### Suggested Readings

Bausch, William J. *Pilgrim Church: A Popular History of Catholic Christianity.* Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1989 [1981].

Bokenkoetter, Thomas. *A Concise History of the Catholic Church.* New York: Doubleday/Image, 1990 [1977].

Congar, Yves. *Tradition and Traditions: A Historical and Theological Essay.* Translated by Michael Naseby and Thomas Rainborough. New York: Macmillan, 1966 [1960].

Dulles, Avery. *The Survival of Dogma.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971.

Küng, Hans. *The Church Maintained in Truth.* Translated by Edward Quinn. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1980 [1979].

Murray, John Courtney. *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition.* New York: Sheed & Ward, 1960.

Tilley, Terrence W. *Inventing Catholic Tradition.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000.

# Chapter 23

# The Meaning of Life

By the time I was in college I had rejected my religion. I wanted to know the true meaning of life. I majored in English literature because I thought that perhaps the persons recognized as great authors would teach me something about the meaning of life. I also became interested in philosophy for the same reason. I learned a great deal in my studies, for which I will always be grateful, but, when it came to the meaning of life, I did not have much luck. Perhaps it was because I was searching for an "answer" to a question that doesn't have a clear, set one. Why do human beings exist? Why does any reality exist at all? Is there a purpose to my life?

I became especially concerned about an area known as general semantics, where philosophy and linguistics intersect. To find out the meaning of life, I would first need to know the meaning of "meaning." If I could know what meaning "meaning" itself had, I would be in a better position to know the meaning of life. What does it mean to "mean?" Why is there such a thing as "meaning?"

For various reasons my college years were intense and depressing. I reached a breaking point in my early twenties. Through group support, I was led to reach out to God in prayer. Through continuing support, I learned how to grow in faith. After a time, I again sought out the religion of my youth. Eventually, I made the academic study of religion, especially Catholicism, my main occupation.

It is through faith and prayer that I have come to trust that life does indeed have meaning. The academic study of religion is important to me, but it would mean much less to me if it were not related to my personal faith.

So what, after all of that, is the meaning of life? I still do not have an "answer." What I have found is that by striving to live a Christian life, by seek-

ing the will of God, by struggling to live my life on a spiritual basis, I have come in contact with the meaning of life. I experience meaning within the context of my life journey. I do not "know" the meaning of life. It is not something that I could write out definitively in a paragraph or two. It is more something that I have an inkling of as meaning spills over into my daily activities. The less I anguish intellectually about the meaning of life, and the more I reach outside of myself to God and to others, the more I experience the rich and deep meaning there is to be had in this great gift of life.

I have trouble relating with Albert Camus's claim that life is absurd because the human heart cries out for meaning in a universe that gives no reply. Whether it be in the midst of the most wonderful things in my life or in the midst of the deepest sufferings I have had to face, I have become more and more convinced that life has an ultimate meaning and purpose. It is as though I cannot quite see or hear it, but I can taste, smell, and touch it. I know it is there, but I cannot describe it in any final or definitive way.

### This Chapter

Chapter seven of *Lumen Gentium* talks about the meaning of life in a way that I can relate to. After proclaiming the ongoing activity of Christ in the world through the church and through the Eucharist, it goes on to say:

> Therefore the promised restoration which we are awaiting has already begun in Christ, is carried forward in the mission of the Holy Spirit and through Him continues in the church in which we learn the meaning of our terrestrial life through our faith, while we perform with hope in the future the work committed to us in this world by the Father, and thus work out our salvation. (*LG,* 48)

That is, by living a life in which one follows Christ, seeks the will of the Father, and listens to the promptings of the Spirit, one will learn the meaning of life, which allows one to carry on one's earthly work with hope for the future.

In this chapter we will explore two themes from chapter seven of *Lumen Gentium* that help to illuminate the meaning of life: eternal life and the Communion of Saints.

### Eternal Life

If this life is all there is, then it has little if any ultimate meaning. Does life end in death? Are we simply snuffed out of existence? Will the universe trudge on for all eternity, never to hear from us again?

Catholic teaching about the afterlife prior to Vatican II tended to be exceedingly clear. Heaven and hell were presented as the two ultimate choices, with purgatory as a temporary but harsh middle ground and limbo as a neutral place for unbaptized infants and other innocent non-believers. Although it was always acknowledged that the actual nature of these places or states of being were far beyond our imaginations, the ways in which they were talked about was often quite detailed and concrete.



