



What Catholics Believe

Section 9:

The Resurrection of the Body



To Luke E. Hart, exemplary evangelizer and Supreme Knight from 1953-64, the Knights of Columbus dedicates this Series with affection and gratitude.

*The Knights of Columbus presents
The Luke E. Hart Series
Basic Elements of the Catholic Faith*

THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

PART ONE • SECTION NINE OF
CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY

*What does a Catholic believe?
How does a Catholic worship?
How does a Catholic live?*

Based on the
Catechism of the Catholic Church

by
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A WORD ABOUT THIS SERIES

This booklet is one of a series of 30 that offer a colloquial expression of major elements of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Pope John Paul II, under whose authority the *Catechism* was first released in 1992, urged such versions so that each people and each culture can appropriate its content as its own.

The booklets are not a substitute for the *Catechism*, but are offered only to make its contents more accessible. The series is at times poetic, colloquial, playful, and imaginative; at all times it strives to be faithful to the Faith.

The Catholic Information Service recommends reading at least one Hart series booklet each month to gain a deeper, more mature understanding of the Faith.

SECTION 9: THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

1. *The importance of death*

Nothing brings home to us the importance and value of human life more sharply than death. We seldom appreciate life until we realize how fragile it is, when friends and family are taken away from us by death.

“. . .[D]eath lends urgency to our lives: remembering our mortality helps us realize that we have only a limited time in which to bring our lives to fulfillment” (CCC 1007)*. The Psalmist prays: “Teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12). If you knew that you had only one year to live – or only one day – wouldn’t you live differently? Then why not live like that right now? Live as if this day were your last – because it may be, and one day certainly will be!

Samuel Johnson said, “I know of no thought that so wonderfully clarifies a man’s mind as the thought that he will be

*CCC= *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

hanged tomorrow morning.” When we think of our (certain!) forthcoming death, trivia no longer seem important, and truly important things no longer seem trivial. Death clarifies our perspective, sharpens our sight, and brings our whole life to a point, like the single summit of a many-sided mountain. Death teaches us all the truth of Jesus’ words: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and anxious about many things. But only one thing is needful” (Luke 10:41).

That “one thing” is God, and – for us – our relationship to God. Only God is eternal, and only our relationship to God is eternal. Only God is necessary in his own being, and only our relationship to God is absolutely necessary for *our* being. Of everything else it is true to say, “this too shall pass.” God alone remains.

2. What does the Church know about death?

I, the unseen author of this booklet, am writing as a disciple of Christ and his Church rather than in my own name. I do not know any specific facts about you, the individual who is reading these words right now. I do not know your present life, whether you are believer or unbeliever, saint or sinner, old or young. I do not know your past, whether your life has been full of pains or full of joys. I do not know your future, what the rest of your life in this world will be like, and whether you will spend eternity in Heaven or in Hell. Only one concrete fact do I know with certainty about you: you will die.

The Church knows that about you too; but the Church also knows the meaning of death. The Church comes to you as a newspaper reporter with a startling piece of Good News about death and life after death from the Man who claimed to be God and proved it by rising from death. The skeptic asks, “What do you know about life after death anyway? Have you ever been there?” And the Catholic answer is: “No, but I know Someone

who has, and I believe him.” We Catholics know *him* – that is the essential thing we know, and the essential reason to be a Catholic – and therefore we know the meaning of death, through *his* witnesses, *his* apostles and their successors, the Church.

3. *Why do we die?*

The first part of the Church’s wisdom about death concerns its *origin*. Why do we die? How did death come into the world?

This is the “bad news” from the past, that comes before the Gospel, which is the “good news” about the future, about our conquest of death through Christ.

The good news is that Christ is the Savior from both sin and death, the Savior of both soul and body. But just as the “good news” of salvation from sin presupposes the “bad news” of sin, so the “good news” of salvation from death presupposes the “bad news” of death.

Why do we die? The Church tells us three reasons. The first is natural, the second unnatural, and the third supernatural.

- 1) “In a sense, bodily death is natural...” (CCC 1006), for we have animal bodies. We are not angels, or pure spirits. We are “rational *animals*.”
- 2) “[B]ut for faith it [death] is in fact ‘the wages of sin’”⁵⁶⁸ (CCC 1006), and thus unnatural. “God did not make death, and he does not delight in the death of the living” (Wisdom 1:13). God originally made man free from death, but when he tested man and man failed the test, man fell into death (Genesis 3:34, 19). The cause of death is sin (Romans 6:23).

