to reflect on the power of the resurrected life brought to us by Jesus Christ. It is the focal point of my reflections. It is only the Resurrection of the Lord that caused the emergence of Christianity. It alone sustained the religion for the last two thousand years. It alone gives answers to all of life's questions in a satisfactory manner. It is the only hope that makes the present life more lovable, joyful and concrete. Live the present as a life of resurrection. That is the insight I would like to give to my readers. Explaining the life of resurrection is my focus in this final chapter.

### **Three Levels of Life**

The life of a person has three levels. The first is a life of flesh and blood, a life that urges a person to enjoy maximum happiness in this life. It does not worry about God, life after death and the realities that cannot be experienced by the senses. This type of life does not want to hear about death. When it experiences the death of its beloved ones, there is frustration first. Then, it tries to forget the event. When there is terminal sickness, it has a tendency to commit suicide and die with less pain. Selfishness is the norm for this life. What can I gain from the realities of the world? – That is its motive. Reciprocal relationship is its logic. Its dreams are limited. It tries to shrink into its own world.

It is the first level of life in any human being. Some people end up with this first stage alone. But, there can always be a development from this stage. The experience of love, generosity and joy in community life brings people to develop another stage of life called "subtle consciousness". A person begins to be aware of the realities that last forever. One begins to believe in values of love, peace, justice and truth. A 'life of relationship' emerges out of intuitions and transcendence. The death of a beloved one causes pain, but also gives hope. One wants to

perpetuate the memories of the beloved people who died. One begins to think about one's own death. What do I want to leave behind as my own legacy??—this is the question that emerges in one's consciousness. Art and music become the legacy for some people. Achievements in their field of work become the legacy for others. In this stage, religion becomes attractive. Life after death becomes a vague thought that passes by. Religious events are mere social events for the people of this stage. They come to Church for family and friends.

The third level is the life of resurrection. A person participates in the very resurrection experience of Jesus in this stage. From subtle consciousness, they go to pure consciousness. They see the realities of the world from the point of view of the risen Lord. It is an experience that is difficult to explain. It is an experience of rebirth, freedom and rejoicing in hope.

### **Re-Birth to Eternity**

In the first level of mere physical life, the self of a person is filled with anxieties and preoccupations. Life is limited from birth to death. The actualization of the self is only in the realm of the material world. In the second level, a person aspires toward something immortal. He feels that he has some powers to explore his immortality. Love and beauty are experienced in a way that is beyond space and time. His soul feels like a guiding force that leads him to the source of life. But, in the third level of resurrected life a person is born anew. Love, compassion, strength and truth are experienced in its fullness. One goes away from all material attachments and doubts about the future. Everything becomes a new wonder for him. He feels as if he is a part of the ultimate divine life. He shares in the splendor of God and boasts in the hope of the glory of God. (Rom 5:2 and Eph 1:18).

### **Freedom to Move On**

This stage is the life of freedom of the children of God. One receives an extraordinary gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit leads one in all the activities of life. He gradually leads

the person's entire life into a transfigured experience of the future. It is a gift from God which leads a person to the future. It sanctifies one in every moment of his struggles in achieving his goal. One is moving forward with the vibrations of divine fire that he receives from the Spirit. He has struggles and choices in life, but the Spirit gives freedom to choose the right direction that leads one to eternity. He enjoys the soft radiance of the Father's benevolence. He moves irresistibly forward, from incompleteness to completion, from imperfect possessions to full inheritance and from initial glow to final effulgence.

The Holy Spirit leads a person to promises that never fail. The promise of God the Father led Jesus to death on Calvary. It is the promise of the fullness of life. It is an entirely gratuitous gift and cannot be merited. God keeps His promises. He is a rock. The Letter to the Hebrews beautifully sets forth this hope in chapter 6:17-20: "Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf". This promise gives immense freedom to move one rapidly toward life. It helps one to make use of all the opportunities for growth and happiness.

### **Rejoicing in the Hope**

Another gift of the Holy Spirit to a person of resurrection is joy. Rejoice in the Spirit! Rejoice in the hope! – these are the slogans of St. Paul in his preaching (Rom 12:11 – 12). A deep sense of joy is given to the person when he has hope. A joyful hope is to meet the transfigured Jesus at the time of death.

All the realities of the world increase this joy in the Holy Spirit. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus beautifully tells us: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute

you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.” (Mt 5:11-12) The risen Lord is an internal binding force that unites the past, present and future. He is the One who brings harmony in all the scattered events of life. All the future events are clustered around Jesus.

## **Kingdom of God**

What would the Kingdom of God look like in its final shape? – that is the curious question that kindles the imagination. The Kingdom of God is the central message of Jesus in his gospel. He gives great parables to explain the nature of the Kingdom of God. It is a joyful event which gathers all realities together. It is the reign of God with love and peace. It is an everlasting Kingdom. It is the goal towards which everything moves. It comprises past, present and future.

Jesus gives a great awareness of the Kingdom in human life: “Repent, the Kingdom of God is at hand; Rejoice, the Kingdom of God has surrounded you; Realize, the Kingdom of God is within you.” This is the powerful message of Jesus. Every human person has access to the Kingdom of God in this life. Everyone has a future taste of the rule of God in the present.

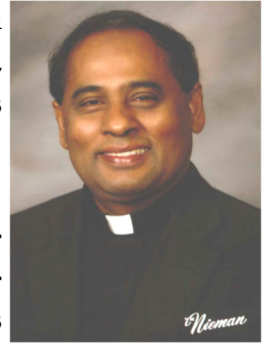
The Kingdom is comprised of all people of all times and all realities of the universe. It is togetherness, it is harmony and it is joyfulness. A hope in the Kingdom would make the life of a person an art, music and grace. The kingdom is comprised of birth, death, purgatory, judgment and heaven. It consists of beginning, growth and fullness. Into the Kingdom of light, God leads us with His marvelous love.

**I would like to conclude this work with the beautiful words of Tagore, a great poet in India:**

**“When I was born and saw the light, I was no stranger in the world; sometimes inscrutable, shapeless, and without words; appeared in the form of my mother.**

**So when I die, the same unknown will appear again; as ever known to me; and because I love this life, I will love death as well.”**

Our human life can not be separated from the life and flow of the universe. We are a part of a wonderful cosmos which is dynamic and always changing.



God, the greatest artist, continues his creation of the universe with beauty, integrity and luminosity out of his goodness and love. There is a dynamic growth in everything. The whole creation is marching toward a perfectness that reflects the perfection of God.

Human beings are unique in creation. They are created in the image and likeness of God himself. Humans are created for eternity in a more fascinating and artistic way.

Jesus, the son of God, has been revealed to humanity as a paragon, a guarantee and way of human destiny. He has revealed by his life a process of death and resurrection that leads to a life of perfection, beauty and light.

This process of death and resurrection is going on every day in the life of people. Death is a major leap in this process. It opens the gate of eternal life in a dramatic way. In the light of Jesus Christ, a person could see this journey in a compelling and all consuming way. That is the content of this small book.

I would like to reflect with you the lasting events of human life. Eternity is even now, when we reflect, believe and practice the beautiful vision revealed to us in the life of Jesus. Death, purgatory and heaven are the powerful realities that could make us live the present life fully and meaningfully. Please read and enjoy this book.