

THE HUMAN SOUL AFTER DEATH

The belief that the soul of man survives the body after death is not only a tenet of Catholic Faith, but it is also a truth generally admitted by philosophers, both ancient and modern. Next to the fundamental dogma of the existence of God it has ever been the most popular belief in the history of mankind. In the present article it is purposed not to prove the immortality of the human soul, which was ably demonstrated in a preceding issue of this review, but to consider the state of the human soul after its separation from the body and to present briefly the teaching of Catholic theology regarding its knowledge and scope of activity.

At the moment of death the lot of the departed soul is irrevocably determined. Man's term of probation upon this earth is then at an end, and the state of his soul in the next life depends entirely upon his actions in the present one. God's judgment but confirms that which man has already, by his life here below, pronounced upon himself. If he dies an enemy of God through mortal sin, his soul must pay the awful penalty of his folly, and will be condemned to separation from God for all eternity in the frightful torments of hell. If, on the other hand, man departs this life in the friendship of his Creator and united to Him by charity, his soul will be admitted to the ineffable joys of heaven, either immediately, if he has nothing to expiate, or after a certain period of purgation in purgatory, which is but a transitory state, and which will cease to exist at the time of the Last Judgment.

The final destiny, then, of every man upon this earth is either an eternity of happiness with God in heaven or an eternity of misery far from Him in the unquenchable fires of hell.

Between these two extreme states there is still another called Limbo, in which are detained the souls of children who die without baptism, before they have been guilty of any personal sin. The stain of original sin, which alone affects these souls, is sufficient to deprive them forever of the sight of God. Since this privation, however, is the result of no evil act committed by themselves but of the sin which they have inherited along with their human nature from Adam, the punishment of hell-fire and the terrible remorse of the wicked condemned for their actual sins do not affect them, and they may be said to enjoy a kind of

natural happiness, for they need not be supposed to know what they have lost. This privation of the Beatific Vision is no injustice to these souls, for their nature gave them no claim to a supernatural reward.

We now come to the second and more interesting phase of our article, namely, the knowledge of the human soul after its separation from the body. Is the soul in its new state still capable of knowledge? What is the source of this knowledge, and to what, precisely, does it extend?

That the soul still has some kind of knowledge may be called self-evident; otherwise, there would be no reason for its existence, for an entity deprived of its proper operation is incomprehensible. The two faculties of intellect and will are inseparable from the soul in whatever state it may be, and, consequently, since they are not mere ornaments but of their nature ordained to certain determined acts, these acts they must be able to elicit. Besides, how could the soul hear its sentence after death, how could it suffer with resignation in purgatory, or with undying remorse in hell; how could it enjoy the Beatific Vision in heaven, or natural happiness in Limbo unless it still retained the use of intellect and will?

We must now distinguish between the manner of knowledge which is natural to every soul in the next life and the supernatural knowledge proper to the blessed alone.

It is natural for the soul to understand through the medium of certain intellectual images which are the proximate principle of cognition and without which it can know nothing. In the present life these images are obtained through the external senses, our only means of communication with the outside world. Hence, the soul of an infant is like a blank sheet of paper. It is only in the course of years, by the development of the sensitive faculties, that it begins to acquire and advance in knowledge.

In the next life, since the soul no longer has the use of the senses, it must obtain all its knowledge in some other way. For the blessed, no mental representation of the object is required, since in the Beatific Vision they see God face to face in the same manner that God sees Himself, although less perfectly, each one according to the degree of glory which he has merited. All, however, see in God the mysteries which were the object of faith in this life, and everything else they may have a reasonable interest in knowing, even the things which are actually transpiring upon

this earth. They know well the prayers that are addressed to them by the faithful here below and the veneration that is paid to them by the Church.

Besides this supernatural knowledge, which the blessed alone possess, every soul has a natural knowledge, and this we now proceed to investigate.

The first kind of natural knowledge possessed by the soul is that acquired in this life. Our concepts are spiritual, like the soul itself, and they will remain with us for all eternity. The sensitive faculties may go, but the intellectual memory still remains, and the soul in the next life can review its past and see clearly the virtuous actions which merited for it eternal happiness, or the crimes which it is now obliged to expiate.

