

Heaven as the fullness of communion with God was the theme of the Holy Father's catechesis at the General Audience of 21 July 1999. Heaven "is neither an abstraction nor a physical place in the clouds, but a living, personal relationship with the Holy Trinity. It is our meeting with the Father which takes place in the risen Christ through the communion of the Holy Spirit," the Pope said.

1. When the form of this world has passed away, those who have welcomed God into their lives and have sincerely opened themselves to his love, at least at the moment of death, will enjoy that fullness of communion with God which is the goal of human life.

As the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches, "this perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity this communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, the angels and all the blessed is called "heaven". Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfilment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness" (n.1024).

Today we will try to understand the biblical meaning of "heaven", in order to have a better understanding of the reality to which this expression refers.

2. In biblical language "heaven", when it is joined to the "earth", indicates part of the universe. Scripture says about creation: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gn 1:1).

Heaven is the transcendent dwelling-place of the living God

Metaphorically speaking, heaven is understood as the dwelling-place of God, who is thus distinguished from human beings (cf. Ps 104:2f.; 115:16; Is 66:1). He sees and judges from the heights of heaven (cf. Ps 113:4-9) and comes down when he is called upon (cf. Ps 18:9, 10; 144:5). However the biblical metaphor makes it clear that God does not identify himself with heaven, nor can he be contained in it (cf. 1 Kgs 8:27); and this is true, even though in some passages of the First Book of the Maccabees "Heaven" is simply one of God's names (1 Mc 3:18, 19, 50, 60; 4:24, 55).

The depiction of heaven as the transcendent dwelling-place of the living God is joined with that of the place to which believers, through grace, can also ascend, as we see in the Old Testament accounts of Enoch (cf. Gn 5:24) and Elijah (cf. 2 Kgs 2:11). Thus heaven becomes an image of life in God. In this sense Jesus speaks of a "reward in heaven" (Mt 5:12) and urges people to "lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (ibid., 6:20; cf. 19:21).

3. The New Testament amplifies the idea of heaven in relation to the mystery of Christ. To show that the Redeemer's sacrifice acquires perfect and definitive value, the Letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus "passed through the heavens" (Heb 4:14), and "entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself" (ibid., 9:24). Since believers are loved in a special way by the Father, they are raised with Christ and made citizens of heaven. It is worthwhile listening to what the Apostle Paul tells us about this in a very powerful text: "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:4-7). The fatherhood of God, who is rich in mercy, is experienced by creatures through the love of God's crucified and risen Son, who sits in heaven on the right hand of the Father as Lord.

4. After the course of our earthly life, participation in complete intimacy with the Father thus comes through our insertion into Christ's paschal mystery. St Paul emphasizes our meeting with Christ in heaven at the end of time with a vivid spatial image: "Then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thes 4:17-18).

Sacramental life is anticipation of heaven

In the context of Revelation, we know that the "heaven" or "happiness" in which we will find ourselves is neither an abstraction nor a physical place in the clouds, but a living, personal relationship with the Holy Trinity. It is our meeting with the Father which takes place in the risen Christ through the communion of the Holy Spirit.

It is always necessary to maintain a certain restraint in describing these "ultimate realities" since their depiction is always unsatisfactory. Today, personalist language is better suited to describing the state of happiness and peace we will enjoy in our definitive communion with God.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church sums up the Church's teaching on this truth: "By his death and Resurrection, Jesus Christ has 'opened' heaven to us. The life of the blessed consists in the full and perfect possession of the fruits of the redemption accomplished by Christ. He makes partners in his heavenly glorification those who have believed in him and remained faithful to his will. Heaven is the blessed community of all who are perfectly incorporated into Christ" (n. 1026).

5. This final state, however, can be anticipated in some way today in sacramental life, whose centre is the Eucharist, and in the gift of self through fraternal charity. If we are able to enjoy properly the good things that the Lord showers upon us every day, we will already have begun to experience that joy and peace which one day will be completely ours. We know that on this earth everything is subject to limits, but the thought of the "ultimate" realities helps us to live better the "penultimate" realities. We know that as we pass through this world we are called to seek "the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God" (Col 3:1), in order to be with him in the eschatological fulfilment, when the Spirit will fully reconcile with the Father "all things, whether on earth or in heaven" (Col 1:20).

Heaven is the state of being in which all are united in love with one another and with God, where those who, having attained salvation, are in glory with God and enjoy the beatific vision—knowledge of God as he is.

The bliss of heaven will consist in both the vision and love of God and the knowledge and love of all others in God. We will, therefore, be reunited with our family and friends as well as with the saints from past, and future, generations.

The Church teaches that we will experience perfect happiness in heaven. Yet some people, because of their lives on Earth, will experience greater happiness than others will. Just as both a large glass and a small glass can be filled to capacity but one will hold more than the other, so will some people have a greater capacity for happiness, but all will be completely happy.