

Part I - Motivations for Holiness

Chapter I

The Delight of Heaven: The Divine Marriage

St. Augustine was born of a womanizing father but a devout mother, and in his early years he took after his father. He moved in with his mistress at the age of sixteen, and lived with her for the next fourteen years. Meanwhile his mother, Monica, prayed for him without ceasing. At the age of 31 he had a conversion, and began to pray and do penance for his past life of sin in preparation for Baptism. Eighteen months after his Baptism his mother died, happy to see the answer to her prayers, and three years later Augustine was ordained a priest. Four years after that he became a bishop. He became one of the most prolific writers the Church has ever known. He wrote beautifully of his conversion, especially in this passage from his autobiography:

“Late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new... I rushed headlong after these things of beauty which you have made... They kept me far from you, those fair things which, were they not in you, would not exist at all... You have sent forth fragrance, and I have drawn in my breath, and I pant for you. I have tasted you, and I hunger and thirst for you. You have touched me and I have burned for your peace.”¹

Augustine tasted the illicit delights of this world and was perceptive enough to realize they didn't satisfy. After just a taste of heaven, experienced through prayer and fasting, he realized that all beauty, all joys of this world are just a whisper of the beauty and joy to be found in God, in this life and in the life to come. That is the first task of every Christian, of every person: to discover the unfathomable glory of being united with God, now and forever. But first we must find motivation in the goal God has given us, namely heaven.

The Basics

Our Blessed Lord refers to heaven using several different terms about 170 times in the gospels. He uses the terms heaven, Kingdom of heaven, Kingdom of God, life, and eternal life to describe the place of eternal reward. He often speaks of the Kingdom of heaven by comparing it to things we are familiar with on earth:

The Kingdom of God is like a buried treasure which a man found in a field. He hid it again, and rejoicing at his find went and sold all he had and bought that field. Or again, the Kingdom of heaven is like a merchant's search for fine pearls. When he found one really valuable pearl, he went back and put up for sale all that he had and bought it. (Mt 13:44-46)

Twice he speaks of the Kingdom as being like a wedding feast (Mt 22:1+, Mt 25:1+), as does the author of the book of Revelation (Rv 19:7+). Thus, Our Lord clearly speaks of the Kingdom of heaven as something very valuable, worth selling all you have to possess, as a feast celebrating a commitment of love, and as a rich reward for whatever sacrifice we make here on earth.

St. Paul speaks of heaven in glowing terms: "Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it so much as dawned on man what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9). It is beyond anything we can imagine.

Will everyone be at the same level in Heaven, or will some receive a greater reward than others? We find the answer in Church teaching:

[The souls of those who enter heaven] clearly behold the triune God as he is, yet one person more perfectly than another according to the difference of their merits.²

This is based on the words of Our Lord: "The Son of man... will reward each one according to his conduct," (Mt 16:27)³ and the words of St. Paul: "each shall receive his wages according to his labor." (1 Cor 3:8; see also 2 Cor 9:6)

Many of the saints wrote of the tremendous joy and happiness that awaits those who are worthy of Heaven: To paraphrase St. Augustine, what must be the amazing joy of those in heaven, seeing how much beauty, how many delights and what great blessings we enjoy on earth? Teresa of Ávila remarked "Our life lasts only a couple of hours. Our reward is boundless."⁴ St. Thérèse of Lisieux said, "I have formed such a high idea of heaven that, at times, I wonder what God will do at my death to surprise me. My hope is so great, it is such a subject of joy to me, not by feeling but by faith, that to satisfy me fully something will be necessary which is beyond all human conception."⁵ And, St. Catherine of Siena wrote, "The indescribable sweetness of this perfect union cannot be told by tongue, which is but a finite thing."

Were (the soul) to have but a foreglimpse of the height and beauty of God, she would not only desire death in order to see him now forever, as she here desires, but she would very gladly undergo a thousand singularly bitter deaths to see Him only for a moment; and having seen Him, she would ask to suffer just as many more that she might see Him for another moment.⁶

What is heaven like? Do we have any clues, more than just a place with many clouds, and gold streets? It is primarily a relationship. But, what sort of a relationship?

The Divine Marriage

St. Gregory the Great said heaven would be like a marriage: "The husband of every Christian soul is God; for she is joined to Him by faith."⁷ St. John of the Cross wrote along the same line:

One does not reach this garden of full transformation which is the joy, delight and glory of spiritual marriage, without first passing through the spiritual espousal and the loyal and mutual love of betrothed persons. For, after the soul has been for some time the betrothed of the Son of God in gentle and complete love, God calls her and places her in His flowering garden to consummate this most joyful state of marriage with Him... Yet in this life this union cannot be perfect, although it is beyond words and thought.⁸

(Thus, according to John, the "spiritual marriage" begins here, not just in the Kingdom.)

