

Heaven

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The English word “heaven” signifies the blue expanse of sky surrounding the earth, in which the sun, moon, and stars seem to be placed. In this sense, it often takes the plural form “heavens.” In Christian use, it signifies, besides, the final abode of blessed souls, or the state of final happiness.

The existence of a place and state of happiness, promised to those who depart from this world in the state of grace, is abundantly clear from numerous texts of Sacred Scripture. It is variously spoken of by our Lord as the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, the kingdom of the Father, the Father’s house, etc. By St. Paul it is called paradise, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, an incorruptible crown etc; by St. Peter, a never-fading crown of glory. This kingdom is possessed by the poor in spirit and by those who suffer persecution for justice sake; there the clean of heart shall see God, there also the just will be as the angels, who always “see the face of the Father Who is in heaven.” At the Last Judgment, before the whole world, Christ will solemnly say to the just: “Come, ye blessed of My Father, possess you the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world,” and these will go into life everlasting.

The location of heaven is not known with certainty. The church has never defined anything on the subject, for Revelation tells us nothing definite concerning it: for us it is more important to know how to win heaven than to learn its whereabouts. This uncertainty has given rise to different opinions. Some think that since the possession of God is the source of the happiness of the blessed, as God is everywhere, so heaven is everywhere. The defenders of this view eliminate from heaven the restrictions and obstacles which space and distance, as we know them on this earth, oppose to freedom and communication, so that the blessed, while they move through the universe, everywhere remain united with one another, with the angels, and with the Sacred Humanity of Christ.

The more common opinion among theologians, however regards heaven as a special place outside this earth, where the blessed and the angels usually dwell, even though they may at will go about through the universe. The various names by which heaven is called, many of which are given above, seem to indicate a special place. Besides, it seems more in conformity with the happy state of the blessed that they should have place specially prepared by God for them; more particularly as the bodies of the just will enter heaven after the General Resurrection. For in heaven God will have special pleasures for the body, of a refined and elevated kind unknown, or little known to us in this world.

From the foregoing it appears how groundless is the assertion made by a writer in a London paper some years ago that the Catholic doctrine of heaven is based on the ancient belief in geocentricism, and should perish with the proved falsity of an obsolete cosmic theory. The doctrine of the existence of Heaven, as we have seen, is founded on God’s word, made clear especially in the New Testament; it should not be confused with speculations about the position of heaven in which the medieval Scholastics, who accepted the geocentric theory, were able to indulge. Such speculations are out.

The essential happiness of heaven consists in possessing God, that is, in knowing God in Himself, and in the love and enjoyment consequent on this knowledge. This is called the essence of eternal happiness for the reason that only the possession of God is capable of rendering man perfectly happy. Moreover, in God man has every good he may desire. Besides the possession of God, the elect enjoy many other blessings (as we shall see later), yet these are so immensely inferior to God, and so incapable of satisfying the aspirations of the human soul, that by themselves they would not suffice for man's eternal happiness. St. Augustine expresses this in a beautiful saying addressed to the Almighty: "You have made us for Yourself, and our heart shall not find rest until it rest in You."

We have said that the happiness of heaven consists in knowing God as He is in Himself, clearly and distinctly. In this life, we know something of God, not in Himself, but only in and through His creatures. As a result, our knowledge is very dim and imperfect. We form a vague idea of His beauty from the beauties of nature and of art; of His love, goodness, and mercy, from the tenderness, kindness, and forgiveness which we see in those human hearts that love us dearly; of His immensity and infinity from the vast expanse of the sea or of the firmament. Yet we must admit that all these things are far from representing God as He is in Himself for He is infinitely superior to them all. We must remove from Him all the imperfections inherent in creatures. Again, much of our knowledge is purely negative; for example, we are not able to form to ourselves a proper concept of God's infinitude: we merely think of Him as being "without limit". This process of knowledge by means of creatures is called abstractive, and analogical; it is vastly inferior to the knowledge of the blessed in heaven, which is called intuitive, because they know or see God in Himself.

