

HOW A CATHOLIC MAY KNOW THAT HE WILL GO TO HEAVEN WHEN HE DIES

By Albert H. Monacelli

would go immediately into the welcoming presence of Jesus.

As a result, she departed in great peace. And I was just as certain as she of her destination. It is hoped that in reading this episode, the reader will be moved to profit from Jane's experience.

A few years ago, a Catholic bishop was dying of terminal cancer. Each day for a number of months, his chauffeur would drive him about his diocese. After the bishop's death, a statement by that chauffeur appeared in the press which seemed quite significant. He said that the bishop during his illness was constantly worrying about what would happen to him upon his death. He hoped that God would remember that he had devoted his whole life to His service.

The bishop, obviously, was not at all sure of his eternal destination.

I recall a statement made to me one day by a Catholic priest. He said that he would be satisfied to squeeze into purgatory when he died, and work his way up from there to heaven, presumably by suffering. I wonder how surprised that priest might be one day to discover that there is no purgatory except in man-made tradition. There is no mention of one in the Bible. What the Bible does say in this connection is this: "And it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" {Hebrews 9:27}. It will then be either victory or defeat. No "overtime" period as in basketball.

The term "purgatory" was coined on March 6, 1254 by Pope Innocent IV in a letter to the apostolic delegate in Greece, twelve centuries after the death of Jesus and His apostles.

There is nothing in the Bible, the Word of God, that says that a man can improve his spiritual status after death either by suffering in another place, by the prayers and intercession of others or by any other means. We can believe that if these things were possible the Bible would not be so thunderously silent regarding them. The Bible is, after all, the inspired Word of God written for our instruction, admonition and comfort. It is the plenary record of God's dealings with mankind, and we may be quite sure that it does not omit anything important.

Indeed, any precept not set forth in the Bible, especially if not even mentioned, is nothing more than a man-made regulation or tradition. And Jesus took a very negative view of man-made regulations and traditions. (See Matthew 15:7,9; Mark

7:13 and Colossians 2:8)

My wife Jane died in 1978. She was born a Roman Catholic and died one. A few months before her death something happened in her life that assured her that when she left this world she

It is noteworthy that the news item mentioned above appeared in the bishop's own diocesan newspaper. This would seem to indicate a prevalence of fear and uncertainty regarding death.

This should not be! The Bible speaks often and clearly on salvation and eternal life, and how it may be secured here on earth. One can depart this life knowing that he is heaven-bound.

Holy Scripture is the voice of God reduced to writing, and the Catholic Church fully recognizes that. Thus, in 1965, when all of the bishops were assembled together at the Vatican II Council, they issued a Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation which contained the following: "Sacred Scripture is the Word of God" and stated that all parts of the Bible, "have God as their author."

In 1943, Pope Pius XII in his Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, speaking of the Bible, said that "the faithful... have a serious duty to make continual and holy use of this treasure." The church was saying that Catholics are obliged to read the Word of God, as the Bible is commonly called. Earlier Pope Benedict XV had said, "The responsibility of our apostolic office impels me ... to promote the study of Holy Scripture ... We shall ... never desist from urging the faithful to read daily the Gospels, the Acts and the Epistles so as to gather thence food for their souls ... Ignorance of the Bible means ignorance of Christ."

The Living Bible paraphrases the Gospel of St. Luke, chapter 11, verse 52, in the following pungent, significant language:

Woe to you experts in religion! For you hide the truth from the people. You won't accept it for yourselves, and you prevent others from having a chance to believe it.

Why, then, do such Papal exhortations to read the Bible fail to reach down to the rank and file and evidently go unheeded in seminaries? They apparently do not travel below the bishop.

When I became interested in the Bible in 1976 and went to my pastor for counsel, he threw up his hands and said, "I can't help you. They didn't teach us the Bible in seminary." It was quite a surprise. The shepherd of the flock was not taught the Word of God. Yet Jesus said that "man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God" (Luke 4:4).

A few years ago while speaking to a patient in a Fort Lauderdale nursing home, I got into conversation with a woman visiting at the next bed. She was an intelligent-looking woman of about 40. I found myself asking her if she read the Bible. Instant indignation ensued. With a touch of anger in her voice she said, "I am a Catholic! I don't read the Bible!" It grieved my spirit. With my Catholic background I was sure that the woman was speaking for many millions of Catholics.

But let me get back to our personal history. In 1969, I retired from a New York City law firm, and we moved to Florida to begin a life of leisure and relaxation. A year later, while we were visiting in Washington, D.C., I felt that my life was in need of new direction and that without significant change I was on course to hell.