In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,*[1] James Joyce offers an exaggerated yet telling depiction of the kinds of things a Catholic retreat preacher might have said about hell in 1916. The preacher reports that "Hell is a straight and dark and foul smelling prison, an abode of demons and lost souls, filled with fire and smoke." He tells how the walls of hell are said to be four thousand miles thick; how horrible is the stench; how despicable the company of demons; how boundless and intense the fire; how painful to be deprived of divine light; how insufferably long is eternity. On each of these points the preacher goes into an extended, vivid description designed to drive home the fear of hell to his school-aged listeners. Although what is being presented is much more extreme than ordinary Catholic preaching of the time, it is fair to say that Catholics tended to operate with a fairly clear idea of what heaven and hell were like, and even of who was likely to go where.

Contemporary Catholic teaching about the afterlife has tended to focus on the mystery of it. There is much less of an immediate stress on what heaven and hell are like and much more emphasis on the coming of the kingdom that Jesus preached. There is an attempt to balance any focusing on individual souls with a focus on human relationships and social issues. There is an attempt to balance talk of afterlife with talk of the kingdom having its roots in this world, wherever the will of God breaks in to transform people and social structures for the better. The kingdom is both individual and social; it is both here and yet to come; it is a reality we experience and a mystery we hope for.

| **Kingdom of God** |
| --- |
| both individual and social<br>both here and yet to come<br>both a reality and a mystery |

Some theologians, writers, and artists have been drawn to an emphasis on the experience of the eternal dimension of reality as we encounter it now. They can be said to emphasize the "already present" aspect of the kingdom. William Blake wrote of experiencing the whole universe in a grain of sand.[2]

In *Our Town*, Thornton Wilder depicts a world whose present moments go by largely unappreciated unless it be by a poet or by someone who has returned from the dead.[3] T.S. Eliot writes in *Four Quartets* of "a lifetime burning in every moment."[4] In *Total Presence*, T.J.J. Altizer speaks of the contemporary experience of an immediacy that signifies the death of interior consciousness and the end of history. He claims that "the only regained paradise is the final loss of paradise itself."[5] These authors challenge us not to simply put heaven off to the day when we die but to appreciate the depth dimension of our lives as we live them.

Other theologians and artists remind us more of the not-yet aspect of the kingdom. Picasso's *Guernica* stands as a symbol of the terrible reality of modern warfare. Elie Wiesel's *Night* helps us to keep in mind the horrors of the Holocaust and of human hatred.[6] Gustavo Gutiérrez's classic *A Theology of Liberation* tells of a world that has too much human suffering to simply lend itself to acceptance and appreciation.[7] These thinkers remind us that the fullness of the kingdom is still a long way off.

As was the case with the mystery of the church itself, *Lumen Gentium* speaks about the afterlife in images and symbols drawn from the Scriptures. There is no attempt at an overly clear definition or description. The reader is told:

> Since however we know not the day nor the hour, on Our Lord's advice we must be constantly vigilant so that, having finished the course of our earthly life, we may merit to enter into the marriage feast with Him and to be numbered among the blessed, and that we may not be ordered to go into eternal fire like the wicked and slothful servant, into the exterior darkness where "there will be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth." (*LG*, 48)

In the original text this single sentence contains five footnotes to scriptural passages, drawing heavily from Matthew 25, but referring also to Matthew 22 and Hebrews 9. It is surrounded by other heavily footnoted sentences that borrow liberally from the letters of Paul and John. In other words, when it comes time to discuss the afterlife, the document relies exclusively on highly symbolic images from the New Testament.

Such a reliance does two things. It helps to reestablish the afterlife as a mystery of the faith rather than as some piece of information that we know all about. Gone are the days that a retreat master might be tempted to speak of heaven and hell as literally as if describing the house down the street. Catholics still believe firmly in the reality of heaven, but we are inclined more to remember the symbolic and analogous nature of the language that we use to talk about it.



At the same time, though, the reliance on scriptural texts reinforces the importance of this mystery in the total scheme of our beliefs. As Catholics, we are called to remain vigilant as we live in the confident hope for eternal life. In our hope, at least, we have not changed.

### Communion of Saints

My father died some years ago. Where has he gone? Will I ever meet him again?

When I was a child I did not tend to think of the Communion of Saints as having to do with ordinary people that I had known. I thought mainly of the saints as amazingly holy people to whom one would pray because they had the power to grant special favors. For example, if I lost something, I prayed to St. Anthony. If I found it, I would pay St. Anthony by putting a dollar in the poor box at church. (Today, if I am really desperate, I may still resort to doing this.)

