

THE COMING OF THE KINGDOM: *Heaven, our home*

(Catechism of the Catholic Church 988-1065)

Introduction

- “*Our true home is in heaven*” (Phil. 3:20)
- “*We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come*” (Nicene Creed)

The coming of the Kingdom of God is the goal towards which all of the teaching and activity of the Church is geared. Ultimately we should judge all that we do and say against this yardstick: will this action/word assist me in my journey towards the kingdom or become an obstacle I must overcome? In the words of one old man, asked for a word of wisdom from his many years of experience of living “We’re only here to get out of here.” Contrary to the impression we gain from life and from society, our faith and our God proclaim loudly to us that this life is not the fullness of existence, indeed it is not even the most significant chapter of existence: it is merely the preparation-chamber for a new life in which the longings of this earthly life will be met and the alienation we feel during this life will be overcome. So long as we focus our eyes on the true life - that of the Kingdom - we will avoid the terrible mistake of regarding our mortal life on earth as the sole and primary good we can experience.

A more materialist outlook would tell us ‘what you see is what you get’ - the physical universe is all there is, this life is all there is, don't go pinning all your hopes on a life after this one because you can't really prove that there is such a life. Today, this mentality dominates: it reduces life to the level of science, and if you can't prove something is there, the chances are that it is not. The spiritual life is neglected, the existence of God is rejected and the notion that our true home is somewhere other than here is regarded as escapism. Marx' oft-quoted line, that religion is ‘the opium of the people’ is perhaps believed by more people today than at any other time in history (which is ironic, bearing in mind the collapse of Marxist communism in the Soviet Union over a decade ago). We have become a ‘post-Christian’ culture which many see as progress and improvement: no longer do we need to drug ourselves with thoughts of heaven and eternal happiness because the lives we lead here are no longer so oppressed that we need this form of mental anaesthetic. All thought of heaven was simply an invention which we could administer to ourselves to help us endure through the pains and troubles of life. The opinion now is that life is so sweet and satisfying in

itself, we lead such contented lives of self-fulfilment and have been able to root out of our society those factors which lead to poor quality of life (poverty, unemployment, sub-standard education, violent crime, drug abuse and dependency, progressive debilitating diseases, disability etc.) that we have no need to take a mental narcotic in order to get through this life: life is so palatable that we can get on with it without pretending that all this pain is worth it because of the rewards that some deity will give to us after we die.

Thank goodness life is so easy today that we don't need to pretend to ourselves that life will get better. Thank goodness mankind has finally grown up and learned to look life in the face without inventing a fantasy world which makes this present one appear easier to cope with.... !? I suggest that this is just self-delusion mixed with a large dose of pride in our scientific and technological achievements. We like to think we have built a better world than the one we inherited from our parents, but the evidence is just not there. While we do get cleverer, and discover more about the world (just look at the human genome project and all the possibilities it will open up to us when it is concluded - eradication of deformity and handicap, eradication of genetic diseases, lengthening of life; and then there are the other possibilities - manipulation of genes, babies made to fit parental specifications, gene correction therapy for social 'misfits') we have a knack of turning technology to suit our purposes - which are no more elevated today as a result of greater scientific knowledge than they were in previous (so-called 'barbaric') ages. Many in our world look to the Bible, especially the Old Testament, and throw up their hands in offended humanitarian compassion when they read that Joshua and Saul were both ordered to place pagan nations under the 'ban' (meaning they were to be absolutely destroyed). How primitive, how barbaric, how unlike our more refined and civilised world today when such savage atrocities would never be contemplated! Oh really? The only difference between the motivation for & methods of warfare between then and now is that we are now better equipped to destroy whole populations, and we are now prepared to do it not simply in order to gain everlasting life, but for much lesser things - world domination, ethnic hatred, the lure of quick profit. The horrific truth is that genocide is effectively a phenomenon of the last few centuries, especially the last, because only in these years has man had the means to carry it out: and he has tried to achieve this atrocity countless times – Hitler and the Jews is only the most *obvious* example. In addition, there were the English clearances of the Highlands after the battle of Culloden in 1746, the settlement of Protestant landowners in Ireland after the massacre and exile of the native population, the Australian clearances of Aborigines on the mainland and from Tasmania, the Nazi systematic gassing of gypsies, Stalin's attempted destruction of the entire Polish middle class and intelligentsia at the Katyn forest massacre, the Siberian gulag camps of Communist Russia, the Turkish clearances of Armenians in Anatolia, Mao Tse Tung's Cultural Revolution in China, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, Saddam Hussein's gassing of the Kurds, the Hutu/Tutsi genocide in Rwanda, the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, the list goes on and on. So much for this utopia that we like to think we have constructed on earth. Don't be conned into thinking that religion was a drug that mankind *used* to need in the superstitious past when life was very hard - but that now we have developed and shaped the world to provide for our comfort, there is no longer any need for such artificial and manufactured comfort blankets. That line just doesn't describe the truth. We have given up religion but not because we have outgrown it or don't need it any more: *we have given up religion in our culture because we no longer trust anything that we can't prove with our senses.*

Unfortunately, this hasn't worked either. We are no better off without religion than we were when we gave religion some credence. This world is no more able to satisfy the needs of mankind today, for all our technological advances, than it was able to in the time of Christ. The consequence of a totally materialist world-view is disillusionment - because we discover sooner or later that for all the material comforts this world can provide, there is still something missing. In 1990 an American social commentator named Francis Fukuyama wrote an article entitled "The End of History" – he argued that since communism had finally collapsed in Russia we were witnessing the final triumph of Western-style liberal democracy. Now that the American form of democracy was triumphant, there could be no further improvement – we had reached utopia and the end of man's struggle to improve the world he lived in: it was impossible for things to get any better. How narrow-minded, conceited and hollow that evaluation was is now becoming apparent. Western-style liberal democracy, which we thought would solve all the problems of society, has brought its own crises - free market economics has meant massive poverty for many parts of the world (look at the former East Germany), we are still fighting wars as ever we did, still failing to construct a harmonious model for society despite legalising divorce, homosexuality, abortion, contraception, pornography and now euthanasia (in the Netherlands, Nov. 28th 2000) etc. each one of which we were told was the last element necessary to provide the utopia we dreamt of. Our social scientists, politicians, psychologists, social anthropologists, doctors, government aid workers etc., are constantly pushing for an end to one particular taboo in the search for the perfect liberal society, convinced and hoping to convince us that this elusive perfect social structure is within our grasp. And with each experiment we see failure. Contraception has not lowered the teenage pregnancy rate or the abortion rate; legalising easy divorce has not made marriage more likely to be a happy state etc. The result has been a total collapse of confidence in man's ability to grow, perfect himself and learn from the mistakes of the past. We have become cynical and untrusting of the voice of the expert or the politician.