In 1572 the Lord spoke to St. Teresa of Ávila as follows: "...you will be my bride from today on. Until now you have not merited this; from now on, not only will you look after my honor as [that of] your Creator, King and God, but... as my true bride."⁹

Others, including Sts Margaret of Cortona, Catherine of Siena, Lawrence Justinian, John of God, and John Vianney all received wedding rings from the Lord.¹⁰ When St. Margaret Mary Alacoque suffered great temptations against her vocation to be a nun, Jesus appeared to her one day after Communion and showed her that he was "the most beautiful, the wealthiest, the most powerful, the most perfect and the most accomplished among all lovers."¹¹ He told her he had chosen her to be his spouse. After this she hesitated no more!

There are several Biblical passages which support this marriage-with-God theme. In Ezekiel 16 the Lord addresses his people, Jerusalem, as his unfaithful spouse with whom he later restores his covenant. In Isaiah 62 we read:

No more shall men call you "Forsaken,"
or your land "Desolate,"
But you shall be called "My Delight,"
and your land "Espoused."

For the LORD delights in you,
and makes your land his spouse.
As a young man marries a virgin
your Builder shall marry you;
And as a bridegroom rejoices in his bride
so shall your God rejoice in you.¹²

Hosea 1 and 2 contain God's complaint against Israel: "...the land commits great harlotry by forsaking the LORD." (Hos. 1:2); God leads her back to Him and says after her return, "And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD." (Hos. 2:19, 20).

The implications of this heavenly marriage are important. If we are to be in a kind of marriage with God who is so holy, we must be holy ourselves. A marriage in which one party loves at an intensely high level and the other loves feebly simply won't do. In order for us to be in this eternal marriage, we must somehow be energized or super-charged to love God at least at a quasi-reciprocal level. We must love God with *his* power, in other words, with *his* Spirit.

How much of the Holy Spirit do we need to be in this marriage? It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know it takes 100%, that is, we must be filled to capacity. The more the Holy Spirit dwells within us, the more we are ready for this marriage.

If you had the spirit of Mozart you could write great music. If you had the spirit of Shakespeare you could write great plays. But, if you have the Spirit of God, you can love at a quasi-divine level.

This need for profound holiness is fully supported elsewhere in Sacred Scripture. In Luke 10:27 we are told that the condition for entering eternal life is to "...love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind" and "love your neighbor as yourself."

There is other biblical evidence for the need to be holy. Jesus said in Mt. 5:48 "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." In Leviticus 19:2 we read, "...Be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy."¹³ (See also Lv. 11:45 and 20:7.) In addition, we read in Ephesians 1:4, "...he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless before him." (Also see Eph 5:27, 1 Pet. 1:15, 16, 2:5.)

Vatican II speaks of this call to holiness:

Thus it is evident to everyone, that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity; by this holiness as such a more human manner of living is promoted in this earthly society.¹⁴

The Lord appeared to St. Margaret Mary at one point and told her, "Learn that I am a Holy Master and One that teaches holiness. I am pure and cannot endure the slightest stain."¹⁵ Thus, it should be clear: to live in this heavenly marriage with God we must be *very* holy.

How foolish we would be to underestimate the holiness we must arrive at to be worthy of the Kingdom. Living in the state of grace is enough to be saved, that is, to be worthy of Purgatory. However, to be worthy of entering the Kingdom, we must surrender all. For those who do well but do not give their all in this life, Purgatory is their lot. And, as we shall see, Purgatory is not a pleasant prospect.

Hard But Sweet

Loving God at that level is no easy task. Nor is loving our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus told us it would be hard: "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to [eternal] destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to [eternal] life, and those who find it are few." (Mt. 7:13, 14). Elsewhere he said, "[Whoever] would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Mk 8:34). Clearly it will be a difficult path to come to this level

of love.

However, Jesus did promise he would sweeten the journey: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am meek and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy [or gentle], and my burden is light" (Mt. 11:28-30).

A Plan

If we were to die tomorrow and had to admit to the Lord, "I confess, I hadn't come to love you with all my heart, soul and mind," he would, we might speculate, be very understanding. But, if we died tomorrow and had to admit that we not only had not come to this level of love, but we had no *plan* as to how to get there, we should anticipate some great displeasure on his part. We *need* a plan. That plan is the subject of this book.

A Romantic View of Heaven

St. John of the Cross wrote of the beauty of the encounter with God:

Since the virtues of the bride are perfect she enjoys habitual peace in the visits of her Beloved, she sometimes has a sublime enjoyment of their sweetness and fragrance when her Beloved touches these virtues, just as a man enjoys the sweetness and beauty of flowers and lilies when they have blossomed, and he must handle them.