But this knowledge is not sufficient. What about the souls of children who die in infancy, without having had any intellectual contact with the material world? Moreover, the soul would be seriously handicapped, indeed, did it have no better knowledge of the new society of spirits, of which it is to be forever a part, than that it could have through its acquired knowledge, which has but a distant analogy with realities of the spiritual order.

The soul, then, needs new concepts. How will it obtain them? In two ways; either directly from God, at the moment of death, or from the other spirits with which it will be able to communicate.

It is to be noted that the human soul at the moment of death begins an existence similar to that of the angels, and, consequently, since Divine Providence provides for every being according to its nature, the soul must have a knowledge similar to that of the angels. Just as the angels at the moment of their creation receive from God a store of mental images in the contemplation of which they perform their intellectual operations, so also the soul at the instant of separation from the body receives an influx of intellectual images to fit it for its new surroundings.

Of course this infused knowledge of the soul will be far inferior to that of the angelic spirits, whose images are more universal, and whose intellect, being more powerful, can penetrate even to the smallest individual detail all that is contained therein. However, the soul in this way will attain to a more perfect knowledge of God than could ever be attained in this life. It will know its guardian angel and those other angels whose company

it actually shares. It will know also the condition of its relatives and friends in after life, and the state of those souls in which it is especially interested. But, unlike the angels, it will have but a general and confused knowledge of the actual happenings upon this earth. Thê particular events that are passing here at any given time remain for the soul a closed book, as far as its infused knowledge is concerned.*

But what the soul cannot know of itself through its acquired or infused knowledge it can learn from others, for, interchange of thought is not limited to our human society here below; it will be far more perfect in the world to come. Here, all our ideas are conveyed through the medium of signs, principally words, which, no matter how well chosen, too often fail to carry clearly our true meaning to the mind of another. But once the soul is free from the body it will no longer require such signs; the material barrier being then removed, soul will speak directly to soul, and mind to mind, without any possibility of being misunderstood.

The exact manner of this communication must now appear to us rather mysterious, immersed as we are in the sensible and material, but we may be sure that since there is no obstacle it must be effected by the mere turning of the mind of one to the mind of the other. By a simple act of the will a spirit can so direct its concept to the mind of another as to impart to that mind the precise knowledge it wishes to convey and, at the same time, withhold that knowledge from others with whom it is not actually conversing. By this conversation with the angels and other souls, a soul in the next life will be able to learn much it could not otherwise know. The angels are not ignorant of what is actually taking place on this earth. Furthermore, souls are constantly departing this life, carrying with them beyond the pale the store of knowledge acquired here below, which they will be able to impart to others. We may then safely conclude that the soul after death will be kept pretty well informed about the affairs of this present life. Thus, the souls in purgatory can know the relatives and friends on earth who still remain faithful to their memory and offer up prayers and good works in their behalf; for it is highly probable that God will reveal this to them through the ministry of angels and not allow his suffering chil-

* *Summ. Theol.* I p., q. 89, a. 8.

dren to remain in complete ignorance of what so deeply interests them and so closely touches their welfare.

The human soul, then, after death, besides the supernatural knowledge which the blessed alone enjoy, will have a threefold natural knowledge, namely, that acquired in this life, that given by God at the moment of separation from the body, and that which can be obtained by conversation with other spirits. As is evident, this knowledge will far surpass both in clarity and extension that of the present life, where we are obliged to glean laboriously all our ideas from the material images furnished by our senses, which alone can grasp directly the external reality.

We now pass to the consideration of the power of the human soul after death, and will endeavor to state briefly its limitations according to the sound principles of Catholic philosophy. Much might be said on this point did space permit, for the number of those who attribute to separated souls the various phenomena of the spiritistic séance is daily increasing and becoming a serious menace to Christian dogma and Christian morals.