The tragedy has been that man is looking in the wrong place for the solution. Convinced that heaven is really an achievable political system here on earth, and equally convinced that we should disregard any notion of heaven beyond this life, man has gone in search of an illusion (that heaven is possible to construct here on earth). When he has consistently failed to find it in all the places he expected it to be waiting, man has refused to consider the possibility that he has been looking in the wrong place. It has yet to occur to Twentieth or Twenty-First century man that heaven can't be constructed on earth, or that heaven means anything other than human standards of morality and understanding.

The best example of such disillusionment, brought on by realising that man had failed cataclysmically to live up to the excessively exalted opinion he had of himself, AND of the Church's response to this purely secular attitude to happiness, fulfilment etc., can be seen in the aftermath of the Second World War. After the War, the world tried painfully and rather unsuccessfully to adjust to the horrors of what man could do to man in the name of nationalism. As the full horrors of the concentration camps, the Japanese prisoner-of-war camps, the dropping of the two atomic bombs and the systematic targeting and obliteration of civilian cities like Berlin, Hamburg, Coventry, Dresden, London and Tokyo, man saw that his sense of being civilised was only

superficial. In the wake of such barbarity, man lost his sense of the eternal - there was an almost universal sense of despair: far from developing beyond the barbarity of the First World War, man had regressed so far that he had actually attempted genocide, he had deliberately targeted civilians for mass-destruction and for the first time: man had de-evolved. This led to a sense of overwhelming despair: man would never improve, life was no more than the physical and beyond this life there was no more. There is no meaning to life beyond the physical: such spoke the existentialist philosophers of the 40's and 50's like Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre & Simone de Beauvoir. Their books speak of the absolute futility of human effort - Albert Camus used the image of Sisyphus to make his point: Sisyphus was punished by the Gods for his sins with the task of pushing a massive boulder to the top of a hill. The Gods ensured however that this task could never be completed by arranging for the boulder to slip from his grasp each time he approached the brow of the hill, and then roll down to the bottom again. To Camus this described the absolutely meaningless nature of human effort and the pointlessness of human suffering. Our lives are arbitrary - some are successful and others failures - but all to no effect and without justice. Human life is a sick joke perpetrated on us by random chance and we just have to put up with it. This is the natural conclusion to any philosophy which begins from the premise that heaven is not beyond this world but a goal which is within our grasp: when that is shown from experience to be untrue then the existentialist steps in and strips your life and mine of all significance and meaning whatsoever.

Against this, the Church proclaims loudly the values of the Kingdom of Heaven rather than the kingdoms of earth: despite the unparalleled barbarity of twentieth century man, there is more to being alive than this human life on earth - there is a Kingdom, promised by Christ in which the meaning of human life on earth, no matter how painful or sacrificial, will be made manifest and vindicated. For this reason, and to re-state the message of hope preached by Christ to the world, Pope Pius XII solemnly declared in 1950 the dogma of the Assumption of Our Blessed Lady - a belief already universally accepted by the Church but proclaimed now with infallible authority to emphasise beyond all doubt and ambiguity the Church's confident belief in heaven, Christ's power to redeem humanity entirely and give it a share in his own glory, and finally the Father's pressing desire that we live for ever with him in the splendour of heaven, the home of the children of God.

Our behaviour in this life ought to be dictated by this Kingdom and ordered so that we may, one day attain it. To put it simply, everything in our human life is an opportunity to re-enter paradise, from which we have been exiles since the time of Adam.

1. What is the Kingdom?

When questioned by Pontius Pilate, at his own trial, about the type of King he was, Christ replied

- *“My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world.” (Jn. 18:36)*

The kingship of Christ and the character of the Kingdom of God are absolutely otherworldly: and this explains to some degree the futility of the attempts to construct a perfect society or utopia on earth. The first characteristic of the Kingdom is its beyond-world nature. For this reason, the values of the Kingdom are utterly alien to the thinking of this world – look at his predictions of his passion and death. When St. Peter hears of them, his reaction is to remonstrate with Christ to persuade him not to go to his death: what could his death achieve? Much better to stay alive and carry on his teaching and miracles, surely? Christ’s reply is devastating:

- *“Get behind me, Satan! For the way you think is not God’s way but man’s” (Mk. 8:33)*

To the thinking of the world, Christ’s death is senseless and disastrous, a waste of a life – yet to God his death is the sacrifice which takes our sins away and the key to our salvation. These are the values of the Kingdom that appear so much nonsense to the eyes and ears of the world. YET, the same values of the Kingdom are to become the values by which Christ’s disciples are to live: Christ says of his own disciples that they are no less alien to the ways, thoughts and actions of the world than he is:

- *“I have given them thy word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.” (Jn. 17:14-16)*

To long for the coming of the kingdom of God puts us into the category of the unstable or the poor old soul - only madness remains as an explanation for the acts of self-sacrifice, mortification, personal efforts to grow in holiness which demand a constant struggle to sacrifice the excellent goods of this life in order to achieve the even greater goods of the life to come.