So moved was I that I immediately went to confession to square myself with God. And on that occasion, as best I knew how, I tried to turn my life over to Him with a real commitment of the heart.

Indeed I promised God that I would go to Mass and receive

communion every day the rest of my life. And for about six years I did just that, faithfully, seven days a week, usually serving the Mass as an acolyte.

In the years following this renewed commitment I spent much of my time studying Catholic theology, liturgy, the lives of saints, etc., guided by reading lists obtained from seminaries. But these led me no closer to knowing God. In fact the study only frustrated my search for the real significance of what was needed to change my life.

In 1976, I became interested in the Bible for the first time. My initial study of the Bible began to open my eyes. I started to understand what Jesus meant when He told Nicodemus that we have to be born again, and "That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the (Holy) Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6). It was at this time, having understood the truth of God for the first time, that I turned my life over to Him. The Bible told me that in doing this I would be made a new creature in Christ... "all things become new" (II Corinthians 5:17). I acknowledged God as my Father. I became heaven-bound according to Scripture.

I also discovered how very simple and certain it is to achieve eternal life while still on earth, and that it is a free gift from God. Jesus purchased it for us when He died on the cross, The Bible states this truth in Ephesians 2:8,9:

For by grace are you saved through faith and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God. Not of works, lest any man should boast.

John L. McKenzie, S.J., perhaps one of American Catholicism's ablest biblical scholars, in his Dictionary of the Bible, says it this way: "It is a principle of New Testament theology that the works of man are totally ineffective to achieve the righteousness which saves" (page 942).

What the Word of God and Father McKenzie are telling us is that the things we do (going to church, confession, communion, prayer) are works, and that our works were never meant to bring us to God, or get us to heaven.

Perhaps my most exciting discovery was that the Bible assures us of our salvation, here and now. As the Apostle John said in his first epistle:

These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life (I John 5: 13).

This verse clearly gives us that assurance.

Jane had always been a meticulously loyal Catholic. She never missed a Mass on Sundays or on holy days of obligation, she confessed and communicated often, she read out of her prayer book each day for deceased friends and relatives. She never doubted what she learned from the cradle: that hers was the true church.

In the last three years of her life, Jane was partially paralyzed and bedridden. Frequently in the morning we would watch the "700 Club" together on television, and on several occasions we recited the salvation prayer with Pat Robertson, the host.

The Bible tells us that if anyone prays such a prayer, from his heart, and confesses that he believes and has accepted Jesus as Lord, he becomes spiritually reborn. He is "born again."

The experience is commonly referred to as the new birth. Up to that point, one cannot be considered a Christian by biblical standards no matter how much church-going, or how many so-

called good works he does.

Jane repeated the salvation prayer, but seemed reluctant or unable to declare that she had accepted Jesus as her Lord. God gives the faith to believe but He also requires each of us to make a positive response to His offer and that is done by declaring Jesus as our Lord. Presumably she feared that she might be taking herself out of the Catholic Church.

One day she volunteered to make the declaration to her son the next time he called. To help her, I wrote out a simple statement of faith *and when her son* called, I placed the paper on her lap.

With no prior explanation, she blurted out, "I have accepted Jesus in my heart as my Lord." And immediately she began to cry. After a few minutes she said, "I can't talk any longer, I'm crying" and hung up. That simple statement of her new faith had so moved her to tears that she was unable to continue her conversation.

Most Catholics believe that they merit salvation or God's favor when they receive baptism or confirmation. Like other Catholic children Jane was baptized and confirmed but it obviously did not work a regeneration of her heart. She had to follow the biblical way to salvation, and when she did, she knew that she had experienced the new birth. It was the Word of God, witnessed to by the Holy Spirit, that assured her of God's acceptance through Jesus Christ and that as a result she would go to heaven.

The absolute necessity of the new birth is beyond doubt. Jesus said in Chapter 3 verses 3-7 of the Gospel of John:

Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God ... except a man be born of water and of the Spirit (the Holy Spirit) he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit (Holy Spirit) is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto you, you must be born again.

Jesus' statement is clear. It is unconditional. It admits of no exception or modification. To interpose an alternative is to signify that Jesus didn't mean what He said and it was necessary for men to correct Him. Any church which does not teach the new birth (considered so vital in the New Testament) may well be leading its unsuspecting people into eternal damnation.

Jesus warned against *making the word of God of none effect through your tradition* (church-made laws and regulations) (Mark 7: 13). He also said that those who were *teaching for doctrines the commandments of men* were hypocrites and they worshiped Him *in vain* (Matthew 15:7,9).