This is not as unbelievable as it appears to be to many people today. It is confirmed by reason, by ancient myths, and by modern psychology. By reason, for sin is separation from God, and God is the source of all life. By the ancient myths, for they

teach the same point: that man was once innocent and immortal but fell from this paradise. By modern psychology, for the “psychosomatic unity” means that body and soul are not two independent beings but two interdependent dimensions of one being: you or me. Thus spiritual death in the soul (that is, sin) is naturally connected to physical death in the body.

3) Finally, death is now a supernatural event, a highway to Heaven. For Christ has given death this new meaning. “For those who die in Christ’s grace it is a participation in the death of the Lord, so that they can also share his Resurrection.”⁵⁶⁹ (CCC 1006). Using the old choral anthem, “Open Our Eyes,” a Christian can even sing: “Thou hast made death glorious and triumphant, for through its portals we enter into the presence of the living God.”

4. *Is death good or evil?*

It is both. Just as God made the worst *spiritual* evil – the sin of man murdering God – into the best thing that ever happened to us in this world, the event that saved man from sin, so that we celebrate this event as “Good Friday,” so God also made the worst physical evil – the loss of all physical goods in death – into the best thing that ever happens to us in this life: the door to eternal life, through Christ’s bodily resurrection, which is also ours if we are incorporated into that Body by faith and baptism.

Death is thus both very bad and very good (if we are in Christ). It is very bad because what is lost is very precious: life, the body, the whole world to the individual who dies. Christ wept at his friend Lazarus’ grave, and so should we if we love life as he did. But death is also very good if we die in Christ, because what is gained is infinitely more than what is lost. “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain,” said Saint Paul (Philippians 1:21). For if we live in Christ, death means only more of Christ, and more of life. This body dies, like a precious little seed, but a

greater body rises, like a greater and glorious plant (see John 12:24 and 1 Corinthians 15:35-53).

5. *How does Christ transform death?*

“*Death is transformed by Christ...* The obedience of Jesus has transformed the curse of death into a blessing”⁵⁷⁵ (CCC 1009).

Death, too, is “Christocentric.” Death’s deepest meaning is revealed only in Christ’s death and resurrection. As Pascal says, “Apart from Jesus Christ we cannot know the meaning of our life or of our death, of God or of ourselves” – the four greatest questions we can ask (*Pensees* 417).

“Jesus links faith in the resurrection to his own person: ‘I am the resurrection and the life’”⁵⁴⁴ (CCC 994). He is not just the giver of the Resurrection, he *is* the Resurrection. Our resurrection is not just *caused* by him, it is found *in* him. We rise because we are incorporated into Christ’s Body.

“God revealed the resurrection of the dead to his people progressively” (CCC 992). The Old Testament is full of hope that God will do some great, mysterious deed of resurrection after death; but only the later prophets clearly announce it. God trained his chosen people first to love him for his own sake (“I am the Lord your God...be holy, for I am holy” – Leviticus 11:44), not just for his gifts. Only after that lesson was learned did he reveal his great gift of the Resurrection.

This is now much more than a “hope,” in the weak, worldly sense of a *wish*. It is part of our “hope,” in the strong, Biblical sense of a *guarantee* from God, who always keeps his promises. The Church’s funeral service calls it “the *sure and certain* hope of the Resurrection.” For it is God’s promise that “just as Christ is truly risen from the dead and lives forever, so after death the righteous will live forever with the risen Christ...”⁵³⁴ (John 6:39-40; CCC 987).

6. *The Christian attitude toward death*

Since death is natural, unnatural, and supernatural (see paragraph 3), we should have three corresponding attitudes toward it.

Since it is natural, we honestly confront it and accept it as a fact of our being, instead of avoiding it by endless diversions of our attention, or by living in denial, pretending it is not there.

Since it is also unnatural, the inescapable punishment for sin, we hate it and fight it as our enemy, “the last enemy” (1 Corinthians 15:26).

Finally, since it is also supernatural, transformed by Christ’s Resurrection, we welcome it. For if we are in Christ, death comes to us as God’s golden chariot sent to fetch his Cinderella bride from the cinders of this dying world to his golden castle to live with him in eternal ecstasy.

The element that pervades all three of these attitudes is *readiness*. “The Church encourages us to prepare ourselves for the knowledge of our death. In the litany of the saints, for instance, she has us pray: ‘From a sudden and unforeseen death, deliver us, O Lord;’⁵⁸⁸ to ask the Mother of God to intercede for us ‘at the hour of our death’ in the *Hail Mary*; and to entrust ourselves to Saint Joseph, the patron of a happy death” (CCC 1014).

