

CATHOLIC BELIEF AND PRACTICE
by Fr. John Ramsay**CHAPTER 9 – THE CHURCH (Part Three)**

This chapter on the Church deals with what might be called the EXTENDED Church or what is called in the Ninth Article of the Creed, “THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS”. The word “saints” here means not just canonised saints like St. Peter, St. Francis, St. Theresa and so on, nor even those good people who have died and are now in heaven, but ALL the members of the Body of Christ, the Church, including YOU and ME.

St. Paul used the word saints in this sense when writing to the Ephesians whom he described as the ‘saints at Ephesus’. Natural death does not mean that people cease to be part of the Body of Christ. They cease to be part of the VISIBLE church, but they remain intimately united with Christ, the head of the body and so with all the other parts. Indeed, the visible Church forms only a tiny part of the whole Body - the tip of a gigantic iceberg. There is a real union between the visible and invisible members and it is this that we are referring to when we talk of the Communion of Saints - between us who are still on our pilgrim way through this world, those who though dead are still being prepared for heaven since they are not yet ready for it and finally those who are already enjoying the vision of God in heaven - three branches of the One Body of Christ, the Church. All of these members of the Body of Christ contribute to the life and wellbeing of the whole - not just the visible members. Indeed, those who have died now see things in an altogether clearer light and consequently their prayers are directed where they are most needed whereas ours here on earth are so often misdirected. It is comforting to think, for instance, that a mother who, while alive, prayed for all her children, never ceases to do so after she has died.

There is thus a three-way communion of prayer: Those in heaven (usually called the “Church Triumphant” since they have successfully achieved their reward) pray continuously for all of us on earth and for those in Purgatory. Those in Purgatory pray to those in heaven, honouring them and asking for their help and praying to us for our help and asking God to reward us for it. I said earlier that they were “preparing” for heaven. These are the ones (probably the vast majority) who died in a state of grace, in friendship with God, yet due to the consequences of their sins - the AFTER EFFECTS, if you like - are plainly not yet fit to go into God’s presence. Thus they are purified or PURGED of their sins (hence the word Purgatory). What form this purification takes we do not know, but the very fact that they are still separated from God is in itself a form of great suffering. For this reason they are usually referred to as the “Church Suffering” Finally, there are all of us, still on the way, battling it out in this world in the struggle to do good and avoid evil and so we are called, appropriately enough, the “Church Militant”. We honour those in the Church Triumphant and ask for their intercession on our behalf, we pray for the Church Suffering, the Holy Souls, and, of course, we pray for one another. So all three branches are inter-active in a ceaseless effort, contributing to the well-being of the whole Body of Christ.

Just a final word on the Souls in Purgatory - these souls have, of course, had all the serious sins they committed forgiven or they would not be there. But though a sin may have been forgiven, the damage it did to others still has to be compensated for and the after-effects or weakness it caused in the one who committed it still have to be purified and healed. Since the sin itself has already been forgiven, the suffering they endure compensates for the damage they have done to others and purifies the after-effects in themselves thus preparing them for heaven.

THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

This brings us to the tenth Article of the Creed - “THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS”. We have already seen how the power to forgive sins was given to the Church and is exercised in the Church. The manner in which it is exercised will be dealt with later when we study the Sacrament of Penance (Reconciliation). Now let us consider not the power to forgive but the thing being forgiven, namely sin itself since there is a great deal of ignorance on the subject.

First, then, what do we mean by “SIN”? The catechism definition is: “an offence against God by any thought, word or deed against the law of God”. Sin is a **DECISION** of the mind and will. It may not necessarily be followed by an act. So, for instance, I may plan to burgle a house. I don’t actually carry it out as, on approaching the house, I spot a Police Car parked nearby and I dare not risk it. But I had already made up my mind so, although I don’t burgle the house, I have committed the sin of theft! Does that surprise you?

What are my grounds for saying this? Where did the idea come from? The answer is Our Lord Himself. What He said on one occasion was: “**YOU HAVE HEARD IT SAID OF OLD ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY - BUT I SAY TO YOU IF A MAN LOOKS AT A WOMAN LUSTFULLY HE HAS ALREADY COMMITTED ADULTERY WITH HER IN HIS HEART.’**” (Matthew 5: 27,28)

Sin is committed when the mind is made up, but not until then. Up till that point it is still temptation.

I want now to make two important distinctions. The first is between **ORIGINAL** sin and **ACTUAL** sin. Original sin refers to the fall of our first parents from grace at the dawn of human history, and its consequences in each one of us. You may remember when I was talking about **WHY** the Incarnation happened I mentioned man’s rebellion. That sin had repercussions on all of us. By their sin, our first parents lost that grace which was the life of their souls and thus could not pass on to their descendants what they no longer possessed themselves. So mankind was deprived of the means of getting to heaven since it lacked the grace to perform the necessary supernatural acts.