The soul feels that the Beloved is within her as in His own bed. She offers herself together with her virtues, which is the greatest service she can render Him. Thus, one of the most remarkable delights she receives in her interior communion with God comes from this gift of herself to her beloved.¹⁶

We should think often of the utter delight of heaven. Imagine being married to the most desirable member of the opposite sex you could ever conceive of.¹⁷ A chaste embrace with the God who created in His own image the beauties we so desire on earth, and who has called us to be his spouse, is an image of heaven which is a mere whisper of the delight and the glory of heaven. And by using this sort of healthy "fantasy" we can inspire ourselves to strive harder in prayer and other spiritual activities.

We might pray thus:

O God, I have always dreamed of a lover like You: beautiful to the core beyond telling, kind, charming, alluring, fascinating, unfathomable, and faithful. You are so warmly inviting, yet you graciously and firmly correct my selfishness. O that you might always call me to that intimate Eucharistic Communion union with you, body and soul even in my imperfect but sincere love, as a sign and promise of the ecstatic intimacy to which you call me in the eternal marriage of Your Kingdom; an intimacy which married couples on earth could never dream of.

St. John of the Cross provided this rather amazing insight into the humility of God in heaven: The tenderness and truth of love by which the immense Father favors and exalts this humble and loving soul reaches such a degree- O wonderful thing, worthy of all our aim and admiration! - That the Father Himself becomes subject to her for her exaltation, as though He were her servant and she his Lord. And He is as solicitous in favoring her as He would be if He were her slave and she his God. So profound is the humility and sweetness of God!¹⁸

No doubt for some this romantic approach to God might seem strange or even uncomfortable. Yet, it is fully in accord with Scriptures and the writing of the saints. Hosea 1 and 2, and Ezekiel 16 are examples of how

the Prophets, as Pope Benedict XVI wrote, "...described God's passion for His people, using boldly erotic images."¹⁹ The Song of Songs and St. John of the Cross' *Spiritual Canticle* are further expressions of this recurring theme of God as our passionate, intimate lover.

Ultimately, it is only union with this Beloved, that will fulfill us completely as persons, and an imaginary embrace of such a Lover is noble fantasy, a powerful sign of that intimate union. And, it is more real than any earthly fantasy could ever be. Such an image should move us to pray and worship our God, that we might be worthy of this eternal, joyful, peaceful divine marriage with this "Beauty so ancient and so new."

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The thought of heaven should be on our minds constantly. We should contemplate this joyful reality several times—even scores of times—daily, that we might be ever aware of our purpose on this earth: to become a worthy gift to live in that Kingdom of love forever.

1. St. Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, Book 10, Ch. 27. This quote is an adaptation from that found in the trans. by John K. Ryan, New York: Image Books, 1960, pp. 254, 255.

2. Council of Florence, Session 6, 6 July 1439, as found at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/councils/Florence.htm>.

3. Author's translation.

4. St. Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, E. Allison Peers trans., New York: Image Books, 1964, Chapter 2, n. 7, p. 43.

5. St. Therese to Mother Agnes, *Last Conversations*, @@@p. 29.

6. St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, tr. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1979, p. 450.

7. In *The Sunday Sermons of The Great Fathers*, Volume III, ed. M. F. Toal, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, p. 186.

8. St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, tr. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1979, p. 497.

9. St. Teresa of Ávila, *Spiritual Testimonies*, in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Ávila*, Volume I, trans. by Keiran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1976, p. 336.

10. Abbé Francis Trochu, *The Curé d'Ars: St. Jean-Marie Baptiste Vianney*, trans. by Dom Ernest Graf, Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1977, p. 545.

11. St. Margaret Mary, *Autobiography*, Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1986 p. 40.

12. Is. 62:4, 5; *New American Bible*, New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1991.

13. *New American Bible*.

14. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 40, from <http://www.ewtn.com/LIBRARY/councils/v2church.htm>.

15. St. Margaret Mary, *Autobiography*, p. 64.

16. St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, tr. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1979, pp. 474, 475.

17. This takes more imagination for men than for women, to be sure. However, the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches, "We ought therefore to recall that God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman: he is God." (CCC para. 239) We call Him by male names and pronouns because he has a male role in relationship to us (provider, pursuer, etc.). Thus the soul is always feminine in spiritual writing (as above). Men who have difficulty imagining this embrace should realize that both men and women are created in the image and

likeness of God. When a man sees the beauty of a woman, body and soul, he sees a reflection of the beauty of God.

It should be realized that such a fantasy focused on God could be taken to immoral extremes. However, if your thoughts were to become sexual, you should simply fast forward through that to a more sedate sharing of affection.

18. St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, tr. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1979, p. 517.

19. Pope Benedict XVI, encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, 2005, as found at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/ENCYC/b16deuscaritas> n. 9.