It is a dogma of Faith, defined by Pope Benedict XII in 1336, that the blessed in heaven see God face to face. By the word "see," we do not mean ocular vision, or the action of bodily sight: God, being a spirit, can no more be seen by the eye than the utmost thoughts of our fellowmen. The term, which is equivalent to "knowing clearly," is transferred from the act of sight to the act of the mind, because of the clearness of knowledge in heaven, and because of a resemblance between the action of the mind and that of the eyes, the noblest and subtlest of the five senses. Similarly, the expression "face to face" is a metaphor used to express the intimacy and intuitiveness of the knowledge of God which the blessed enjoy, taken from the fact that we know a person most familiarly and most dearly when we see him and converse with him face to face. It is hardly necessary to add that since God is a spirit we must exclude from Him a literal meaning of the word "face." The intuitive knowledge of God, which the blessed have, is called the beatific vision, that is, the vision which renders them supremely happy.

That the blessed know God directly and immediately is a doctrine clearly taught in Holy Scripture. St. Paul says: "We see now through a mirror in a dark manner; but then face to face. Now I know in part; but then I shall know even as I am known," that is, I shall know God in the same way as I am known by Him, directly and immediately. And St. John tells us: "Dearly beloved, we are now the sons of God; and it has not yet appeared what we shall be. We know that when He shall appear we shall be like to Him; because we shall see Him as He is."

As God subsists in three distinct Persons, the blessed see these Persons, and have a clear understanding of what we on earth call the mystery of the Blessed Trinity, which is indeed a mystery to us but to the blessed in heaven is an evident fact.

We said above that the happiness of heaven consists not merely in knowing God in Himself, but also in the love and enjoyment consequent on this knowledge. We speak of eternal happiness mostly

as knowledge or vision, because the vision of God is the source of happiness from which the beatific love and joy flow. Hence, in our consideration of heaven we are concerned principally with the vision. That the blessed love God is asserted by St. Paul “Charity (i.e., supernatural love) never falls away.” So ecstatic and so rapturous is this love that the soul, while retaining its identity, becomes as it were ‘Immersed in God’; its will is in perfect conformity with His will; His desires inflame it with desire; it loves Him and is for ever loved by Him.

It is clear that the blessed experience for eternity an unspeakable joy in the “possession of God Whom they love so intensely”. For He is the Supreme Good, in Whom they have every good which their souls may desire. Of this joy our Lord spoke — secondarily, at least, but in the fuller meaning of the words — in His farewell discourse to His Apostles after the Last Supper: “I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no one shall take from you.”

The happiness of heaven, or the beatific vision, is supernatural, that is, it is altogether above the nature, the powers, and the claims of creatures, both of men and of angels. To see God in Himself is not within the power of the unaided human or angelic mind; neither is it in any way due to our nature or to that of the angels, but is purely a gratuitous gift of God granted out of sheer liberality and love.

For the clearer understanding of this doctrine, it should be noted that the eternal happiness of man is of a twofold kind, natural and supernatural. Natural happiness is the happiness due to virtuous man in accordance with his nature and powers. We have seen that man is capable by his own powers of acquiring only an abstractive and analogical knowledge of God from the created world. Natural happiness consists, therefore, in a perfect knowledge of God of an analogical kind, based on the creatures amidst which the lot of the disembodied soul is cast, and more easily acquired than during the present life, with the natural love of God and joy in knowing Him consequently upon such knowledge. Man’s natural desire of everlasting happiness can be satisfied with such a knowledge and love, more than this is not due to him.

God, however, in His goodness, has elevated us to the supernatural happiness of the vision, and has given us in sanctifying grace a right thereto; consequently, the beatific vision is due to the soul which leaves this world adorned with grace. But in conferring sanctifying grace upon us, God has given us something to which we have no claim. Supernatural happiness does not destroy the natural happiness due to us, but includes it and immeasurably surpasses it.

To use a comparison, it is as if instead of paying a friend merely what you owe him, you present him with an amount a hundred thousand times greater. Man has no choice between natural and supernatural happiness. If he loses the latter through his own fault, he suffers eternal punishment.

That the beatific vision is supernatural with regard to both men and angels is a dogma of Faith resulting from the condemnation of the opposite error of the Beghards and Beguines by the Council of Vienne (in the South of France) in 1311; and from the condemnation by Pope (Saint) Pius V in 1567 of a similar error of Baius. The [First] Vatican Council, in 1870, teaches that God has elevated man to a supernatural destiny.

The Scriptural proof of the supernatural character of the vision is found in several passages of the New Testament. St. Paul says: “The grace of God, life everlasting.” Life everlasting is a grace, a free gift of God. In St. John, we read, “Behold what manner of charity the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called, and should be, the sons of God.”