*Lumen Gentium*, drawing upon the depths of the Catholic tradition, includes in the Communion of Saints not only those addressed as "Saint," but all those people who have died and are now with God. It also includes those who are struggling to live lives of holiness now. That is, the Communion of Saints includes not only those extraordinarily holy people who have been canonized, but also people like my father and myself. The point of the belief in the Communion of Saints is that we are all joined with one another in that we share the same grace of our loving God. We remain related to each other in a community. My father and I are still both part of the mystical body of Christ; the fact that he has died and that I remain alive has not erased our continuing relationship. Only death separates us; we are united through our love of God. I know nothing concrete of what eternal life is like, but I know that I believe in it and that I hope to meet my father again.

*Lumen Gentium* still talks about the saints as those who, through their merits, can intercede for us with God; this belief, however, is complemented by an even greater emphasis on the role of the saints as inspiring examples and as companions in a fellowship of love. Vatican II did not come right out and tell me to stop praying to St. Anthony when I lose something; what I hear the document saying, however, is that my prayers for intercession should be complemented by a knowledge of the life of the particular saint and an openness on my part to become a more open and loving person through that saint's example. In other words, for me to receive the grace of God through the intercession of a saint is connected with my knowledge of that saint and my openness to being inspired. In this light the document calls for growth in the way we relate with saints:

> . . . we urge all concerned, if any abuses, excesses or defects have crept in here or there, to do what is in their power to remove or correct them, and to restore all things to a fuller praise of Christ and of God. Let them therefore teach the faithful that the authentic cult of the saints consists not so much in the multiplying of external acts, but rather in the greater intensity of our love, whereby, for our own greater good and that of the whole church, we seek from the saints "example in their way of life, fellowship in their communion, and aid by their intercession." (*LG*, 51)

This passage suggests that we avoid superstitious petitioning of saints through repetitious prayers. Saints are a help in relating with God, not a substitute. We should study the life of any saint to whom we pray, sense our connectedness with him or her, and be open to be inspired.

| Functions of the Saints |
| --- |
| intercede for us with God |
| inspire us by example |
| strengthen fellowship in love |

The church also still holds a special place for those saints who have been canonized. It is hoped that many, many people, both those alive and those who have gone before us in death, can qualify for the generic title, "Saint," but there have been some people who have led such recognizably holy lives that they stand out as shining lights for the rest of us. These people are canonized by the church much in the way that baseball players are inducted into the Hall of Fame. They are proposed to a committee, investigated and reviewed, and finally voted and decided upon. The pope has the final say. To be canonized a saint is to receive an official endorsement by the Catholic Church that you are a fit model for veneration and inspiration. Unlike the Hall of Fame, people are not eligible for canonization until after they have died.

Pope John Paul II has beatified and canonized holy Christians at a pace more rapid than his recent predecessors.[8] Part of his motivation for doing so has been to expand the types of saints that the faithful have available to them, for one of the functions of saints is to show how the Christian life can be lived faithfully in a variety of life situations and circumstances. Some commentators have called for even more expansion of the canon of saints, with a yet deeper emphasis on bringing in more women, more non-Europeans, more middle-class, and more married people. Some liberation theologians



have argued that the church should give more emphasis to reformers and political activists who work for systemic change than to "saints of the system" who do not challenge the status quo.[9] It is important to remember, however, that the number of saints in the Catholic Church (and, I would add, beyond) is far greater than the number of those who have been canonized.

**Summary**

In this chapter, we have discussed the meaning of life in relation to Catholic belief concerning eternal life and the Communion of Saints.

I am fairly certain that my father will never be officially canonized; I live in hope, though, that he is now with God as sure as is St. Peter, and that someday we will meet again.

In the next chapter we will examine different styles of theology that have emerged in the Catholic Church since Vatican II.

**For Further Reflection**

1. What do you think of when you hear the phrase, "the meaning of life"?
2. The journey theme is very popular in contemporary spirituality. What are its limitations? Does it need to be balanced by other images?
3. Some art and literature stresses the need to appreciate life now. Other works stress the horrors of the realities we face. How might these contrasting emphases fit together?
4. Do you know anyone whom you think of as a "saint"? What is that person like?
5. Do you believe in eternal life?

**Suggested Readings**

Cunningham, Lawrence. *The Meaning of Saints.* San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980.

Hellwig, Monika. *What Are They Saying about Death and Christian Hope?* New York: Paulist Press, 1978.