Christ and the Sacred Scriptures give many examples of the nature of the Kingdom, the goal towards which all our actions are ordered. There are three images of the kingdom that stand out:

A. The Garden of Eden

The Kingdom is compared to the Garden of Eden. All that was lost in the first struggle between good and evil is now re-gained. St. John more than the other evangelists depicts Christ as the new Adam: especially in the resurrection narrative, which uses so many motifs from Genesis. Only John has the resurrection take place in a *garden* - as Adam was expelled from Paradise, the garden of Eden, so the new Adam is to be found within the garden, since he is the one to lead humanity back to the home for which they were made.

In the story of Adam's expulsion from Eden/Paradise, God places the cherubim, angels armed with fiery swords to prevent mankind trying to storm his way back into Paradise. When the descendants of Adam and Eve (Mary Magdalen and those wishing to anoint Christ's body properly) come to the garden, it is the cherubim they

encounter, although they do not forbid them entry any more because the new Adam has opened the gates of Paradise to permit humanity to return.

Before the expulsion from Eden, Adam did not do nothing - he found work for himself: he tilled the garden and guarded it (Gen. 2:15) - Adam was a gardener, the one who preserved the beauty of the garden of Paradise. Is it just coincidence that when Mary Magdalen encounters Christ in the garden she assumes he is the gardener?

Adam's spouse, Eve, is formed while he sleeps in the garden from his own side (the rib God takes out when Adam sleeps and then fashions into the form of woman) - just as Christ, the new Adam, finds his spouse (the Church) is formed while *he* sleeps (on the cross in death) and also from his side (the soldier pierces his side with a lance from which flow water and blood, the first being a sign of the Baptism by which we *enter* the Church, and the second a sign of the Mass, by which we are immersed in the very core and centre of the Church, Christ himself)

There were two trees forbidden to man in Eden: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life. Adam is tempted and eats from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil having been reassured that if he does so, he will not die. The opposite happens, Adam does indeed die especially spiritually, since he has chosen to cut himself off from God, hence his expulsion and exile. Hoping to ensure he never dies, Adam causes his own death in eating the fruit. Christ, the new Adam, mirrors all this and reverses Adam's failure. Christ doesn't choose to live and end up dying in shame: he chooses to sacrifice his life on our behalf and ends up resurrected in glory. Adam ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, promised by the serpent that his eyes would open and he would know the difference between good and evil - the effect of eating from the tree is the opposite: his sin blinds Adam to the difference between good and evil so that human beings are often so confused about right and wrong that they can't tell them apart and end up picking evil under the impression that it was good. Contrast this with *Christ*, the new Adam: he goes to the cross (which the Church identified with the Tree of Life from the first century) but the effect of eating from this tree is the reverse of what you would expect - the new Adam eats from the tree of life and immediately dies. His death brings life to the rest of humanity, and the new Adam is resurrected and glorified.

The imagery of Eden and Adam is dramatic and to the point: Eden/Paradise is our *home*; it is the environment man was created to live in. Since Adam, mankind has been in exile and *this* is the root cause of man's inability to find satisfaction. Man is a stranger living in a strange land who yearns for the home for which he was created - and only in that home will he find rest and contentment. We are fish out of water. The Church refers to this when she uses the language of the pilgrim people - as pilgrims journey to the shrine on which they have set their heart so the disciple of Christ is bound on a journey by which he will leave this place behind because it is *NOT* the shrine he seeks. His journey is complete only when he is united heart and soul in an unbreakable way with the God he seeks.

Please note: there is one essential point of difference between Eden and Paradise, or at least between our experience of it in the time of Adam and our experience of it (please God) when we return to our heavenly home. In Eden, mankind enjoyed God's favour as a creature. Because of the Incarnation of the Son of God, when God and man

joined in perfect harmony, and because of Baptism, when we were adopted by the Father through being given the Holy Spirit and by entering Christ's body, the Church, we are no longer simply creatures of earth. We have become God's sons by being united with God's Son. SO - the Kingdom we are bound for is not just a re-acquisition of what Adam lost. We are not just returning to the house we left all those centuries ago: we have been brought closer to God than Adam had ever been: now we are sharers in the divine nature - and for all the intimacy Adam shared with God, it did not extend to God's own life. Setting our sights on the Kingdom of Heaven is not just about claiming ancestral rights or about going back to the place from whence we came. When we return to paradise, it will be as members of Christ, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.

B. The Marriage-feast of the Lamb

Christ's favoured image of the Kingdom is that is a wedding-feast. Drawing on the imagery of marriage, Christ deliberately uses the intimacy of marriage to convey the closeness of God's relationship with his people when the fullness of the kingdom is established. God is presented as marrying his people, and therefore entering a relationship with them that is just as exclusive. In the book of Revelation, this imagery comes to conclusion: when the end of time is imminent and the culmination of Christ's work of redeeming is drawing close, the new union of Christ with this people is again presented as a marriage: now, however, the marriage is solemnised - the Kingdom is made manifest when the Lamb takes his bride whom he has prepared as a spotless offering. The devil is presented as a prostitute who has beguiled Israel for so long, but now, when the Lamb has triumphed, his union with his people will become unbreakable and incapable of deeper intimacy:

- *“Alleluia! The reign of the Lord our God Almighty has begun; let us be glad and joyful and give praise to God, because this is the time for the marriage of the Lamb. His bride is ready, and she has been able to dress herself in dazzling white linen, because her linen is made of the good deeds of the saints.” (Rev. 19:7-8)*

The Kingdom means coming so close to the Almighty that the only analogy that draws close to what is being expressed is the analogy of marriage. The fulfilment of this image is anticipated at each Mass when the Lamb of God is held aloft for the veneration and worship of the people with the words *“Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. **Happy are those who are called to His supper.**”* Literally, happy are those who are invited to the wedding-feast of the Lamb (in Heaven) - they are happy because this is the culmination of all that has been promised to Israel, and that wedding-feast is itself anticipated in the pre-wedding-feast of the Mass. Whosoever receives the Lamb under the appearance of bread and wine receives the first inklings of the final feast, which is the Kingdom, when the communion between God and man will reach its climax.