“Every action of yours, every thought, should be those of one who expects to die before the day is out. Death would have no great terrors for you if you had a quiet conscience.... Then why not keep clear of sin instead of running away from death? If you aren’t fit to face death today, it’s very unlikely you will be tomorrow...”⁵⁸⁹ (*The Imitation of Christ*, I, 23, 1; CCC 1014).

7. *What happens at death?*

We naturally fear death because we fear the unknown, and death appears to us as the great unknown, an immense darkness.

The Church gives us a light from Christ in this darkness, so that we can truly pray, with David in the 23rd Psalm, “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.”

What happens at death is not *extinction*. Souls cannot be destroyed as bodies can.

What happens at death is *not reincarnation* into another earthly body and another earthly life. “It is appointed for men to die *once* and after that comes judgment” (Hebrews 9:27).

What happens at death is *not a change into an angel*. God created angels, men, and animals to be different, not to be confused. Angels have no mortal bodies, animals have no immortal spirit; man has both.

What happens at death is *not a change into a ghost*, a pale copy of what we were in life. God has something more substantial, not less, in store for us. (By the way, though the Church denies reincarnation, she does not deny the existence of ghosts.)

What happens at death is the “*Particular Judgment*.” God infallibly knows and judges each soul as either 1) able to enter Heaven immediately, or 2) needing to be purified in Purgatory first, and then able to enter Heaven, or 3) set forever (since our life-time is over) in unrepented sin and capable only of Hell.

Then, at the “*General Judgment*” at the end of time, there is the “*General Resurrection*” of the body, which will share in the soul’s eternal destiny.

The answer to “What happens at death?” depends on three things.

- 1) It depends on us: on our free choice for or against God, and on our degree of holiness. There are two roads: to life and death (Psalm 1; Wisdom 3:1-8), and God gave us the incredible and fearful dignity of deciding our own eternal destiny.

- 2) But it does not depend wholly on us, because it depends on eternal justice and truth, which we cannot change. Even God cannot change this, because it is his own nature. Truth is eternal and unavoidable. We can hide from it only temporarily, and even then we can only hide God from our sight, not ourselves from him – like a baby playing peek-a-boo.
- 3) It also depends on God’s grace and mercy. No one can buy Heaven, or force God’s hand. All who are saved, are saved by God’s free choice to be merciful. We are saved by mercy, not by justice. Hell’s citizens stand on justice, and get it. Heaven’s citizens stand under The Mercy.

8. *The meaning of resurrection*

We can discover the fact that our souls are immortal by the proper use of our natural reason, for souls are immortal by their own nature: they are not material or biological. But only divine revelation can inform us of the resurrection of the body, for it takes a supernatural act of God to resurrect bodies.

“The term ‘flesh’ refers to man in his state of weakness and mortality.⁵³⁶ The ‘resurrection of the flesh’... means not only that the immortal soul will live on after death but that even our ‘mortal body’ will come to life again”⁵³⁷ (CCC 990).

What does this mean? “*What is ‘rising’?* In death, the separation of the soul from the body, the human body decays and the soul goes to meet God [in the “Particular Judgment”], while awaiting its reunion with its glorified body [in the “General Judgment”]. God, in his almighty power, will definitively grant incorruptible life to our bodies by reuniting them with our souls, through the power of Jesus’ Resurrection” (CCC 997).

Our resurrection is dependent on Christ; we are resurrected only in him. His Body is resurrected, and we are put into his

Body. This is done by faith and baptism. For the Church is his Body, and the “ark of salvation.”

9. *Resurrection is more than immortality*

The significance of Christ’s resurrection was not merely that it was visible proof of life after death. The immortality of the soul was always true and always knowable by human reason. But Christ’s resurrection brought a new reality into the universe: a new kind of body, a human body that was as immortal as the soul.

The immortality of the soul is not an idea that is unique to Christianity. Many religions teach it. But the resurrection of the body, foretold by the Jewish prophets, came true only in Christ.

Resurrection with Christ is a far greater hope than mere immortality. Immortality is not even necessarily a good thing. If science should ever discover how to make our present bodies immortal by genetic engineering, this would not give us Heaven on earth, but Hell on earth. We would be like eggs that never hatched. We know that smell.

A suicide does not want immortality. He wants to die, but cannot. He wants to kill his soul, but cannot. He is eternally frustrated. Immortality can be Hell. (“*Can* be” – suicides don’t necessarily all go to Hell, for many have mixed motives, confused minds and hearts, and not the full knowledge and full consent necessary for a mortal sin. The partly sane are only partly responsible for their sins.)

