

## What Will We Do in Heaven? Newman on Holiness

Fr. Joseph Koterski, S.J.

What will we do in heaven? More of what we do now? Will it just be endlessly more of our current run of activities? Will we ever get bored? Will it be entirely different from what we are used to? Granted the unfathomable creativity of God, will the life of the saints be like an endless cruise, with an out-of-this world entertainment director? Cruises are nice, but at some point even the most inveterate cruise-afficionado wants to return to port and get back home.



As we look forward to the canonization of John Henry Cardinal Newman, we might well wonder just what he – and all the others who are in heaven – are doing. Coming to know the true answer to that question for sure, admittedly, will depend on whether we ourselves get there. But in the meantime, we do have a way to reflect on what Newman

thought that the saints in heaven would be up to.

The very first item in his collection of *Parochial Sermons* is one entitled “Holiness Necessary for Future Blessedness.”<sup>1</sup> In that sermon Newman neither forecloses on nor insists on the possibility that there will be a walking tour of the City of God or dancing at the wedding of the Lamb. Instead, he offers the following sage comment:

It would be presumption to attempt to determine the employments of that eternal life which good men are to pass in God’s presence, or to deny that the state which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor mind conceived, may comprise an infinite variety of pursuits and occupations. Still so far as we are distinctly told, that future life will be spent in God’s presence, in a sense which does not apply to our present life, so that it may be best

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<sup>1</sup> John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 1987), previously published in eight volumes (London and New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1891), Sermon 1, pp. 5-13.

described as an endless and uninterrupted worship of the Eternal Father, Son, and Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

A comment like this is very comforting, but it also makes us wonder. One can hardly imagine not enjoying a stroll when one finds oneself in a city with no need of the sun or moon to illumine it. Quoting the book of Revelation, Newman notes that the glory of God is going to give all the light anyone could ever need, and that “the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it.”<sup>3</sup> Further, we know that this will be the place of the wedding of the Lamb,<sup>4</sup> and it is simply impossible to imagine the glories of a wedding without dancing and a great feast!

But rather than follow my own hunches about the realities of heaven, it will be better for us to make a careful review of the main themes in Newman’s sermon. Its title (“Holiness Necessary for Future Blessedness”) comes from the line he quotes from the letter to the Hebrews: “Holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.”<sup>5</sup>

Newman takes a two-pronged approach: he explains (1) that without holiness no one will see God, and then, at greater length, (2) that even if someone of unholy life were allowed to enter heaven, that person would not be happy there. The idea of holiness that Newman mentions here comes directly from the Scriptures, and especially from the Sermon on the Mount: “to love, fear, and obey God, to be just, honest, meek, pure in heart, forgiving, heavenly minded, self-denying, humble, and resigned.”<sup>6</sup> Why would God require this sort of holiness, Newman asks. Since eternal life is “the gift of God,” it is something for which God can establish the conditions for our being able to enter upon that life, and God has made it clear again and again that this is what he wants of us.

It is in his reflection on the second point that Newman becomes expansive. What he says has direct bearing on the question we were asking at the start: What will we do in heaven? In this life, people may choose what pleases them, and it is understandable if we imagine that it will be the same in that other life, except that (we suppose) people there will be sure of getting what they want. Here in this life we are not always sure of that.

It is this misplaced expectation that Newman wants to correct. In his judgement we often do not appreciate the real extent and importance of the preparation that is necessary for the next world. He writes:

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<sup>2</sup> Sermon 1, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Revelation 21:23-24, quoted in Sermon 1 on p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> See Revelation 19:6-9 on the wedding supper of the Lamb.

<sup>5</sup> Hebrews, 12:14, quoted in Sermon 1, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Sermon 1, p. 5.

We think that we can reconcile ourselves to God when we will; as if nothing were required in the case of men in general, but some temporary attention, more than ordinary, to our religious duties – some strictness, during our last sickness, in the services of the Church, as men of business arrange their letters and papers on taking a journey or balancing an account.<sup>7</sup>

For Newman, even to put such a thought into words is to see the idea refuted. Heaven – Scripture shows us – is not the sort of place where one can simply go around and do as we like: “Here every man can do his own pleasure, but there he must do God’s pleasure.”<sup>8</sup> It will not be a place of working out some temporal project, great or small, or extending our sphere of influence, or of doing our business. Good as such things may be during earthly life, there “we will hear solely and entirely of God.”<sup>9</sup> Newman’s view is quite clear, but some people may start to wonder if heavenly life may get dull and boring.

In an image that is very memorable because of the way he develops it, Newman urges that being in heaven will be like being in church! There we will praise God, worship God, sing to God, thank God, give ourselves up to God, and ask God’s blessing. And so, just as it happens here and now, some will find it delightful but others will simply hate it!