The Kingdom is the celebration of our unity with God, which is most closely approximated by the union between husband and wife: everything that each person has is given and shared with the beloved. What we have to offer our spouse (Christ) is nothing - but what he has to offer us is the whole of divine life. This is a marriage

where only one party gains by the union. The Kingdom is unparalleled unity with God.

C. The New Jerusalem

Jerusalem was the chosen city, the place where God chose to dwell. It was here that God led Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, substituting a ram at the last moment (Mt. Moriah is a small range of mountain summits, one of which is Mt. Zion, on which David built his capital). It was the King/Priest of this place, Melchisedech, who honoured Abraham with gifts of bread and wine (Melchisedech was King/Priest of Salem which was re-named after the sacrifice of Isaac “the Lord provides”- Salem, or in Hebrew Jehru-Salem: Jerusalem). It was here that through Moses, God ordered all sacrifice to be offered to his name. It was here that David chose to site his capital as the city chosen by God as the place of his resting. It was from Jerusalem that God promised, in the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah, that the Law would go forth through all the world so that all nations could assemble there to worship his name, led by the eldest son in this new family, the people of Israel. And it is here that the final act of sacrifice is offered, when Christ completes what Abraham started but was ordered to halt - the offering of the first-born son in sacrifice to the Father. No wonder that when St. John wanted to describe the nature of the fullness of perfection when God would live face to face with man, having fulfilled all the promises of the Old Testament which so often revolve around making Jerusalem great among the nations, he chooses to speak of a new Jerusalem descending from Heaven, in which, as in Eden, men sees God living among his people, not in the confines of a Temple as in the old Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1-27).

The Kingdom is the new city of Jerusalem, the place God had chosen for his own - it is about faithfulness to the covenant he made with the people of Israel and which God keeps without begrudging the terms even despite the efforts Israel had made to show God that they were not interested. The use of the city image for the Kingdom is interesting in addition for its social/communal aspect. A city implies more in the way of inter-communication, mutual relationship and an aspect of social interaction: that needs to be remembered: no human being has or will be saved on account of their own holiness but because of the very real holiness of the whole Body of Christ, not its individual members. There is a social or community aspect to the Kingdom: we will be saved (please God) not by the efforts we have put in but because we have only one hope for salvation, and that is Christ - and in entering the Church I am his brother. We are saved by being members of the Church, joined in communion with Christ our head, not by our feeble attempts to become holy individuals on our own.

2. Where is the Kingdom?

A. The fullness of the Kingdom - the resurrected life of Heaven

We await the full revealing of the Kingdom. Indeed, the whole of creation waits with eager longing for the revelation and establishment of the perfect state of affairs that

has been pledged to us in Christ. To this extent, the Kingdom is a matter of the *not yet*.

However, it is not simply something for the future. The central core of Christ's message was the proclamation of the here and now foundation of the new Kingdom. To some extent, the Kingdom of Heaven is a present reality, established by Christ during His lifetime, as indeed he asserts. That foundation is incomplete because the undisputed reign of the Lamb has not yet been established, and yet it has begun: there is an *already* aspect to the Kingdom.

The heart of the Gospels as they come down to us is the simple truth that in the proclamation of Christ, the Kingdom takes root in this world. To be plain, the foundation of the Church, the community of believers, is the first colony of the Kingdom of Heaven. Within this community, its members attempt to live according to the values and commandments of the Kingdom. The colony remains precarious and subject to threat from outside until it is firmly established enough to resist the influence of values which are alien to the heart of the Gospel: yet we have Christ's guarantee that the Church will stand the test of time and not be destroyed:

- *“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.” (Mt. 16:18)*

In essence, the Church is the first presence of the Kingdom of God on earth. This is not because of any inherent virtue or strength in the members of the Church - as we know only too well from the Catholic press, the Church is full to the brim of sinners. Each one of us constantly fails in our attempts to live according to the Gospel. The Church is the foundation of the Kingdom on earth simply and only because *Christ* is the foundation of the Kingdom: wherever the Son of God is present, there is the Kingdom of the Father, in which the Son has been given all authority as King. Where the King is, there is his Kingdom. The Church is the Body of the King on earth - his Body because he has chosen to be inseparably connected with this group of believers through Baptism. Where the Church is, there is Christ - because the Church is the making-present of Christ by the authority of his oath *“Whoever hears you hears me” (Lk. 10:16)*, *“Wherever two or three of you meet in my name, I shall be there with them.” (Mt. 18:20)*

B. The Sacraments - signs of the Kingdom already established

God himself confirms the presence of the Kingdom in embryonic form within his Church by demonstrating, often despite ourselves, the values of the Kingdom: if we want to know what these are, the Sermon on the Mount makes it clear. The Kingdom is characterised by Christ - self-sacrifice as shown by the cross itself. If we ask whether the Kingdom has taken root in our souls, we need go no further than ponder our lives for traces of loving self-sacrifice, since this is the footprint and hallmark of the Kingdom.

Yet the Kingdom is present within the Church by the power of God, not of man. Even if we fail to live according to the values of the Kingdom, it is still present within the Church. This is guaranteed because even if we are unfaithful to God, he is ALWAYS

faithful to his promise – “*I am with you always, to the close of the age*” (Mt. 28:20) God is present within his Church because he is faithful to his bride, even when his bride is untrue. Nor is this presence simply an invisible spiritual presence: the Kingdom is established by God in many ways, some of which are visible, tangible and easily identifiable by us - these are, obviously, the seven great sacramental oaths of the Kingdom, the sacraments we celebrate in our Churches.

These are seven interlocking foundation stones of the Kingdom, which root the heavenly Kingdom in the earthly Church. In the seven sacraments we have guaranteed access to the Son and therefore to the Father: ***again these are the work of God not of man***. It is critical to remember that we are not bringing Heaven to earth to construct it among our families - it is God who is building up the Kingdom in its visible expression here on earth (incomplete as it will be). Christ is given to us in the sacraments not because we have a claim on him but because he has sworn to give himself to us in these liturgies. In each of the sacraments we receive the power to live according to the values of the Kingdom, and thus to bring the presence of the Kingdom more powerfully into the world. Christ himself becomes visible to the world in the living witness of the members of the Church who proclaim the facts of his life, death and resurrection. This is most especially true in the most solemn proclamation the Church makes of this life-giving message: the Mass, where we witness, proclaim and then sink ourselves into the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ himself.