How absurd it is to tamper with the Word of God. In Isaiah 40:8 the Holy Spirit moved the prophet to say that "the Word of our God shall stand forever." And Jesus said that "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away" (Matthew 24:35).

How lacking in wisdom, how foolish, how tragic, to reject God's sure way when eternal life is at stake!

The salvation method is set forth in Romans 10:9-10:

... if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved.

(Catholic edition of the Revised -Standard Version).

How simple and easy God has made salvation for us. How tragic that so few are being taught to avail themselves of it.

How do we obtain this eternal life? By believing in Christ. "God so loved the world, that he gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

But what does the New Testament mean by "believing?" It means more than mere mental assent, more than lip service. One must believe in one's heart and without doubt, and one must act upon such-belief by trusting God for salvation. Faith is acting on one's intellectual belief and trusting Christ as one's Savior.

As the late Bible teacher E. W. Kenyon put it:

"Believing demands action, creates action. Mental assent admires, admits, but does not act."

If the airline schedule says your flight goes to Tulsa, you have no doubt about it. You believe it in your heart, you have faith in the schedule, and you act upon that faith by boarding the plane.

Thus, one has to do more than just believe in his head. He must trust Christ.

Jesus said (John 16:7-9) that after His death the Holy Spirit would convict or convince the world of three things, and one of them was "sin." What sin? The sin of not believing in Jesus. According to the Word of God, it is the sin of unbelief in Christ that sends man to hell. No matter how good and exemplary a life a man may lead, he will still miss heaven if he does not make Jesus the Lord of his life.

Let us always remember one vital, all-important truth: Christianity is a belief in and commitment to Christ. It is not a church, it is not a creed, it is not in a religion. Religion is concerned with the outward acts and forms of worship.

Christianity is a way of life. It is knowing Jesus and having a personal encounter and relationship with Him. He is the only way to heaven. The Bible says that He is the only "mediator between God and man" (I Timothy 2:5). No one else, not even a saint, can fill this role.

Jesus made it clear when He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man comes unto the Father but by me" (John 14::6).

If your church doesn't teach the new birth enunciated by Jesus Himself, then it would seem to be incumbent upon you as a rational human being to examine the Scriptures for yourself.

It is very clear that baptism and confirmation by themselves do not constitute spiritual rebirth. If you have not committed your life to Christ by believing in Him and confessing Him as Lord, the rituals are meaningless.

What a difference it makes when Jesus enters one's life, as so many can testify. In some cases, a wife or husband has observed a change in the other and wants to have what the other has. Empty lives have been filled. Many have discovered that alcohol; drugs, striving for worldly success provide no lasting satisfaction. Jesus has been called the answer to all problems. Indeed one could safely venture to say that there is no man or woman living who has not experienced a void that only Jesus can fill.

Are you tempted to think that you are not bad enough to go to hell? That is one of the cleverest and most deceptive thoughts ever planted in the human mind by the devil. But the Bible supplies the correct answer. For Jesus said it will not be

He who will judge us on the last day but His Word. In short, if we disobey His precept that we must be born again, there will be no need for Him to judge us. His Word will do the judging and the judgment will of course be automatic. We would be sending ourselves to hell. See John 12:48.

And let us remember the warning from Jesus that "strait (narrow) is the gate and narrow is the way which leads to life, and few there be that find it" (Matthew 7::14).

Should one not be concerned to find that one's own church is not teaching the salvation doctrine which Jesus Christ Himself said was an absolute necessity? And that in the face of warnings in the Word of God such as this one: "... how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first to us by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles ..." (Hebrews 2:3,4).

Can there be any doubt that we are flirting with eternal death when we refuse to prefer the Word of God over the word of men, especially on so important a doctrine as the Gospel message itself which Jesus Christ taught. When God directs us so clearly, dare we follow any other? The foregoing Scriptures are not the words of a man or of a church. The author is God. Incidentally, the reading of this booklet is ample warning to you, if any were needed. You cannot be considered to be in ignorance. The pertinent scriptures have been set before you. Surely you will not let unscriptural, anti-scriptural, tradition take you to hell.

In any event, what does one stand to lose by heeding God's Word and making Jesus Lord of one's life?

Let me pause here to ask you two important questions:

No.1. Have you come to the place in your spiritual life where you can say you know for certain that if you were to die today you would go to heaven?

No.2. Suppose that you were to die today and stand before God and He were to say to you, "Why should I let you into my heaven?" What would you say?

How did you answer these questions?

Especially the second one? What would you say if God asked you that question? If you are not sure of your answer or would like to make a sincere confession of your own sin, stop what you are doing, ask the Lord to forgive you and grant you His gift of eternal life. I invite you to pray to God with these words:

God, your Word (Romans 10:13) says that "**whoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.**" Accordingly, I now call upon You in Jesus' name as my Lord and Savior.