The striking image that Newman uses here should strike a deep chord in us. For my own part, I truly do not want to be the kind of preacher or celebrant who gives his congregation reason to make their shopping lists or to speculate about dinner! But that comparison only goes so far, precisely because even now, during our liturgies on earth, the liturgy had better never be about me! It has to be about the Lord, who is infinitely interesting and intriguing without pause.

By saying that being in heaven will be like being in church, Newman is not saying that we will simply be sitting in a pew forever, to be interrupted only by occasionally standing up, kneeling down, or perhaps undertaking a procession down one aisle and up the next. The point of his comparison is not in what we will be doing but in how we will like it. And it is this insight from which he draws the practical conclusion (that is, the second part) from the line from Hebrews, that “without holiness, no man shall see God.”

When we try to fathom this point, the comparisons we use will invariably fall short, and yet there is some good that can come from them. Suppose that we find ourselves at an

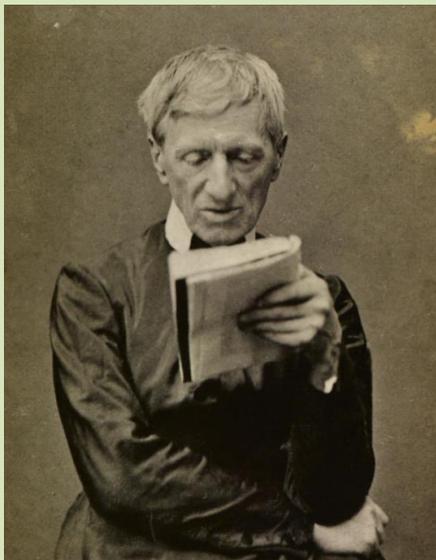
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<sup>7</sup> Sermon 1, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Sermon 1, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Sermon 1, p. 7.

extremely high-level discussion of some tricky point in logic. Those well prepared will find it fascinating, but the rest of us will do more than yawn! Newman's point here, of course, has nothing to do with *recherché* academics. We could equally well use a comparison from soccer (what Europe calls football): suppose that we found ourselves at an extremely high level of low-scoring World Cup play. Those well prepared will find it fascinating, while the rest of us will wish we were elsewhere.



Newman's image has little to do with even the most pious practices of church, and everything to do with holiness of life. Holiness means having a life that is truly centered upon God. To enjoy being in church means to take delight in God and so to love being in a place where this is the subject that we will hear about and the face that we will look upon. Unless we are the sort of people who find our pleasure in a life of holiness, we will be extremely unhappy there. Such a person, says Newman, "could not *bear* the face of the Living God; the Holy God would be no object of joy to him."<sup>10</sup>

Presumably the point of Newman's comparison is by now clear. He is not saying that we will be cooped up in a pew for eternity and somehow enjoy it. Quite to the contrary, we will enjoy God's presence in heaven if during our lives here on earth we have accepted the graces God is so eager to give us and if we have lived the sort of lives that God wants from us: true faith, good works, real repentance from sin, true delight in God himself, and true delight in what God has made. As Newman writes,

The more numerous are our acts of charity, self-denial, and forbearance, of course the more will our minds be schooled into a charitable, self-denying, and forbearing temper. The more frequent are our prayers, the more humble, patient, and religious are our daily deeds, this communion with God, these holy works will be the means of making our hearts holy, and of preparing us for the future presence of God.<sup>11</sup>

In human beings, outward acts create inward habits, and for Newman this is the way to impress on our hearts a heavenly character. A habit that is formed within us can be for some great good, but it is equally possible to form bad habits. Imagine the lot of someone who acted throughout his life out of a bad spirit. He would have a corrupt state of heart, full of self-love, self-conceit, self-reliance. Without repentance, reparation, and

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<sup>10</sup> Sermon 1, p. 8.

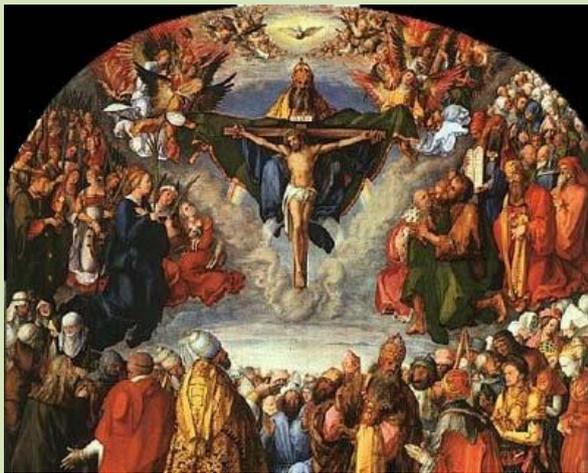
<sup>11</sup> Sermon 1, pp. 9-10.

cooperation with the grace God offers, an everlasting life that operates within those parameters would simply be endless misery.

