

# *Thinking about Dying, Death, and Prayer for the Dead*

## **Pastoral letter from Bishop Brendan Leahy Diocese of Limerick**



### **Jubilee Year of Hope**

We are in the 2025 Jubilee Year that has Hope as its theme. It is good during this Jubilee Year to reflect on what our Catholic faith says about dying, death, what happens after death and prayer for the dead. As Catholics, we approach these topics with great hope. We believe that, in God's love and mercy, we can reach heaven and that we will meet our loved ones again in the next life.

### **Death – Our Encounter with Jesus**

#### *Is Death the end?*

Some will answer that with death, everything finishes. There is nothing more. We simply slip into oblivion. But that is not what Catholics believe. Others believe in reincarnation, that is, that after death you come back to life in another body or as an animal and so will die again and again as the soul is evolving. Catholics do not believe that either. We believe we have one earthly life. It is unique and is directed towards eternity. We only die once.

Our faith tells us there is a next life and that the choices we make in this life shape our final destiny. It has been said that in this life we build a house in which we will live in the next life.

#### *What happens to us when we die?*

Catholics believe that at the moment of death, we meet Jesus. At that moment, there is what is called the particular judgement, the moment of truth, as it were. In meeting Jesus, we get to review with him our lives. It's a little like an exam but the good thing is that we already know the questions – did you love your neighbour on earth? Did you visit the sick? Feed the hunger? Shelter the homeless? Forgive those who offended you? Pray for the living and the dead? Offer good advice to those in need?

### *Should I be afraid of death?*

Death is always mysterious because none of us have gone through it. There is also a certain fear just as we are afraid before any exam! Yet remember the One who will be judging us is Jesus and he has laid down his life out of love for us. God sent Jesus into the world not to condemn us but to save us. He wants the best for us. Jesus risen from the dead tells us: "do not be afraid I am with you". Christ wants to lead us into eternal life. So, of course, we should be full of trust in God. The last words of St. Teresa of Avila were: "The hour I have longed for has come. It is time to meet one another". St. Thérèse of Lisieux went through much darkness as she was dying and yet she was also full of confidence as she faced death commenting, "Not death, but God will take me." So, yes, we must have great trust in God's love and mercy.

And yet, when facing death there is always going to be an element of mystery that can cause us to be in awe of the God we are to meet face to face.



### *Why is there Death in the first place?*

Death was never in God's original plan in creating our world and humanity. It entered our world through what is sometimes called "original sin" (that original choice against God which marks humanity, putting everything out of order, bringing suffering and pain, violence and death into our world). The great news is that in sending Jesus Christ to suffer and die for us, God managed to transform that negative thing, death, into something positive. If we turn towards Christ, he frees us from the darkness of this world so that we can open our eyes onto the new heaven and new earth where God will wipe every tear from our eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more (Book of Revelation, 21:4). Catholics believe that by dying for us on the Cross, Jesus, the Son of God, opened Heaven for us.

## Facing Death

### *Facing death is not easy. What is the best way to prepare for my death?*

God created us. He gave us life. He accompanies us always along life's journey. What he wants of us is to live the present moment of life well. It is good to ask God to help us to be ready to die whenever, however and wherever he wants. And then, if, through a diagnosis of illness, our imminent death is announced to us, we can adapt an attitude of loving surrender to God. God gave us life and now, having lived life with its many ups and downs, the time has come to offer our life back to God as a gift. We do so in thanksgiving for the good things we received in life, and entrusting our failures to his mercy. It means uniting ourselves with Christ's self-offering on the Cross. In this way we prepare to go with Jesus Crucified into the new life with the risen Christ.

### *How should we accompany those who are dying?*

Some die unexpectedly. And that is difficult for those left behind. Often, however, a family member will find themselves accompanying a person who has been diagnosed with a terminal illness or is elderly. It is a delicate time. Not always easy. Today, we can be grateful for the wonderful care of hospices and those who assist the dying with palliative care. From the point of view of Catholic faith, the time leading up to death is a sacred time because the person is preparing to meet Jesus. On the one hand, if there is still time, it can be important to talk to your loved one about dying and also to look after any practical issues that may arise. It is clearly a time to be reconciled if there has been estrangement, a time to make amends, to seek and ask for forgiveness, both for the person dying and for their family members and friends.