So, Jesus Christ became a man, suffered and died on the cross, thus providing man with the means of obtaining that grace which had been lost. We are all born, therefore, lacking this grace - which is sometimes called the stain of original sin - but through Baptism that lost grace is restored to us. Nevertheless, man’s nature remains damaged - our lower nature is not fully under the control of our higher nature. All of us have experience of this inner battle haven’t we? St. Paul describes it most graphically in his letter to the Romans. Read it now for yourself- you find it in Romans 7: 15-24. Actual sin is, of course, the kind of sin we ourselves commit and this is where the second distinction comes in.

It is vitally important for us to know the difference since one has the deadly effect of severing the life-line between Christ and ourselves, depriving us of grace and leaving us as man was before the Redemption - incapable of getting to heaven and, since it is our own fault, heading for that permanent separation from God that we call Hell. So it is vital, then, to know the difference between what is called **MORTAL** sin and **VENIAL** sin. It is mortal sin, as its name suggests, that is deadly. Theologians have defined it very carefully for us so that we can be in no doubt whatever if we ever commit one. Before a mortal sin is committed, three clear conditions must be simultaneously present.

First, the matter must be **SERIOUS**. Secondly, there must be **FULL KNOWLEDGE** of what I am doing, so if there is ignorance it is not one. (I shall talk more about ignorance when I deal with the Sacrament of Penance). Thirdly, it must be **QUITE DELIBERATE**. Any sin which lacks one or more of these three conditions is **VENIAL**. It displeases God and, if unchecked, it can lead to mortal sin but it does not have the catastrophic effect of depriving us of grace - the life of the soul.

You will notice that I have not mentioned any particular **SPECIES** of sin. This is because **ANY** species of sin which fulfills all three conditions is **MORTAL**. One very common error in the old days was that people seemed to think that **SEXUAL** sin was almost the only mortal sin! Nowadays, one gets the uneasy impression that many people don’t think there is such a thing as sexual sin at all! The truth is, of course, as I have said - **ANY SIN** fulfilling all three conditions is mortal.

THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

The eleventh Article of the Creed is “THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY”. Do I need to remind you that we are dealing with mystery here? In other words something above and beyond reason which we would be unable to grasp without the gift of faith. St. Paul once addressed a number of highly intelligent Greeks in Athens, who listened to him with great attention until he mentioned the resurrection of the dead whereupon they burst out laughing and went home though a few said they would like to hear more. We have seen that each of us is composed of body and soul: either of these alone would not be wholly ME. Now it is I who do good and I who commit sin - all of me is responsible. All of me, therefore, deserves PRAISE and REWARD or CONDEMNATION and PUNISHMENT and all of me will receive them.

Death, as we have seen, is the separation of body and soul and is the consequence of sin. For the Redemption to be complete, therefore, the damage done by sin needs to be repaired so the body must be raised and re-united with the soul. This part of Revelation is clearly mentioned in the Scriptures. I will give just two examples. Writing to the Thessalonians St. Paul said (I Thess:4.14.) “We believe that Jesus died and rose again and that it will be the same for those who have died in Jesus.” and Our Lord Himself said (Matthew: 10.28) “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; fear him rather who can destroy BOTH BODY AND SOUL in hell”. What will the body be like? We do not know but, judging by Our Lord’s own body at the Transfiguration, it will be something simply breathtaking.

The twelfth and last Article of the Creed is “LIFE EVERLASTING.” In the very first chapter, if you remember, we worked out that the soul was immortal, it has no parts so there is no disintegration which is what death is. We are composed of both body and soul and, as we have just seen, the body is raised up so both body and soul will live for ever. When Christ comes again, we shall be raised up and then both body and soul will receive the reward or punishment that our lives deserve. Do you remember what I said about judgement? - God is goodness itself: His laws reflect His goodness: they are there for our good: only harm can come if, like the disobedient child, we put our hand in the fire. Having said that, if we attempt, however feebly and unsuccessfully, to follow Christ, we shall eventually achieve our reward and live with God for ever. The only kind of person who will not do so is the one who freely and deliberately chooses NOT to follow Christ and rejects all efforts to change him. We don’t get sent to hell. We send ourselves there.

What will heaven and hell be like? We do not know. St. Paul, talking of heaven, describes it as being beyond our wildest dreams. I personally find most attempts to describe heaven and hell highly unsatisfactory - HARPS on the one hand and FIRE on the other. I content myself with the thought that God is infinitely greater than what would satisfy all my deepest yearnings and I shall be with Him for ever if I go to heaven. Hell is the exact opposite and hardly bears thinking of, though from time to time we SHOULD do so as the fear of hell is a healthy deterrent to a life of sin. Having said that, the thought of heaven and all that is in store for us is a very much greater incentive to live a life of virtue and, since God wants all men to be saved, we may be sure that He will do everything He can short of forcing us against our will to ensure that we ARE saved, and thus share with Him EVERLASTING LIFE.

So now we come to the end of our summary of the Creed - the headlines of what we must believe. Those beliefs are not just a list of facts which I have to learn by heart - they demand a response - as a result of what I believe, I have to do something about it - live in a certain kind of way: be a certain kind of person. From now on, therefore, we shall be studying what our response must be so that we can start making it.