St. John adds: “Dearly beloved, we are now the sons of God, and it has not yet appeared what we shall be. We know that when He shall appear, we shall be like to Him, because we shall see Him as He is.” From this text, it is clear that God has adopted us as His children, by grace in this life, and by the vision, to which grace entitles us, in the next. St. Paul expressly tells us of our adoption: “You have received the spirit of adoption of sons, whereby we cry: Abba (Father). For the Spirit Himself gives testimony to our spirit that we are the sons of God. And if sons, heirs also, heirs indeed of God, and joint heirs with Christ.” (Romans 8:15-17.) Now no creature, neither man nor angel, is by nature an adopted child of God. It is not within the natural power of any creature to attain to such an exalted relation with his Creator. All creatures are of their very nature the servants of God, infinitely inferior to Him in essence, in rank, and in power, with no claim to the sublime dignity of sonship with Him, with the consequences which sonship entails — familiarity with Him, and a right to a share in His possessions (Which are God Himself). This consideration shows that the beatific vision is supernatural not only in regard to existing creatures, angels and men, but also in regard to all creatable beings.

Reason itself recognizes that it is altogether above the nature, the powers, and the claims of every created being to know God in Himself. The mode of knowing follows the mode of being, since knowing is the act of the subject which knows. An intelligent creature, therefore, knows God, a being of a higher order, according to the creature’s own mode of being. In the case of every creature, this is infinitely inferior to God’s mode of being, for God is pure Existence, while every creature of its very nature has only a participated, finite existence. Therefore, no creature can by its own power, know God as He is in Himself; consequently, it has no natural claim to such knowledge.

Since the blessed intellect can not by its own power, see God in Himself, it requires a special help from Him for that purpose. This help is called by theologians “the light of glory.” In the Council of Vienne, it was defined against the Beghards and Beguines that the soul needs the light of glory or the beatific vision. The help, which God gives to the blessed intellect, is called a “light” by a comparison with material light, which is required for bodily vision. In order to see corporal things, the eye needs light; in darkness, nothing is visible to it. In the same way, the intellect of the blessed needs the light of glory to enable it to see or know God in Himself; otherwise, it would be in a sort of darkness with regard to Him. This help is called the light “of glory,” because it is granted only to those who have attained to true glory, who are glorified by God Himself before all their fellow-citizens of heaven; and also because the light itself is the immediate cause of the glorification of the blessed. It should be noted that the light of glory is demanded not by the defect of light, or capability of being known, on the part of God, Who is light and in Whom there is no darkness, but by the defect of power to know Him in Himself on the part of the created intellect.

The light of glory may, therefore, be described as “a permanent, supernatural aid infused by God into the blessed intellect, to enable it to receive the Divine Essence and elicit the beatific vision.” A few of these terms need explanation.

The light of glory is said to be “permanent”; its purpose makes clear why it must be so. The vision is eternal; at every moment it is above the natural power of the intellect; hence, throughout eternity the blessed soul requires for the vision, the permanent aid of the light of glory, which, accordingly, adheres in the intellect as a supernatural habit.

We speak of the blessed “intellect” seeing or knowing God in Himself. The soul of the blessed knows God through its faculty or power of knowing which we call the intellect or mind.

By the phrase, “to receive the Divine Essence,” is expressed the difference between the mode of knowing God and ordinary, natural knowledge. Our ordinary knowledge is effected by the mind’s expressing or forming in itself a mental image of the object known. In everyday speech, we refer to this image as an idea or “notion.” The correct and common opinion among theologians holds that the beatific vision is effected without any image; because no image, being of necessity a created thing, can represent the Uncreated One as He is in Himself. Hence, in the beatific vision the Divine Essence, God, is immediately present to the soul or mind of the elect.

We say, lastly, that the intellect “elicits the beatific vision.” By this we mean that the beatific vision is the act, not of God, as some wrongly thought, but of the blessed soul itself, elevated by the light of glory — the greatest act to which an intellectual being could be raised.

Theologians see a reference to the light of glory in the following passages of Holy Writ:

“With You is the fountain of life; and in Your light we shall see light.” (Psalm 36:9 – or 35:10 in the Vulgate.)