Accordingly, the latter parts of Newman's sermon on holiness are given to the urgency of getting started and persevering on the quest for holiness. For him, there is no place for thinking in pollyannish fashion that somehow all will be well without any real effort. There is no use contenting ourselves with the notion that it will somehow everything work out, even if we never quite get around to doing anything about it.

In much the same way St. Ignatius of Loyola captures this point in his meditation on "Three Classes of Men."<sup>12</sup> It is a prayer exercise in which he asks us to contrast (1) a person who never takes the necessary means, (2) one who simply wants God to come around to his own point of view, and (3) one who is willing to be so devoted to God as to be ready either to follow or to let go of some preference (or some aversion), depending only on what God wants. Newman makes the same point in his words:

No one is able to prepare himself for heaven, that is, make himself holy, in a short time... Yet, alas! as there are persons who think to be saved by a few scanty performances, so there are others who suppose that they may be saved all at once by a sudden and easily acquired faith. Most men who are living in neglect of God, silence their consciences, when troublesome, with the promise of repenting some future day. How often are they thus led on til death surprises them!<sup>13</sup>



Newman is confident that God, by his grace, could bestow his forgiveness even on someone's deathbed. His concern here, however, is to note that it is hard to imagine how such a person would be ready to find joy in heaven. Which of our tastes or likings, he asks, can we change at a moment's notice? In his view, this does not happen even with superficial things, let alone with "the whole frame and character of our minds."

<sup>12</sup> *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. Louis J. Puhl, S.J. (Chicago IL: Loyola University Press, 1951), §149-§156.

<sup>13</sup> Sermon 1, pp. 10-11. For the role of conscience in the cultivation of holiness, see some of Newman's other sermons on the topic, especially: Sermon 2 in *Sermons on Subjects of the Day* ("Saintliness not Forfeited by the Penitent") and Sermon 5 in *Discourses to Mixed Congregations* ("Saintliness the Standard of Christian Principle").

Thus it is not that Newman in any way doubts what the grace of God can bring about, but rather that he wants us to meditate on the way in which God allows us our freedom for however many years there are in our lives. It is part of God's mercy to allow us free choice and to respect the character traits that we form in ourselves by the myriads of choices that we make, day in and day out. He writes:

We dare not, of course, set bounds to God's mercy and power in cases of repentance late in life... Yet surely, it is our duty ever to keep steady before us, and act upon, those general truths which His Holy Word has declared. His Holy Word in various way warns us, that, as no one will find happiness in heaven who is not holy, so no one can learn to be so, in a short time, and when he will.<sup>14</sup>

To obtain the gift of holiness, for Newman, is the work of a lifetime. It is a matter of constant cooperation with the graces the Holy Spirit provides us, and thus never a task beyond our strength.<sup>15</sup>

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Perhaps it will be helpful at this point to add something from Newman's Catholic period to what we can learn from this sermon, which dates from the early days of his service as a curate at St. Mary the Virgin in Oxford. In this regard there is much to learn from one of his most charming works, *The Dream of Gerontius*.

The story begins at the deathbed of an elderly man, one whose very name suggests his old age. In the opening scene we witness his family gathered around, joining in a litany that is led by a priest. By the second scene we already are in the presence of a soul that has been separated from its body but seems to have some trouble understanding just where it is:

I went to sleep....  
I had a dream; yes, someone softly said  
'He's gone;' and then a sight went round the room.  
And then I surely heard a priestly voice  
Cry *Subvenite*, and they knelt in prayer....  
Ah! Whence is this? What is this severance?  
This silence pours a solitariness

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<sup>14</sup> Sermon 1, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Sermon 1, p. 13.

Into the very essence of my soul.<sup>16</sup>

The soul of Gerontius here does not yet realize that death has come, even though there is no power to move hand or foot, or to see anything. There is awareness that this is not life as usual. Eventually the soul begins to realize that “someone” holds it “within his ample palm.” Then, with the good humor of Newman’s sacramental vision, Gerontius’s guardian angel breathes a sigh of relief:

My work is done,  
My task is o’er...  
My Father gave  
In charge to me  
This child of earth  
E’en from its birth  
To serve and save...,  
And saved is he.<sup>17</sup>

When the soul expresses a bit of disappointment at not being brought to the presence of God right after death, Newman has this good-humored angel urge the soul to practice the sort of patience that is a real part of holiness, a patience of trusting in the Lord’s time. The angel says:

Thou are not let [i.e., kept from going to the Lord], but with extremest speed  
Art hurrying to the Just and Holy Judge;  
For scarcely art thou disembodied yet.  
Divide a moment, as men measure time,  
Into its million-million-millionth part,  
Yet even less than that the interval  
Since thou didst leave the body, and the priest  
Cried *Subvenite*, and they fell to prayer;  
Nay, scarcely yet have they begun to pray.<sup>18</sup>

Thankfully, this good soul comes to trust his long-suffering guardian angel and does so just in time, for the fourth scene is a rollicking experience. Demons come and try to grab the souls being carried to God, as if they were claiming their own property. The staccato rhythm Newman concocts for the demons shows their futile but determined malfeasance:

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<sup>16</sup> *The Dream of Gerontius*, Scene 2, lines 1, 9-12, 16-18.