Through us, therefore, the Kingdom, which is Christ, becomes a living reality in the world. That presence of the King through the sacraments is undoubtedly real - it is Christ who gives the Holy Spirit in Confirmation, who consecrates at Mass, who binds couples together in marriage - but his presence, for all its reality, is incomplete. The reign of Christ the King is not completely established in us, his disciples, or in the world.

For this reason, the seven sacraments await their own fulfilment. Each one of the seven points to a future when the undisputed reign of God will be made evident. Each one of them is a foretaste of the fullness which they promise, and when we take part in any one of the Church's sacraments we are powerfully stating our belief in the life of the world to come when they will be fulfilled, we are benefiting now from the first fruits of that fullness, and we are being led by God to yearn even more urgently for that completion.

Each of the sacraments looks to the final establishment of the Kingdom in a different way, and they teach us to focus our eyes on the future, which the sacraments have begun to establish within us.

The Three Sacraments of Initiation into the Church (Christ)

1. ***Baptism***: a sign of the final washing in the Spirit when we will become like Our Lady – “filled with grace”, cleansed absolutely from sin, both actual (the things we have done) and from our flawed and sinful nature (concupiscence). This washing is begun in Baptism, but only completed when we are entirely a “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17-20, Rev. 21:1-5). See the book of Revelation where God claims his own, marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit (one of St.

Paul's images of Baptism: "*In Christ you ... were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it*" Eph. 1:13-14), contrasted with the damned who carry the seal of the beast. (Rev. 7:1-8, 9:4, 13:16-18)

2. **Confirmation:** the seal of the Holy Spirit, strengthening the disciple to bear witness to Christ. This seal points to its completion in Heaven when the witness we give to Christ is complete, offered in perfect love and without reservation. See the elders in the book of Revelation, who stand around God's throne, throwing their crowns before him and worshipping God with undivided heart. (Rev. 4:9-10, 5:14, 7:9-12, 19:1-8)
3. **The Holy Mass:** the most intimate union with Christ achieved by receiving him not just spiritually but actually and through our physical senses. This is completed when our union with Christ reaches its final and ultimate level, when our whole person is completely in communion with Christ - body, mind, instinct, emotion, will, soul etc. This will only happen when all sin is removed from us, in other words when we are fully in communion with the Father - this means heaven. When this happens, we will be at its most profound level the Body of Christ, the Church - totally united with Christ our Head and perfectly reflecting the face of Jesus. Mass anticipates the wedding banquet of the Lamb, when Christ marries his faithful people.

The Two Sacraments of Healing

1. **Reconciliation:** sacramental Confession begins what will only be completed when the whole of creation is made new - when you and I are totally renewed in our human nature, and when the old nature, with its downward-dragging tendency of concupiscence is made whole and healed. This is the meaning of the image in the book of Revelation, which describes Heaven as God living face to face with man.
2. **Anointing the Sick:** this sacrament strengthens the faith of the sick by forgiving their sins and, where it is the will of God, restoring health either partially or completely. It points towards the future of Heaven by underlining the prophecy of Isaiah: the Kingdom is characterised by freedom from pain, illness and suffering. Christ himself used miraculous cures as an indication of the proximity of the Kingdom and as proof of his own identity when questioned by John the Baptist. Each time we celebrate this sacrament, we repeat Christ's answer - in the healing of the sick there is a visible sign of the life of the Kingdom. (Rev. 21:1-4)

The Two Sacraments of Vocation

1. **Marriage:** the sacrament binds husband to wife in the image of Christ's bond with his bride, the Church. The marriage between God and his people is achieved when man lives in the deepest intimacy with God, when there is no sin to separate them: in the Kingdom of Heaven. The Book of Revelation speaks of the spotless bride of the Lamb, prepared for the wedding feast (anticipated in the Mass), now bound in an eternal marriage covenant with

Christ. Human marriage, when a sacrament, points to this future state. (Rev. 19:6-8, 21:9-11)

2. **Holy Orders:** Christ continues to lead his Church visibly through human ministers who act in his name, under his guidance as intermediaries - bishops and priests. This is necessary because we need visible leaders, chosen and led by God. The Book of Revelation points to a time when such mediation is no longer needed because God will live face to face with his people, and so the heavenly Jerusalem has no temple (Rev. 21:22). Does this mean there are no priests in Heaven? Actually it signifies that the whole people have become more deeply priestly, not less so. The letter to the Hebrews speaks of the citizens of the New Jerusalem as all being "first-born sons" - they were the priests, as priesthood existed before Moses and the Levites. "*What you have come to is Mt. Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem where the millions of angels have gathered for the festival, with the whole Church in which everyone is a 'first-born son' and a citizen of heaven. You have come to God himself, the supreme Judge ... and to Jesus the Mediator.*" (Hebr. 12:22-23) This signifies a priestly nation in its fullest sense: the whole people is perfectly united to Christ so that the two are one (the language of marriage – the Lamb's wedding feast) - Christ's bride, the people of the Church, are perfectly immersed in him, and so share more fully in his Priesthood. The sacramental, ministerial priesthood of the Church points towards this state: Christ leads the Church as Head (or Priest) and the Church leads the peoples of the world as the 'first-born son' (or priest) to the Father.

All seven sacraments, like the Kingdom are both ***already*** and ***not yet***. They are ***already*** in the sense that they are effective and bring about a real change, establishing the Kingdom here on earth. They are ***not yet*** in that they all anticipate the fullness of the gift to come - Heaven. Each time we celebrate them, we wallow in the life of the Kingdom and should be filled with an urgent and increasing attraction towards and desire for the fullness that they represent and make available.