As the time of death draws close and the person becomes quite weak, it is a time to be a gentle, comforting presence, speaking words of love and gratitude. Simple prayers such as the "Our Father" or a Rosary said now and then help both the person dying and those close to them. Or the gentle singing of a hymn can be a comfort. The "Hail Mary" prayer is most appropriate as it has the line "pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death". Admittedly, we need to be careful not to burden the one dying with too many words and prayers. Above all, it is an important time to be a silent loving presence, holding their hand and helping in any practical way we can. We can pray silently for them.



### *What about "the last rites"?*

The phrase "the last rites" could be misleading. Though not used much today, it is still an expression that you hear from time to time. It refers to prayers said when the priest visits a person who is dying, hears their confession, gives them Holy Communion and anoints them with the oil of the sick. Often, in the past and sometimes still today, a priest is only called to visit the dying person when he or she is unconscious and at the point of death. At that point, the priest can really only anoint them. Sometimes in the past people spoke of "last rites" and "Extreme Unction (= anointing)" as if they are the very last thing that should happen when there is no further hope. But in recent times, the Catholic Church encourages people to invite the priest to come while the person who is dying is still conscious and can engage with the administration of the sacraments.

In that way the dying person can be brought the consolation of the community praying with him/her and offering the sacraments to strengthen them inwardly as they prepare for this last phase of their earthly journey. For instance, the Holy Communion given to a dying person is called "viaticum" meaning "food for the journey". The administration of these sacraments to a person dying really shouldn't normally be about last-minute blessings. By the way, in the past, when a priest came to administer the sacraments to the dying person, a candle was lit. It provides a symbol of the light of Christ. If appropriate in the circumstances, it is a good thing to light a candle as prayers are being said.

## Judgement, Purgatory, Heaven and Hell

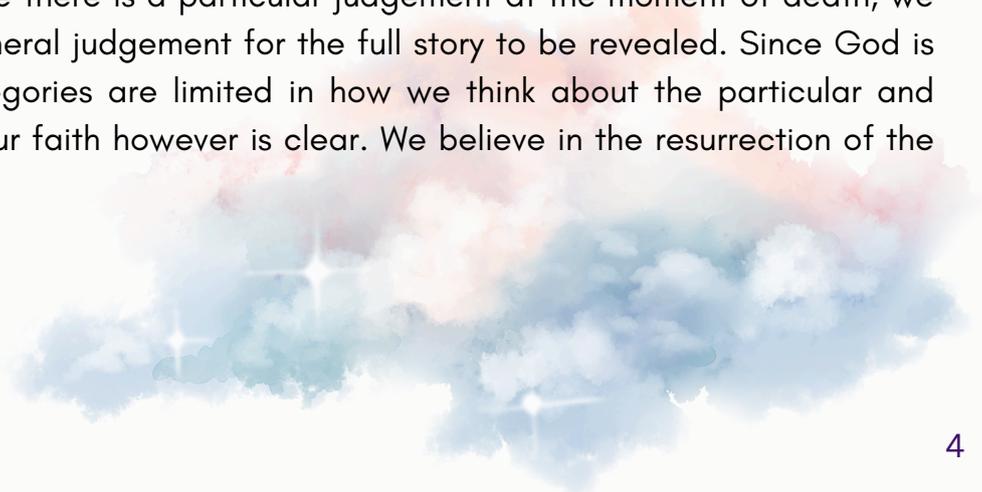
### *What we do mean by saying that in death our soul is separated from our body?*

In physical terms, when we die our human body begins to decay. So, our body is buried or cremated. But Catholics believe that our soul, that is, our innermost spiritual aspect of who we are goes to meet God. We believe that just as happened in Jesus' Resurrection, God will give life again to our bodies by reuniting them with our souls at the General judgement. We believe in the resurrection of the body.