Your Word states: "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified. and he confesses with his lips and so is saved" (Romans 10:9,10).

I believe in my heart that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that He died on the cross for my sins and was buried. I believe in my heart that on the third day God raised Him from the dead for my justification.

Dear God, I repent of all my sins, and I ask your forgiveness in Jesus' name. And, here and now, I receive and acknowledge Jesus as my personal Savior, and I ask you to come into my heart and be the Lord of my life. Amen.

If you have just prayed to the Lord and were sincere in your

confession of your sin and desire that Jesus be your Savior and Lord, you have just taken the most important step in your life. However, this first step needs to be followed by other steps. God wants you to grow in your walk with Him. What you have just done means that you have been born again, an event never to be repeated. Your spiritual growth however is a process - the process of becoming the person God has designed you to be. Your spiritual maturity continues until you are fully formed in Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote (Philippians 2:12) that we are "to continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling." He was not talking about entering the Kingdom of God by good works. The Bible never tells us that by good works we can work our way into the good graces of God. He does talk about the process through which each of us moves as we grow in Christ.

There are several basic steps which you must take to grow as a Christian.

1) Pray daily and pray regularly. This is to be the most basic expression of your life, a conversation with your Heavenly Father. It might not be natural at first, but will become so as you make it a part of your life.

2) Bible reading. This goes hand in hand with your times of personal prayer. Bible reading is absolutely central to our lives. Inasmuch as it is the Word of God, we know that by reading God's Word our faith in Him will grow and, in time, establish the standard for our lives. You can only know of God's desire for your life by reading His Word.

3) Steps one and two will have no meaning unless you begin to put into effect those things about which the Lord speaks to you. The term "in Christ" is used His times in the New Testament. Why so often? The writers of the Bible are telling us that to be in Christ means essentially to "be" with Him, to walk with Him, and perhaps more importantly, to "obey" Him. Living a life of obedience to Him insures our growth as a Christian. Jesus said so in so many words, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15).

4) The three steps outlined above will begin to produce something more. If you are at all faithful in praying, reading your Bible and obeying the words of our Lord, your life will begin to reflect the life of Jesus, your Savior and Lord. In John 15:1 Jesus refers to Himself as the vine and those who follow Him as the branches. If we stay attached we will bear fruit and our lives will be a testimony to those who see and know us.

Another word must be added here. As important as it is for you to give witness to your Lord through your actions and behavior, you also need to back up that witness with your conversation. Actions can too easily be misinterpreted. Speaking about Jesus should come as naturally as telling others about a person you love. God will give you the right words and will direct you to the right people as you commit yourself to Him.

Finally, if you are serious about believing in God and identifying yourself as His follower, you will need to begin one of the most difficult parts of a Christian life: trusting God for every detail of your life. This will take some doing because until now you have trusted almost everyone else, including yourself, but not the Lord. The Bible is full of illustrations of people who trusted (or failed to trust) God with their lives. This does not mean that you put your mind into neutral and never think for yourself. It means that since you have placed your life

in the hands of your creator, you need to live out that commitment daily by trusting Him with your life and all its details.

The Bible contains many examples of how God blesses and helps those who put their trust in Him and who obey His commandments. While we do not earn eternal life through obedience, we please and honor God by living according to His Word. Growth and obedience are perfect partners in the spiritual maturing experience.

These are the basic steps you need to take to begin to grow as a Christian. There is much to learn, and much to enjoy as you start your new life in Christ. Your growth, however, almost presupposes other Christians will help you grow. We're talking about those who know and love Jesus Christ, and are themselves growing. God has made it clear that we need other believers to help us mature. If you are not in such a relationship with other believers, you need to find one. If you have no such friends, ask the Lord to help you and start looking. God answers prayer.

May God richly bless you.

THE PROLOGUE TO THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made.

In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

And the light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. .

He came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe.

He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.

That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.

He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not.

He came unto his own, and his own received him not.

But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name.

Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

About the author:

Mr. Monacelli practiced law in New York City until 1969 when he retired and moved to Florida. He now lives in New Jersey. He holds degrees from the University of Norte Dame and from the Georgetown University Law School. He served two terms as president of the Norte Dame Association.



Evangelism Explosion International, Inc.

P.O. Box 23820 Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33307



MENORAH מנורה -Menorah Ministries -

P.O. Box 460024 Glendale, CO 80246-0024

Voice: 303-355-2009 Fax: 303-339-0365

E-mail: menorah@menorah.org

Internet Page: www.menorah.org