3. Entry into the Kingdom: the Four Last Things

The Church proclaims the Kingdom of God with ultimate confidence: it is the hope towards which all our activity on earth is directed and we need have no fear of our approach to the final consummation of all that is pledged to us of the fullness of the presence of the Kingdom through the sacraments. Traditionally, these are called ***the Four Last Things***: they have been seen in the past as fearful trials to pass, but this is to misrepresent the teaching of the Church and the message of Christ. We should not be afraid of the four last things as though their purpose was to terrify us into obeying God. Equally, we should not dismiss the four last things as if they were a story to frighten children. As Catholic Christians we are not believers in fantasy or make-believe: if we believe something it is because God has revealed it to us, and thus we believe it because God does not deceive his children. We know from human experience that all human beings die - while we might *wish* that this were not so, we are forced to acknowledge that it is an inevitability in our lives (after all, none of us have great great grandparents still alive - *because they have all died*). The choice we

have to make is how to approach this reality of human experience. Christianity does not lead its members to pretend that death does not happen - quite the reverse, it prepares us to face that most difficult day of our life because the one thing we do know is that that day is certainly coming. Christianity is the gift God gives us to face death head-on and not to be overwhelmed with fear and uncertainty. It is delusion to think or live as though it will not come to us - but knowing that we are certain to die gives us the opportunity to ask ourselves what we truly believe about human life and what is enduring. The same can be said about judgement, Heaven and hell - these are realities that exist whether we believe in them or not. Christianity is there so that we have no need to be petrified with fear because we approach death in the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection; because we pass through death to judgement, where our good deeds go with us, united through Baptism to the good deeds of Christ; because we have been promised that Heaven is ours simply for the wanting - if our lives are lived in the wanting of Heaven and the desire for it, God gives it joyfully to us; and because we know that hell is not so much a punishment meted out by a vengeful God on the unsuspecting, but as the alternative choice offered to us if we decide that we could not bear to live in the company of God, with the angels and saints who have prayed for us and protected us throughout our lives.

As with *all* other doctrines taught by Christ, these four last things are, at heart, statements of joy - read and understood correctly, they should reassure and strengthen our faith in Christ.

A. Death

The Gospel is quite certain about the reality of death: it is inevitable, and it is also conquered in Christ. The fear of death (death in the sense of total obliteration - the absolute end of my life and consciousness) is a past event since the Resurrection of Christ. The mystery of Easter and Christ's triumphant victory over death is not simply a fact of faith we are asked to proclaim but a mystery of faith we are given to share in through Baptism. In other words, we have *already risen with Christ* (symbolised in St. Paul's thinking by rising out of the baptismal font) in the sense that through the Church, that is, through the visible Body of Christ, we are given a partial sharing in his risen and glorified life. This is the life of faith, the gifts of grace we are offered in the sacraments - which are all actions of the risen Christ giving himself to us.

Dying is still a part of the lived experience of human life: we still are subject to the gradual decay of our mortal bodies, and the pains that may accompany this. Death still brings with it the sadness of mourning and separation from the ones we love - and we need to make our way painfully through this. We are asked by God to let go, and this we find a uniquely painful experience, but it is necessary. It shows us that this world is not our home but the place we must leave if ever we are to come back to our true home. Dying teaches us, or at least *can* teach us if we are prepared for it, the very heart of the truth about being a pilgrim people and about earth being *NOT* Heaven: dying shows us that what we have in this life, good as so much of it is, is not the ultimate good that God has prepared for us. Dying becomes the step we take in faith from a life of varying joy and satisfaction into an unending life of fulfilment and completion. With this perspective, we would be fools to want to cling forever to this life. Of course, this does not mean we should all commit suicide so as to get to this better life as quickly as possible: but it *does* mean that leaving this life behind is the

unavoidable and crucial way that you and I enter a completely new life, bathed in the God we have come to love. In a way you could say that death defines us as human beings: it is a factor that God asks each one of us to go through for love of him, and regardless of power or social status, religion, popularity, political influence, culture or hat size we will all come to this moment. It is the only moment of our lives that is guaranteed, and so it is truly the key moment for us to prepare ourselves for.

Our faith in the life of Heaven and the resurrection does not mean we have sidestepped death, but it does mean that death has lost its power - no more is man to be separated from God eternally by the end of his natural life. Now, because we already have the seeds of eternal life planted in the soul through the grace of God and the action of the Church, when we die we are not annihilated and lose all existence (as is the understanding of 'eternal life' to a Hindu or Buddhist in the concept of nirvana). The first preface for funerals in the missal puts it well:

- *“In him who rose from the dead, our hope of resurrection dawned. The sadness of death gives way to the bright promise of immortality. Lord, for your faithful people life is changed, not ended. When the body of our earthly dwelling lies in death, we gain an everlasting dwelling place in heaven.”*

The hope which this firm belief gives us does not stop us grieving at the death of the ones we love and nor should it, but it means that our grief at losing them lies within the context of our confident hope that through Baptism, human death is the gateway to sharing the fullness of divine living (1 Thess. 4:13-18). Because Christ is risen from the dead, so too will be all those who share in Christ's life - the baptised.

Only Christ has anything of consequence to say in the face of the human mystery of dying, because only Christ has shattered the gates of death and shown himself to be master of life, the giver of life and the one who could not be contained by dying. St. Paul's words are so powerful when viewed in this light:

- *“When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? Death, where is thy sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Cor. 15:54-57)*
- *“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you.” (Rom. 8:11)*
- *“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, “For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom 8:35-39)*