### *What do Catholics mean about the General/Universal Judgement?*

On the basis of the Gospel, the Church speaks of a particular judgement and a general judgement. The particular judgement, as we mentioned above, is the one we receive at the moment of death. If we're ready for heaven we move into heaven. The general judgment, which is also called the Last Judgment, occurs on the Last Day, at the end of the world. It is when the full story of the world will be clarified - the issues of truth and falsehood, justice and injustice, all over the world will be dealt with.

How will that "Last Day" be? We don't have details. We can use images to describe it. It might come about through some dramatic catastrophe or else our world will simply evolve into that "Last Day". Our life is made up of many relationships that impact on our world. It is only at the end of time that the full story can be told about how our life has gone. So, while there is a particular judgement at the moment of death, we have to await the General judgement for the full story to be revealed. Since God is outside time, our categories are limited in how we think about the particular and general judgement. Our faith however is clear. We believe in the resurrection of the body.



### *What is Purgatory?*

Purgatory is often imagined as a place but that's not quite accurate. It is a condition or state of being. Someone who dies but who still needs purification before he/she can see God face to face goes through the experience of purgatory. When Peter had betrayed Jesus, the Lord turned around and looked at him: "And Peter went out and wept bitterly". He recognised his sin and was sorry for it, and that would be something like what will happen in purgatory. It has been said that purgatory can be compared to a situation where you're told a very important person is about to visit your house. You'd like a few minutes to tidy yourself up and get ready. Likewise, if, when we die, we're not quite ready to enter heaven which is, after all, the place of pure perfect love, God gives us the chance to get ready because if we entered heaven unprepared, we might feel a little uncomfortable initially! So, the preparation of purgatory helps us. We can say purgatory is a time of purification, but the good news is that those in purgatory know they are definitely heading towards heaven.

Pope Benedict says this best in his encyclical on hope, *Spe Salvi*. Speaking of the experience of Purgatory as a purifying fire, he says: 'Some recent theologians are of the opinion that the fire which both burns and saves is Christ himself, the Judge and Saviour. The encounter with him is the decisive act of judgement. Before his gaze all falsehood melts away. This encounter with him, as it burns us, transforms and frees us, allowing us to become truly ourselves. ...Yet in the pain of this encounter, when the impurity and sickness of our lives become evident to us, there lies salvation. His gaze, the touch of his heart heals us through an undeniably painful transformation "as through fire". But it is a blessed pain, in which the holy power of his love sears through us like a flame, enabling us to become totally ourselves and thus totally of God. ...At the moment of judgement we experience and we absorb the overwhelming power of his love over all the evil in the world and in ourselves. The pain of love becomes our salvation and our joy. It is clear that we cannot calculate the "duration" of this transforming burning in terms of the chronological measurements of this world. The transforming "moment" of this encounter eludes earthly time-reckoning—it is the heart's time, it is the time of "passage" to communion with God in the Body of Christ.'

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### *How do we help the departed who are in Purgatory?*

There's a lovely line in the prayer book used in Church for funerals: "My brothers and sisters, we believe that all the ties of friendship and affection which knit us as one throughout our lives do not unravel with death". Our love for one another extends into the afterlife. Love is not quenched in death. Through our fasting, prayers, and good works, but especially through our participation at Mass, we continue to express our love for the departed ones and help them if they are in purgatory by praying for them.

### *Does Hell exist?*

Hell is the condition of everlasting separation from God, the absolute absence of love. Someone who consciously and with full consent dies in serious sin, without repenting, and refuses God's merciful, forgiving love forever, excludes him/herself from communion with God and the saints. In the past there were all kinds of images used to describe hell. Put simply, however, a life without love is nothing but hell. Unlike in the canonisation of saints, when the church declares people to be in heaven, the Church has never declared any specific person to be in hell.

Yet, God has made us free. Our dignity is to be able to choose God and desire heaven. But our freedom also means we can choose hell. Jesus warns us again and again not to separate ourselves definitively from him by shutting our hearts against the need of his brothers and sisters.