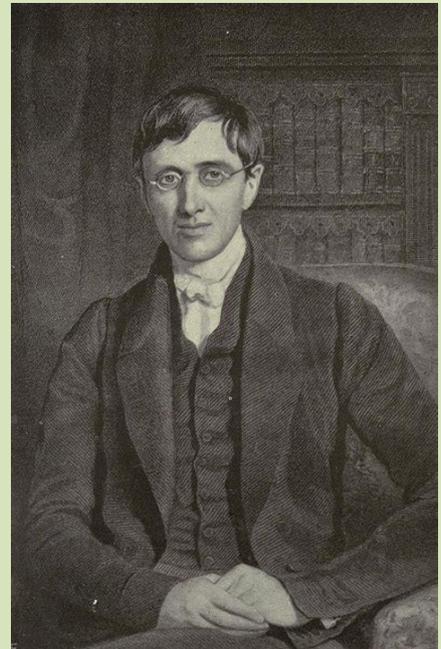
<sup>17</sup> *The Dream of Gerontius*, Scene 2, Angel’s speech, lines 1-2, 8-14.

<sup>18</sup> *The Dream of Gerontius*, Scene 3, third speech of the Angel.

What's a saint?  
 One whose breath  
 Doth the air taint  
 Before his death;  
 A bundle of bones  
 Which fools adore,  
 Ha ha!<sup>19</sup>

Once the angel has brought the soul through the gauntlet of the grasping demons, the angel has the leisure to speak with the soul further about the realities of the post-mortal life. Good as Gerontius was in life, there is still further preparation that is needed. The angel says:

How, even now, the consummated Saints  
 See God in heaven, I may not explicate;  
 Meanwhile, let it suffice to thee to possess  
 Such means of converse as are granted thee,  
 Though, till that Beatific Vision, thou art blind;  
 For e'en thy purgatory, which comes like fire,  
 Is fire without its life.<sup>20</sup>



And the soul answers in real faith:

His will be done!  
 I am nor worthy e'er to see again  
 The face of day, far less His countenance,  
 Who is the very sun.<sup>21</sup>

The fifth scene gives us twenty-four stanzas of salvation history, sung to the uplifting melodies of "Praise to the Holiest in the height". There are then several more stanzas of this hymn after the soul encounters the angel of the Sacred Stair that leads to the presence of God.

Finally, in the sixth scene the soul of Gerontius has a brief, ineffable experience of the personal judgment. There the soul fully realizes the truth of the matter, by grasping the difference between the degree of holiness that it had managed to attain during earthly life and degree of holiness that still remains to be acquired. With holy resignation (an

<sup>19</sup> *The Dream of Gerontius*, Scene 4, Second song of the Demons, lines 7-13.

<sup>20</sup> *The Dream of Gerontius*, Scene 4, the last seven lines of the Angel's fourth speech.

<sup>21</sup> *The Dream of Gerontius*, Scene 4, the answering speech by the Soul.

important part of the list of qualities that constitute holiness mentioned in the Sermon we discussed before), the soul of Gerontius addresses his angel:

Take me away, and in the lowest deep,<sup>4</sup>  
 There let me be,  
 And there in hope the lone night-watches keep,  
 Told out for me.  
 There, motionless and happy in my pain,  
 Lone, not forlorn –  
 There will I sing my sad perpetual strain,  
 Until the morn....  
 There will I sing my absent Lord and Love:  
 Take me away,  
 That sooner I may rise, and go above,  
 And see Him in the truth of everlasting day.<sup>22</sup>

The poem closes in the seventh scene with the angel gently lowering the soul into the lake of Purgatory and promising to wait for the precious soul that has been its charge, to wait patiently for the day the soul will be ready for the beatific vision.

The more we learn of Newman's life, the more we can appreciate that he had committed himself to the quest for holiness, and that at each stage of his life he took the steps necessary. When he preached on the topic and used his creative imagination to portray it for the rest of us, there is a special authenticity. May God help us to do the same.

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 Via Aurelia 257, 00165 Rome  
[newman.roma@newman-friends.org](mailto:newman.roma@newman-friends.org)  
[www.newmanfriendsinternational.org](http://www.newmanfriendsinternational.org)

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<sup>22</sup> *The Dream of Gerontius*, Scene 2. Speech of the Soul.