“We shall see light”, that is, “You, Who are Light.” “The Lord is my Light” (Psalm 27:1 – or Psalm 26:1 in the Vulgate.) That the Royal Psalmist is here (in Psalm 36) referring to heaven is deduced from what he says in the preceding verse of this psalm:

“They shall be inebriated with the plenty of Your house; and You shall make them drink of the torrent of Your pleasure.”

In St. John’s description of heaven in the Apocalypse we read: “The city (heaven) has no need of the sun, nor of the moon to shine in it. For the glory of God has enlightened it, and the Lamb is the lamp thereof.” (Revelation 21:23) By the reference to “the Lamb” is meant the glorified Humanity of Christ, which is as a second light in heaven for the eternal enjoyment of the bodily eyes of the blessed after the General Resurrection.

The light of glory is unequal in different souls. As a result, some of the blessed see God more perfectly than others, and, in consequence, enjoy a greater degree of happiness. This teaching was assailed by Jovinian in the fourth century and by Luther in modern times. It was solemnly defined as an article of Faith by the Council of Florence in 1439 that in heaven there are various degrees of happiness corresponding to diversity of merits. The Council of Trent in 1547 condemned the error of the pseudo-Reformers which teaches that the “just by their good works do not merit an increase of glory.”

The Catholic teaching is supported by various texts of Holy Scripture. Our Lord says: “In my Father’s house there are many mansions”. (John 14:2) That these words refer to the Church in heaven is clear from the continuation of our Lord’s discourse following the text quoted. The phrase, “many mansions,” implies a difference of some kind among the heavenly dwellers. What can be the foundation of this difference but varying degrees of happiness? St. Paul says; “Every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour.” (1 Corinth 3:8) This is so, as “He who sows sparingly shall also reap sparingly, and he who sows in blessings shall also reap of blessings.” (2 Corinth 9:6) And again: “One is the glory of the sun, another the glory of the moon, and another the glory of the stars. For star differs from star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead.” (1 Corinth 15:41-42)

From St. Paul's words, it is clear, that the different degrees of happiness correspond to different degrees of merit. Supernatural merit is measured according to sanctifying grace, which in turn is greater or less according to the perfection of the good works done by the soul during its earthly life. Therefore, every good work of ours performed in the state of grace merits for us an increase of the light of glory and a consequent increase of the beatific vision and of happiness for eternity.

There is no contradiction in the teaching that all the elect see God clearly and distinctly, but some more perfectly than others. In this life different intellects understand clearly the same truth, but with varying degrees of perfection. To take one example: there is scarcely a human being come to the use of reason that does not clearly understand the truth contained in this statement; "man has a body," or "man is an animal." Yet how different in intensity will be the knowledge of each mind to which that truth is presented! The child and the person of no education see little in it beyond what the mere words convey.

The man of experience sees a great deal more. The person versed in anatomy knows much of the structure of the human body and how it resembles that of the higher animals; he sees still more than the others. For the biologist this simple truth contains enough subject matter to fill several volumes dealing with the origin of life, the influence of heredity, cellular organization, the shape and function of various organs, and so on. We might continue to enlarge upon this theme, but it is already evident that universal clearness and varying intensity of knowledge are compatible with each other, because of the natural differences between minds. So in heaven, the clearness of knowledge, which all the blessed enjoy, does not exclude higher or lower degrees of vision according to the differences of the light of glory, which varies in proportion to the merits of each soul.

Yet every soul is perfectly satisfied with its own degree of happiness, for it sees that God has rewarded it according to its merits, and that a higher degree is not due to it. And it loves God too intensely to be dissatisfied with His most just decrees. For the same reasons, and also because of the great love the blessed have for one another, no soul is envious of those placed in a higher state. Each rejoices at the happiness of the others as brothers do even in this imperfect world.

Though there are varying degrees of vision in heaven, yet none of the blessed comprehends God, because He is absolutely incomprehensible to every creature. The term "comprehend" has here a special meaning. It is not used in its ordinary sense of "understanding" or "knowing"; in that sense the blessed certainly do comprehend God in a most perfect manner. In a sense akin to that, all the blessed are called comprehensors to signify that they have attained to the possession of their Supreme Good. When we say that God is incomprehensible, we mean that no creature is capable of knowing Him to the extent to which in Himself He is knowable, that is, to an infinite degree. For God is infinite in nature and perfections. He is, therefore, infinitely knowable. The mind that would comprehend Him would have to equal His knowableness — it would have to be infinite. No creature has an infinite mind: consequently, no creature can comprehend God, even when it is aided by the light of glory.