### *But if God is love, can there really be a hell?*

God does not condemn us. It is we ourselves who have the choice to accept or refuse God's merciful love. God created us to be free and respects our decisions. Even God cannot compel us to love. It has been pointed out that we need to believe in the possibility of hell as there are so many unresolved situations of injustice and hatred, violence and warfare in our world crying out for a just solution that often seems to be beyond this world. Catholic Faith does not simply propose a happy-ever-after story that leaves injustice and wrongdoing unaccounted for. Nevertheless, Catholics hope all will be saved, that God, perhaps through Purgatory, will find a way of resolving unresolved issues here on earth, leading all to heaven.

### *What will heaven be like?*

The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that "Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness." (CCC, 1024). Heaven is the dream of dreams, the fulfilment of all our hopes. Sometimes heaven has been presented almost as an angelic existence. It seemed as if, on death, we would be leaving this world behind and joining the company of angels and saints playing their harps with the choirs singing and adoring God. Such an image might give an idea of heaven as a simply angelic extension of the time we already experience, and it would go on and on and on... Such images strike people today as unattractive and indeed boring. They're not quite sure that's an eternal life they might like.

But Catholic faith sees heaven as dynamic. It is our hope that in heaven we will again be in each other's company in a new transformed way, full of love. Our world will somehow continue but in a new way. So the streets of our cities, the buildings we inhabit, the sea and lakes and hills and animals will be there but in a new

transfigured way. We will all be joined to Christ and in Christ we will know perfectly just how much God the Father loves us and we will breathe in, as it were, the atmosphere of the Holy Spirit who is Love in person

## Preparing for a Funeral

### *Preparing for a Funeral*

The Catholic Church offers various ways for people to go through the often-difficult days of mourning and separation from their deceased loved one. Apart from the simple prayers people can themselves recite at home or in the presence of the body of the deceased, there are rituals such as, in particular, the Funeral Liturgy (A Mass or Liturgy of the Word) and Rite of Committal (at the Graveside or Crematorium). Sometimes, there can be Prayers to accompany the removal of the body from the home or funeral parlour to the Church on the morning of the Funeral Mass or the evening before.

Normally, upon hearing there has been a death in the family, a priest or lay person on behalf of the parish will visit the deceased family's home to offer condolences on behalf of the community and to begin a conversation around the funeral Liturgy - what readings the family might want, the music if desired, prayers of the faithful to be composed. Sometimes, perhaps with the help also of the undertaker, a booklet to accompany the funeral will be printed. In Ireland, normally a priest celebrates a funeral Mass. Perhaps in the future, it will be a lay person leading prayers but that will still be the Church community praying for the deceased with the Mass celebrated on another date, such as the following Sunday.

### *Symbols*

It has become common to bring up symbols of the deceased person's life. It is not necessary to do so but it is allowed. In the ritual itself of receiving the remains into the Church building, the liturgy provides for placing the Cross and bible on the coffin. The family may want to present a few symbols that provide windows onto the deceased person's life and character. The number of symbols should be limited to not more than four or five. They should be appropriate for a church setting. For instance, bringing up their favourite bottle of whiskey wouldn't be appropriate!

### *Music at funerals*

The Church has always encouraged music in liturgy. People find music at funeral liturgies helpful. Normally, the parish has someone who can advise on making arrangements for music or put them in touch with singers/musicians who sing at funerals. The music in funeral liturgies should be suitable for the Church and for liturgy. The deceased's favourite song, if it's not a hymn, can be sung, for instance, at the graveside or crematorium.

### *The Eulogy*

The issue of eulogies can be controversial. Some consider the eulogy should take place at another occasion and not at the Mass. Others believe it is good to include a brief eulogy by a family member either at the beginning or end of the Mass. It should always be clear that there is no expectation of a eulogy. It is not an essential part of the Mass. If a eulogy takes place, its purpose is primarily to give thanks for the care and support received by the deceased person and his/her loved ones at the time of bereavement. It is appropriate also in the eulogy to outline briefly key features of the person's life, aspects that can edify the community gathered. A eulogy is not a time for long reminiscences about the deceased, nor most definitely is it a time to speak ill of the dead. That is totally inappropriate.