Death is the moment when we benefit fully from the death of Christ on the cross: we are pulled from this perishable world into the world where all things are made new. It is the moment when we trade in our old, tired, fragile bodies for bodies that are imperishable, glorified, holy and spotless. Death, when viewed from the context of Heaven, is to be welcomed. This can only be done with the firmest belief in Heaven and a steady faith as well as ardent love of God. Without God and the prospect of Heaven, death is the final and greatest cataclysm, the irrevocable snuffing out of all that is enjoyable. It is no wonder that in our modern society, which has rejected to a large extent, any belief in God and therefore a life beyond the grave, we find a greater and greater urgency in the fight to prolong and extend life. While we may never seek to end life by our actions or by failure to act, still we do not regard this life as the ultimate good. We are not 'vitalists' and so we should be ready to accept death when it comes. It is not that we mustn't want to prolong our lives even at the point of dying: it is more that we would never want to do this. In America today it is possible (on payment of a massive and immoral amount of money) to arrange that at the moment of death, or just before it, the payer's body would be cryogenically frozen and kept in stasis for an indefinite period of time until medical science had discovered a way to "cure" him or her of whatever it was that had led to their death. This is vitalism at its most extreme - an obsession with prolonging this life at all costs because it is the only good that they recognise and beyond it there is nothing. Death, for them, is the ultimate evil to be avoided whatever it takes. As Catholic Christians we are not so afraid of dying, because we know that it is the process which leads to our glorification, and who would want to hang on to a rusty and unreliable heap of a car if they had the agreement with a garage that the moment it became unroadworthy it would be exchangeable, absolutely free, for the top of the range B.M.W. or Jaguar. The martyrs all welcomed death, not because they wanted to feel the pain of dying, but because they knew it was worth it, for the Kingdom waited for them on the other side.

Dying is one of the conditions of human life. It is not to be feared because it leads us to God - and if we truly love the God it takes us to, we should not be so eager to put that moment off. The only problem we have is in choosing between the good things we enjoy now without having to go through a trial to get them, and the infinitely better things we are offered in heaven but only after the possibly painful trial of human mortality. Our faith tells us that the trial of dying is well worth the prize that waits for us, but our human nature often settles for the second best out of anxiety over the trial. Human life, and especially the years we spend as disciples of Christ, learning about the promises made to our ancestors and coming to a personal knowledge of and love for our saviour, is about enabling us to have courage and face the trial with the reassurance that our future is more glorious than any earthly and finite suffering can outweigh.

B. Judgement

Again, Christian hope stops us from viewing judgement as something to be afraid of. Judgement is the proof positive that God regards our actions as significant and that therefore we are significant. Were we to avoid judgement, it would imply that nothing we could do would affect God's plan of salvation, and that he was prepared to ignore the decisions we had made in our lives. Nothing could be more confirmatory of the

value God places on our voluntary willingness to love and honour him - nothing could affirm so strongly that God's relationship to us is one of love. Judgement is not God's arbitration on our actions, but God's authority carrying out the consequences of our actions - if we have acted in our lives so as to separate ourselves from him, then by his divine authority, he carries out the implications of our wishes, and we live for all eternity in separation from him. We have nothing to fear from God since in judgement, he is simply acting as the executor of our human wills. The only ones we have to be afraid of are ourselves - and through the power of God in the sacraments, we have the strength offered to us to rise above ourselves. Judgement is an affirmation of hope in the mercy of God. It is also the supreme act of free will that we are able to make. God gives us the absolutely free choice to determine our everlasting future: as we decide so shall it be. Why should we be angry with God for that? Why should we be terrified of that? The decision is ours to make - only the execution of that decision is left to God. Remember - God is merciful and loving as only we experience from a parent: and no parent rejoices in the suffering of his or her children. SO - please don't live in the petrified fear of judgement, since this means you are terrified of what you will do to yourself!

A brief note: many people speak of judgement as if it were an arbitrary thing, in the language of "will I make it or won't I?" almost as if there were some luck involved. We are freed from that worry. To the ancient Greeks, the state of a soul after death was partly decided by the feuding of the gods - if you were one of Zeus' favourites, you could fall foul of Hera, his Queen, if she wanted to injure her husband out of jealousy for his many mistresses. In other words, salvation often depended on circumstances beyond your control and totally unconnected with you - the Greeks were literally pawns in the larger game played by the factions among the gods. We believe in no such thing - judgement is decided totally and absolutely by ourselves, according to the actions of our life on earth. Christ freely offers the possibility of salvation to us and we are asked, by the course of our lives, to decide whether we want to accept it. This is unprecedented freedom: thank God for the fairness of the judgement he offers us!

C. Heaven

The purpose and goal of our lives: man longs to re-enter the garden he left in Adam. Now, however, because of the gift of Christ into whom we have been entered through Baptism, we are given the chance of entering not as sons of Adam and mere human beings, children of clay, but as sons of God and co-heirs with Christ. We may enter not as we left but infinitely greater than the mere human beings who left. We are offered more than we ever lost: divine sonship.

No prize is of comparable worth to this one, because no prize matches up to our Father, to his divine Son and to the burning love of the Holy Spirit. Christ teaches us that if it comes down to it, we should be prepared to sacrifice everything for the sake of gaining the Kingdom of Heaven, because what we lose will be restored to us a hundredfold; while if we chose the goods of this world (which are passing) above the perfection of the next, then even the goods we have chosen will be taken away from us (at the moment of death). Why choose what we can't keep in place of choosing what we would be unable to lose?

The Kingdom is the completion of every joy we have known in our lives and the total immersion into God himself. The parable of the man who finds the treasure in the field, or the pearl of great price, and then sells all he has in order to buy the field in which he has found it, is about the primary value of heaven.

- *“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.” (Mat. 6:33)*

With the Kingdom of Heaven we inherit all things, and all relationships we have treasured on earth: without the Kingdom, we lose even those good things we enjoyed here below. Hence the need for our lives to show our primary choice for the righteousness of the Kingdom of Heaven.

D. Hell

1) DOES HELL EXIST?

Proclaiming the existence of hell may frighten us as a possible end to our lives, but the alternative (the popular thought nowadays that hell is just symbolic, does not really exist and was only invented to frighten people into obeying the Church) is no better and I think actually much more sinister and demeaning. Hell, we see, is actually vital to the faith, and we do ourselves and our dignity damage if we try to pretend it does not exist.