The incomprehensibility of God was defined as a dogma by the Fourth Council of the Lateran in 1215, and by the [First] Vatican Council in 1870. It is taught in Holy Scripture: "The Lord of hosts is Your name. Great in counsel, and incomprehensible in thought." St. Paul says: "O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are His judgments, and how unsearchable His ways!"

Here, however, we must guard against a mistake into which our imagination might lead us. We said above that in this world our knowledge of God is founded on the creatures which exist round about us. Moreover, while we are in the body, we need the co-operation of our imagination — a bodily faculty seated in the brain — for all our thoughts. As a consequence, we are liable to confuse our thoughts, or mental images, with the images of our imagination. When we learn that God is incomprehensible because He is infinite, our imagination represents God's infinity and incomprehensibility as being like the wide expanse of the sky or of the ocean, only part of which we see at the same time, while the rest is hidden from us. From this we might conclude that the blessed in heaven see only a part of God, while the rest of Him is veiled from their mental gaze. This, however, our intellect, the faculty which discerns truth, would declare to be an error. For God is a simple Being, devoid of parts, existing wholly and entirely everywhere; neatly, the mind which sees Him at all sees Him whole and entire; it can not see Him with the infinite clearness with which He is knowable; therefore, it can not comprehend Him.

To use again the example given above, the child or uneducated understands the whole of the Truth: "man is an animal" because he clearly understands each of the ideas which compose it, and sees how one idea fits into the other. No part of that truth is hidden from him: yet he does not understand it with all the clearness with which it is capable of being known; for example, he does not understand it as clearly as the biologist. If we suppose that the clearness of that truth to the biologist represents the infinite clearness of the knowableness of God, we can understand how clearness of vision does not include comprehension of its Object. God alone is capable of comprehending Himself.

Hitherto we have been considering what theologians call "the primary object" of the beatific vision, namely, God, with all His perfections and the Trinity of Persons. We shall now consider briefly the secondary object of the vision, the creatures, actual and possible, which the blessed see in God.

God contains in Himself all creatures and all the perfections of creatures, not physically indeed but super-eminently. He would not be God, an infinite, all-perfect Being, if outside of Him there were any perfection that He did not possess. Still, creatures and their perfections do not exist in Him physically, in the same way as, for example, a stone exists in a wall or a seed in a plant, but super-eminently, that is, He possesses the pure perfections of creatures, such as knowledge, wisdom, goodness, in an infinite degree in His Essence, while their mixed perfections, like bodily nature, quantity, the power of seeing, are contained in His infinite power of producing these perfections in creatures. (These are called mixed perfections because they imply some imperfection. Bodily nature is a perfection but it implies restriction and divisibility, and is vastly inferior to the 'nature of a spirit'; sight, or sense-knowledge in general, is a perfection, but it is limited by matter and is inferior to intellect).

Hence, the blessed see in God the perfections of creatures; their pure perfections in His Essence, without the limitations which they have in creatures; their mixed perfections in His omnipotent power. The beauty which a sculptor imparts to a block of marble when he chisels it into a statue, he already possesses in super-eminent way in his intellect and imagination. If we could know the sculptor as intimately as the blessed know God, we should see in him the beauty which he communicates to the creature of his mind and brain. In a somewhat similar way, the soul which knows God face to face sees in Him, for example, the sun, because it knows His Power by which the sun was brought into existence and is still kept in existence, while it sees the brilliancy and beauty of the sun in Him as infinite spiritual brilliancy and beauty.

Besides the creatures which have been, or will be in the future, there are myriads of possible creatures which never have been and never will be, which, however, could exist if God desired to create them. The soul which sees God sees that it is in His power to create numerous possible creatures. But no created mind can see all possible beings in God: for this it would be necessary to comprehend His infinite power and perfections, which we have shown is impossible for any created intellect. The more perfectly a soul knows God by the light of glory, the more possible creatures it sees in Him.

We turn now to the question of the actual things — by which we mean things that ever have existed or will exist in the future — which are comprised in the secondary object of the vision. It may be stated as a general principle that the blessed see in God everything that they have a reasonable desire of knowing because they have a reasonable interest in it. For it is most consonant with a state of perfect happiness that God should make known to the blessed all that they have a reasonable interest in knowing.