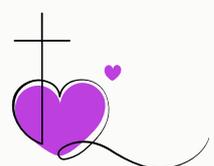
### *Web Camera*

It is important to remember that today many churches have web cameras or that arrangements are made for a funeral liturgy to be relayed and recorded. It is great that people at home and abroad who cannot attend the liturgy can link in with it. But there are data regulations that need to be kept in mind. The immediate family can request that the ceremony not be relayed. If it is transmitted, anyone who has been asked to read or speak at the liturgy should be made aware that the liturgy is being relayed. People offering a eulogy should be very sensitive to how their words might sound to people outside the context of the liturgy.

## Praying for the Dead

### *What am I doing when I pray for the Dead?*

Love does not die in death. We believe that the relationship we had on earth continues with the person who has died, even if in a new way. We can no longer see or hear them directly. Our Catholic faith tells us they are alive in God. We can talk to them, ask for their help. We can also pray to God for them. That is an act of love. Perhaps not everything between us in our relationship on earth went smoothly, or perhaps we simply really miss them. We can still do something to help the relationship. By praying for them, we ourselves find comfort, and our faith tells us that by praying for them, we help them on their journey toward God if they are in purgatory. If they are in heaven, our prayers are still useful as it's our way of letting them know we love them, and God can use our prayers to benefit some others who have no one to pray for them.



### *Month's Mind*

There is a long tradition, especially in Ireland, of celebrating what's sometimes called a "month's mind" Mass. It occurs around a month or so after the deceased died. Of course, there is flexibility. There might be family reasons or circumstances why it is longer than a month before the Mass is celebrated. The practice is valuable. It provides an opportunity for families and friends to meet again, this time not in the direct grief of the funeral. It is a time to remember the deceased in prayer and draw new hope in the message of the resurrection. The Mass is our best prayer. The month's mind also helps mark a moment for those grieving the loss of their loved one to begin, if they can, to move on in the journey of accepting and living with their bereavement.

### *Anniversary Masses*

Many families like each year to mark the anniversary of the death of their loved one. They do so by having a Mass celebrated either on a weekday or on a Sunday. It is a chance for a family to come together and pray for the deceased.

### *Do you have to "pay" for the Mass?*

It is a beautiful expression of love and faith when people have their dear departed loved ones, whose memory they carry in their hearts, remembered at the altar during the celebration of Mass. The Mass is the highest form of prayer and unites us with Christ's love made visible on the cross. Sometimes people speak of "paying" for a Mass when they want it offered for a specific intention such as an anniversary Mass of a loved one. It's not accurate to speak of "paying" for a Mass. Sacraments should never be bought or sold! If offering a financial contribution to the priest, what is happening is that the person getting the Mass offered for their loved is making a donation to the priest to assist him in his living expenses or in charitable or pastoral works he is doing. The donation is greatly appreciated. Those asking for the Mass to be celebrated and offering a donation are making their own sacrifice as their contribution to the prayer of the Mass for the deceased loved one. By depriving themselves of money, they are uniting themselves even more to Christ who offers himself for all in the Mass.

### *What happens when there's a number of Mass intentions?*

Due to the decline in the number of priests and the consequent reduction in the number of masses celebrated in our churches, it has become common for a single Mass to be offered for two or more deceased persons or intentions.

It is important to note, however, that when a priest accepts a Mass stipend (offering) he is bound normally to celebrate a Mass for that specific intention only. He cannot accept money from three or four people who want Mass said for their loved ones and simply decide himself to join them all together into one Mass intention. To do this, it has to be explained and agreed to by those people asking for a Mass to be celebrated for their intention. If it is agreed that the Mass intentions can be joined, the priest can only keep the money equivalent to one of these intentions and must forward the rest of the money to a charitable cause indicated by the Bishop. If there is concelebration, each priest may offer his Mass for a specific intention.