Without wishing to enter into the controversy as to whether these phenomena can be ascribed to merely natural causes or postulate some supra-mundane intelligence, which could be decided only by a careful examination of the facts and the theories advanced to explain them, we may here lay down as certain that the souls in after life can have nothing at all to do with these manifestations, which will be sufficient for our present purpose.

In order to prove our assertion, it must be borne in mind that while the soul after death has a mode of existence similar to that of the angels, still it is far from attaining the perfection of the angelic nature in the spiritual order. The angel is a complete nature in himself, entirely independent of matter and all material conditions, while the soul is but a part of the human nature and the principle of life in a determinate corporeal body, which it was created to animate. The angel, therefore, can move bodies at will, since he is not bound by nature to any one in particular, but the same cannot be said of the soul, which, being a part of a certain individual, can move other bodies only through the medium of its own, separated from which it is powerless to move the smallest material element.

Let us now, in the light of doctrine just exposed, consider briefly some of the phenomena which many would attribute to the souls of the departed. It will be easy to show that such an

assumption postulates in the soul a power it cannot possess in the next life.

We saw above that the separated soul has a knowledge far superior to that of us mortals of earth; it knows much that we can never know in this vale of tears. Is there any way in which the soul can communicate this knowledge to us? No. God alone can illuminate directly our intellects and impart there what He wishes us to know. A mere creature can reach our intelligence only through our imagination, the images of which are bound up with all our acts of cognition. The angel, therefore, being able to excite new images within us, can thus lead us to the knowledge of truths we would otherwise ignore; but the soul can exercise no such influence upon our imagination and, consequently, has no way to transmit knowledge to our intellect.

What about the apparitions of the dead, of which we have numerous instances recorded in history and which are said to be one of the principal phenomena of the spiritistic séance?

It is not contrary to the teaching of Catholic theology to admit that the souls of the dead have appeared upon this earth, as St. Thomas explicitly concedes in the case of Moses at the Transfiguration of our Divine Saviour, not that the soul of Moses was reunited to his body, but that his soul appeared through some assumed body, just as the angels do.* However, since such apparitions are miracles, in the strict sense of the word, they are of very rare occurrence, and consequently should not be admitted except in well-authenticated cases, the judgment of which is left not to the caprice of the individual, but to the Church. Theologians hold that these apparitions almost always take place through the instrumentality of angels, who are able to form bodies to the likeness of any person, living or dead, and who can act and speak as such persons once did. As to the so-called spiritistic apparitions, and the other phenomena observed at séances, if they are not out and out fraud or due to purely natural causes, they must be traced not to the departed souls, which would require a direct intervention of God, preposterous in the case, but to meddling angelic spirits for the furtherance of their own ends, and this is precisely where lies the danger.

* Summa Theol. III, p. q. 45, a. 3, ad 2m.

We have here, as throughout our whole article, endeavored to expose faithfully the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas, than whom we could have no safer or surer guide in all questions relating to philosophy and theology. As a fitting conclusion, we will now let our Angelic Doctor speak for himself; in a few well-chosen words he will sum up for us admirably the teaching of Catholic Tradition upon this point. In the *Summ. Theol.* I. P. q. 117, a. 4, where St. Thomas proves that the separated soul cannot move bodies locally, he proposes to himself this difficulty: "In the Itinerary of Clement it is said that Simon Magus, by sorcery, retained power over the soul of a child that he had slain, and that through this soul he worked magical wonders. But this could not have been without some corporeal change, at least as to place. Therefore, the separate soul has the power to move bodies locally." Here is his answer, which it would be well for us to ponder deeply: "As St. Augustine and St. Chrysostom say, the demons often pretend to be the souls of the dead, in order to confirm the error of heathen superstition. It is therefore credible that Simon Magus was deceived by some demon who pretended to be the soul of the child that the magician had slain."

Comment would be superfluous. It would seem that our ancient enemy is still at his old tricks and not an entire stranger to the remarkable phenomena of the spiritistic séance, for, surely, there is no easier way for him to spread false doctrines than by impersonating the souls of the dead and leading the poor dupes of this world to the belief that they can communicate with their friends in after life, when they fall an easy prey to his machinations.

—Brother Innocent Smith, O. P.