Hence, they know clearly all the mysteries of our Faith. This is taught by St. Paul. They understand clearly how the two natures, Divine and human, are united in Christ; how Christ is present in the Holy Eucharist; how God creates out of nothing; how He keeps the world in existence; what grace is, how it works in the intellect and will of man, and how it is produced by the Sacraments; the abiding of the Holy Ghost in the Church and in the souls of the just; why God permits evil; predestination; and many other matters of which on earth we have only the faintest notion.

Since the blessed are a part of the universe and have a reasonable interest in this handiwork of God, each of them knows in God the genera and species of all created things in the spiritual as well as in the material world, the beautiful and harmonious arrangement of at least the principal parts of the entire world, and the laws that govern movement, life and development in the universe. The knowledge, artistic or scientific, which the blessed acquired on earth, is purified and elevated, at least if they elevated it on earth by applying themselves to its acquirement, through supernatural motives.

Each of the blessed sees the manifold influences that worked with Divine grace towards his eternal salvation. Such are, for example, his parents, his spiritual director, and such things as the sufferings he endured while in the body.

As citizens of heaven, the blessed know the thoughts and affections of one another.

As a member of human society while on earth, each blessed knows what pertains to the position he formerly held. A Pope knows the condition of the Church; a father the fortunes of his family; a pastor, the state of his spiritual flock. The blessed see their relations and friends who are still on earth or in purgatory, for death does not destroy the love they bore them, but purifies it and elevates it to a higher state in which the salvation of souls is the paramount consideration. They also know in God the prayers addressed to them by those who dwell on earth, which they answer by interceding for their clients at the Throne of grace and mercy.

St. Thomas with St. Gregory thinks that the blessed know everything that takes place on earth; but since they are in perfect agreement with Divine justice, they are not saddened by the evils which they see, nor do they interfere in the affairs of the living except as the dispositions of God's justice may require.

The blessed know all the foregoing actual things and not only according to their super-eminent existence in God but also in their own natural existence, through the medium, however, of the Divine Nature. They may know created things also by infused knowledge, that is, by mental images of them implanted in their minds by God.

In addition to what is set forth above, the blessed may know other actual things, which vary in number according to the intensity of their knowledge of the primary object, God. But none of the blessed — if we except Christ in His human nature — knows all actual things, because none of them — except Christ Who is the judge of all — can be said to have an interest in every actual thing, in every thought of the human mind, and in every utterance of the human tongue. Our Lord tells us that no one but God knows when the General Judgment will take place: (that Day is hidden even from the angels.) Nor is the fact that the blessed do not know all actual things a hindrance to their perfect happiness, since, as we saw above, the knowledge of the primary object of the vision, God, is capable by itself of satisfying every desire of the human soul.

Throughout eternity there is no increase in the vision of God, the primary object, because, as we saw, the degree of clearness with which God is known is proportionate to the grace which adorns the soul at the moment of its separation from the body, which after death cannot be increased. But the blessed may grow in knowledge of created things. Eventually the Day of Judgment will become known to them, since they will themselves be present at the Judgment. St. Paul teaches that through the Church the angels learned certain details concerning the Incarnation which before were unknown to them. The blessed may advance in knowledge by their own experience and observation; they may learn, also, from those who enjoy a higher degree of vision, but the knowledge thus communicated will not be so excellent or so clear in the learner as in the teacher. Such increase may continue until the Day of Judgment, but not beyond it, for then all things will be consummated; and in the final state of creatures following the Judgment, St. Thomas thinks it possible that all the blessed will know all actual things, not in God, but by illumination from the soul of Christ, which since the beginning of its existence has known all actual things.

There remain a few other questions concerning heaven. The exigencies of space compel us to treat very briefly.

The happiness of the blessed is eternal. This is a dogma of our Faith defined by Benedict XII in 1336; and professed by the Church from her earliest days in the Apostles' Creed: "I believe... in life everlasting." It is clearly taught in Sacred Scripture, as is evident from many of the names by which heaven is called, especially from the name, "life ever-lasting." Reason itself recognizes the truth of this teaching for the perfect happiness of an immortal soul must of necessity be eternal.

The blessed are physically incapable of committing sin, even venial sin. It is inconceivable that a soul which sees God face to face and loves Him ardently, could for a moment offend Him by preferring any created good to Him Who is the Supreme Good, which is the essence of mortal sin; or by an undue attachment to any created thing, which is the essence of venial sin. The blessed can not do otherwise than love God; they are free only to show their love of Him by choosing one good action rather than another. If in this world we are capable of sinning, it is because we do not realize with sufficient clearness the infinite loveliness of God.