Priests who receive many Mass intentions and are unable to celebrate the Masses directly themselves will normally send the Mass intentions on to missionary priests or some other church body that will arrange for the specific Mass intentions to be celebrated.

*But what about getting the name of a deceased mentioned at Mass?*

There is a separate tradition of a priest calling out the name of people whose anniversaries occur even if the Mass is being offered for just one specific intention. Sometimes, people offer a small donation for that, though it is not necessary. It should be clear that though the name will be mentioned, the Mass is not directly being offered for the person or persons named. Admittedly, it is important to recall that every Mass is celebrated for the whole world, including all the living and the dead. So even if there is one specific intention for a Mass, all are remembered, including those named.



## Burial in the ground or cremation?

Saint Paul teaches us that just as Jesus' own body has been raised, so too God will raise our mortal bodies to be like His own in glory (cf. Phil. 3:21). Catholic faith teaches us to respect our body as a gift from God. It is a temple of the Holy Spirit. It is to be respected not only during life, but even after death. It is necessary to show the greatest respect for the dead body and to treat it with the understanding that it will be raised from the dead.

While preferring burials in the ground, the Church allows cremation. The cremated remains, however, are to be shown respect. Cremated remains of a loved one are not to be scattered, kept at home or divided into other vessels among family members. Normally, the cremated remains should be buried on sacred ground. The Church does allow for burial at sea, providing that the cremated remains of the body are buried in a heavy container and not scattered.

## Bereavement support

Grief after the death of a loved one takes many forms. It can hit each person differently. Catholic faith can help us live through bereavement. We believe in the resurrection of the dead. We believe we will look into each other's eyes again one day. We believe that our loved one is now in God's company with all the saints and our loved family members and friends who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith. By going to Church, we are part of a community that supports us, we hear God's word that consoles us, and we can receive holy Communion that strengthens us.

Even so, grief is not easy. It can be painful, difficult and traumatic and can last a long time. It has been said that grief is the price we pay for love. It is a sign that we have loved with a human heart. It is inevitable that there is pain. CS Lewis wrote a famous book on grief in which he described many of the aspects of grief. He said he experienced grief like being "concussed" and he described the death of his partner as like an amputation. He was embarrassed at times with his outbursts of grief, and he felt that he embarrassed others who didn't know what to say or how to act. He wrote that "No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear" and that "Grief is like a long winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape."

Grief is a 'whole person experience'; it can affect our feelings, thought patterns, physical sensations and behaviours. It is changeable and it comes and goes in waves. It can be accompanied by exhaustion and restlessness and, in some cases, by depression. All bereaved people need support, which will often be found through other family members and friends, and in personal resilience. Some parishes have bereavement groups, and on occasions there might be a need for counselling sessions. Above all, after the death of a loved one, it is important to be gentle and patient with oneself, but also to keep on praying, handing over to God the suffering and pain, knowing that God can comfort the broken-hearted and draw good out of everything. And keep hope alive because our great hope is that death is not the end. Jesus has conquered death and opened heaven for us.

### Living on Earth as in Heaven

In concluding this letter that has considered some aspects to do with death, dying and the next life, it's good to remember that Jesus invited us to live "on earth as in heaven". The journey of life is certainly made up of joys and dreams, but also disappointments, setbacks and tragedies. Because of our Christian faith, our lives are not meaningless. We have hope that the Risen Jesus is leading us home to heaven. But already, in this life, we can recognise he is with us now, supporting us and helping us get up again when we feel dejected or deflated. He gives us the strength to overcome hardships and struggles. As Pope Leo put it recently, "Jesus, with his Resurrection, has guaranteed for us a permanent source of life: he is the living one (cf. Rev 1:18), the lover of life, the victor over all death." He is the destination of our life's journey but also the One who already in this life fills us with the hope that, as Pope Leo puts it, "gives us a foretaste, despite the fatigue of living, of a deep and joyful calm: that peace that only he can give us in the end, without end."

November 2025