Hell is the consequence of choosing other than God - or of rejecting him. Without the possibility of not choosing God (i.e., hell) we have absolutely no alternative to choosing him either. If we can't refuse God, then we have no option but to accept him - and this is fundamentally to deny that which is most human about us - our freedom. We may be certain of salvation if we deny the possibility of hell, but we have explicitly denied our nature as free, rational human beings whose decisions are respected by God. We have made ourselves robots who can do no other than choose God because there is no alternative. To admit the possibility of refusing God is not to say that anyone has done so, but simply to say that we have, in all seriousness, the absolutely free choice of wanting him - and therefore of choosing not to want him. To put it simply, without hell, we are not human. Hell confirms the most significant aspect to our nature: God's love for us is so absolute that he abides by and confirms our decisions. In which case, if we do choose him, his power as God makes that choice effective. What have we to fear?

Thank God hell exists: it proves we can truly choose Heaven.

One last thing - hell is not for those who are punished by God for disobeying him so much as the place chosen by those who cannot bear to be in the presence of God. We think of hell as a place of fire and burning which those who are locked up in there would do anything to exit if they could. Actually, in the words of C.S. Lewis, it is more accurate to speak of hell as being locked “from *within*” – Lewis is referring to the understanding that those in hell are there not by force of the power of God but by their choice: the only alternative is Heaven and that they have ruled out entirely. We think of the fires of hell as punishment, but Lewis speaks of Heaven as fire that is even hotter. The Scriptures talk of the angels as the “burning ones”, the last judgement as the day when Christ himself “*is revealed from Heaven with his mighty*

angels in flaming fire” (2 Thess. 1:7) and God himself is ablaze – “*for our God is a consuming fire*”. (Hebr. 12:29) The fire that blazes around God is not anger but love. Hell is not the only place that burns: Heaven burns with the searing intensity of divine love. This is the passionate fire of love that blazes but does not destroy – and indeed many mystics, such as St. Teresa of Avila, Mother Julian of Norwich, St. Faustina of Krakow etc. have described the experience of the revelation of God's love to them as the most intense burning of the heart which brings rapture, not pain. We pray to the Holy Spirit to set us ablaze with the love of God in the well-known prayer “Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your people, **kindle in them the fire of your love** etc.”. The fire of hell has the same origin, the love of God - this fire sears and pains those who experience it because they reject it absolutely (and many people have known what it is like to be loved by someone they can not bear - it is love which they find makes them suffer). The souls in hell burn because they reject the very love which God has for them, and this causes them bitterness and fury. Yet, they would not leave hell if they could because they know that the only other option is the full glory of the presence of God in Heaven, an intensity of love that they would find too hot for their comfort. Should the saints visit hell, I wonder if they would not find the fires of hell almost chilly in comparison with the full intensity of the fire of God's love in Heaven. The pain of hell derives from being separated from the fullness of the burning love of God in Heaven.

2) WHO SENDS US TO HELL?

The Catholic Church does not teach that hell is the punishment God inflicts on us in retribution for our sins: this was the theology of Martin Luther and the more severe reformers of the sixteenth century such as Calvin and John Knox. To them, man is absolutely depraved, incapable ever of choosing good or of co-operating with the grace of God to choose good: to them, sin had annihilated everything in man that bore originally the image and likeness of God and that therefore man deserved infinite punishment unless God in his unfathomable mercy picked you out from the masses for totally undeserved mercy. The rest suffer the just penalty for sin - eternal damnation.

The Catholic Church has always been more optimistic in its view of human nature: our nature is weakened and even temporarily paralysed by sin, but it is not depraved or totally evil. With the gift of grace, man has the potential to choose good again and to co-operate in God's work of salvation. The choice of Heaven or hell is not arbitrary: God acts as executor of our last will and testament - this will is the whole of our lives. God carries to completion in eternity what our lives have led towards on earth. God does not condemn to hell: he simply gives us what we have stridently demanded in the course of our lives (i.e., to be separated from him for ever). Please God, that has never happened to any human being - but we must hold fast to the teaching that it is at least possible, for if we deny this in a misguided attempt to stress the forgiving mercy of God, we in effect teach that God will save even those who do not wish to live with him for eternity.

4. Heartburn for the Kingdom

- “*Thou madest us for thee, O God, and our souls are restless until they find their rest in thee.*” (St. Augustine of Hippo)

Our prayer, our reading of the Sacred Scriptures ought to give us a dire case of spiritual heartburn - an overwhelming longing to enjoy what we know is promised to us in the sacraments and described to us in the Sacred Scriptures. Read the final chapter of the book of Revelation to see the passion with which we should look to the final consummation of time when God will complete all that he has begun, and glorify us as he has already glorified his divine Son, the same Son's human mother and the countless millions of Saints. We should remember the words of that old man – “we're only here to get out of here” - we are pilgrims bound for a country alien from this world, and while we live here, we do not belong here – we are exiles.

We should recall that the heart of our prayer is the longing for the establishment of the Kingdom - in our souls, by conversion at a deeper level to Christ, and in its fullness, in the court of heaven. We should make it a central devotion at each of the sacraments we take part in, especially the sacrifice of the Mass, to dwell on and bring to our minds that these actions of Christ in his Church, sublime as they are and world-changing as is their potential, are but the first-fruits of the glories and wonders of the Kingdom of Heaven. There is so much better to come, when we have died and been purified by God's love. We place our faith in the most glorious future. We should cultivate in our prayer and devotions a burning desire for the Kingdom, both in its first-fruits (the Church) and in its completion. There is so much, as Catholic Christians that we either take for granted and scarcely pause to consider (like the sacraments) or even regard as the regrettable baggage of an old religion that just has to be suffered in silence and is best never discussed (such as judgement, purgatory, penance etc.). This is a terrible waste of what God has revealed for our peace of mind, security and salvation. The treasures and riches of the Church's faith should be plundered regularly by the faithful as a source of encouragement and spiritual strength. This is our food for the journey of faith throughout life, and it will take the bitter sting out of death so that we have nothing to fear.

It is no wonder that one of the most quoted prayers of the early Church reflects this heart-felt longing for a Kingdom that is to come - *Maranatha: Come, Lord God!*

Fr Guy de Gaynesford