Besides the essential happiness of heaven, which consists in the vision of God, the elect enjoy many other blessings, which constitute what is called "accidental happiness." They rejoice in the company of Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary, the angels and the saints, and in the reunion with those whom

they loved on earth. The arrival of every new soul in heaven brings an increase of joy. They rejoice when they behold the good results of their work for souls still continuing on earth. The prayers that are addressed to them, and the celebrations which the Church holds in their honour, also add to their accidental glory. The union of the soul with the glorified body after the General Resurrection will be a new cause of joy. This body, being in some way spiritualized, will not be subject to the needs, the sufferings, or the passions, which belong to the animal body during its earthly career. The sight of the new heavens and the new earth, which earth and the heavens are changed and beautified after the Judgment, will also enhance their enjoyment. To the objects of accidental happiness belong all those created things actual and possible which the blessed know. The character imprinted on their souls by the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, or Holy Orders redounds to the glory of the elect. The doctors, martyrs, and virgins enjoy a special happiness from the aureolas or crowns which adorn their souls in heaven. The blessed are free from all suffering and sadness. (Revelation 21:4 says: "Death shall be no more, nor mourning, nor crying, nor sorrow.")

They are not saddened even if any of those whom they loved on earth suffer eternal damnation, for they see that these most justly deserve their punishment, because they repelled the advances of friendship made by God and died in eternal enmity to Him. In this world, even the closest friendships are not proof against all offence. Who has not heard of the bond of parental affection being shattered by the long-continued wickedness of unrepenting children? Or how should we regard even our dearest friend if he deliberately murdered our parents? For the blessed, the affections founded on mere carnal relationship or community of interests, are of much less importance than those which have relationship with God as their motive. If a soul has put itself in a state of eternal hatred of Him by departing from this world in mortal sin, the blessed can no longer retain the least affection for it, and thus they are not saddened by its sufferings.

Under several of the above heads, accidental happiness may increase until the Day of Judgment.

We make no attempt to describe the life led by the blessed, nor the boundless happiness which they enjoy: it is not in the power of mortal man to do so. The beatific vision is a mystery: no earthly mind can describe exactly the intimate manner in which God is present to the blessed soul, because we have in this world no example with which a comparison may be instituted. The happiness of heaven is supernatural: it is above everything that our mind can conceive or our imagination create. We are more helpless in trying to conceive or imagine it than a man blind from birth is in trying to imagine the beautiful landscape which we describe to him. It is indeed questionable if the heaven which we can imagine would arouse us to much effort for its attainment; because it would be a place of mere earthly pleasures of which we soon grow tired. The happiness of heaven, on the contrary, while it calls into activity to their fullest extent the highest powers and facilities of human nature, never tires nor satiates. It is ever new, ever entrancing.

We can form only a very inadequate notion of it, more by saying what it is not than what it is. Let us imagine all the happy hours we have ever known in our mortal life — all those hours when we seemed to forget that we were still in a world where suffering and sadness are known, and we experienced, as we may have thought, a foretaste of heaven — let us imagine all those hours gathered into one perfect day of purest joy, and intensified a hundredfold: we have not yet the faintest notion of the eternal happiness in store for us. We may have stood on some Alpine peak on a summer's day and felt our souls bowed in awe, our hearts suffused with rapture at the surpassing beauty of the panorama of snow-capped mountains, wooded valleys, and shimmering lakes, spread before us, wrapped in glorious sunshine. We thought, perhaps, that here we had an inkling of the

beauty of heaven. Or we may have contemplated with delight the heavenly paintings of [Blessed] Fra Angelico, the most heavenly-minded of the Christian painters, and thought that he has succeeded in depicting for us a gleam of the glory of our eternal home. But the words of St. Paul come back to us, the words of him who once was granted a vision of heaven: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has it entered into the heart of man, what things God has prepared for them that love Him.” (1 Corinth 2:9.)

These considerations should encourage us during our earthly exile, and comfort us amidst our trials, in accordance with the beautiful sentiment of St. Francis of Assisi:

“Tanto è il ben che io aspetto

Che ogni pena mi è diletto.”

which we may translate as:

So great is the Good I hope to gain,

It turns to joy my every pain.