10. *Is the resurrection irrational?*

The Christians at Corinth, to whom Saint Paul wrote two epistles in the New Testament, apparently thought Christ’s resurrection (and their own) could not be literally real, not a resurrection of the *body*, but (as many Modernist theologians today teach) a “resurrection of faith,” – something in the

disciples' hearts and lives rather than a real resurrection of Christ's body; a "resurrection of Easter faith" without a real Easter! The Corinthians thought the idea of a literal resurrection crude, naive, and irrational.

For Saint Paul's reply, read the First Chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthians, especially vs. 12-19.

"From the beginning, Christian faith in the resurrection has met with incomprehension and opposition....⁵⁵⁰ It is very commonly accepted that the life of the human person continues in a spiritual fashion after death. But how can we believe that this body, so clearly mortal, could rise to everlasting life?" (CCC 996).

The answer is: Because "with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). The God who created the whole universe out of nothing can surely perform the lesser miracle of making an immortal body out of a mortal one.

The question should rather be: How could we *not* believe it, since it is Christ who, along with his apostles, and their successors in the great chain of witnesses to the Resurrection that is the Church, tells us. Resurrection is not a philosophical idea accepted on the very fallible authority of human reason; it is a reality accepted on the infallible authority of divine revelation.

11. *Who will rise?*

"*Who will rise?* All the dead will rise, 'those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment'"⁵⁵² (John 5:29; Daniel 12:2; CCC 998).

12. *When will they rise?*

"[A]t the last day,' 'at the end of the world.'⁵⁵⁷ ... 'For the Lord himself will descend from heaven, with a cry of command,

God. And the dead in Christ will rise first”⁵⁵⁸ (1 Thessalonians 4:10; CCC 1001).

13. *How will they rise?*

“Christ is raised with his own body...but he did not return to an earthly life. So, in him, ‘all of them will rise again with their own bodies which they now bear,’ but Christ ‘will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body...’⁵⁵⁴ (CCC 999).

We do not know how God will do this – whether he will use the matter of our old, dead bodies or whether he will make new matter, a new kind of matter, for our new bodies. But we know that “we will be like him” (1 John 3:2).

“This ‘how’ exceeds our imagination and understanding” (CCC 1000). It should not, however, exceed our understanding that God’s deeds should exceed our understanding. Wonder and amazement (*thaumadzein*) is the typical mark of his presence throughout the Scriptural narrative.

14. *What do we know about our resurrection bodies?*

The only real data for what we know about our own future resurrection bodies comes from the Gospel accounts of Christ’s resurrection body. It was recognizable as Christ; it had a continuity with his former body; it was him and not another. And yet it was different – so different that at first his own disciples did not recognize him – and then they did (Luke 24:13-32; John 20:11-16; 21:1-13). It could walk through walls (John 20:19) and ascend to Heaven (Acts 1:9-11). Yet it was a body, not a ghost; it could eat, and be touched (Luke 24:36-43; John 20:19-29; Matthew 28:9).

15. *Why will we rise?*

Because God loves us, and loves life. He who has commanded us, through his prophet Moses, to “choose life”

(Deuteronomy 30:19) practices what he preaches. He who *is* life itself, eternal life, chose to create many forms of temporal life, culminating in man; and when man chose death God chose to restore man to full life, body and soul. “The wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

16. *The importance of the body in Christianity*

Christ’s resurrection bestows new dignity on our bodies by revealing to us a new, unexpected and glorious eternal destiny for them. C. S. Lewis says, “These small and perishable bodies we now have were given to us as ponies are given to schoolboys. We must learn to manage: not that we may some day be free of horses altogether, but that some day we may ride bareback, confident and rejoicing, those greater mounts, those winged, shining and world-shaking horses which perhaps even now expect us with impatience, pawing and snorting in the King’s stables” (*Miracles*). “In expectation of that day, the believer’s body and soul already participate in the dignity of belonging to Christ” (CCC 1004).

In most religions (e.g., Hinduism), only spirit is *immortal*. In some (e.g., Gnosticism), only spirit is *good*. In some (e.g., Buddhism), only spirit is *real*. But for Christians, the body is real, good, and immortal. No religion exalts matter and the body as Christianity does.

- 1) God created it, and declared it “good” (Genesis 1).
- 2) God united man’s body with his immortal soul to make one substance, one being.
- 3) And therefore he made the body immortal like the soul, through resurrection.
- 4) He uses matter to make new eternal souls, in sexual intercourse.

- 5) He incarnated himself into matter and a human body.
- 6) And he kept his human body forever. Ever since Christ took his human nature, body and soul, to Heaven in the Ascension, God has a body forever. Christ did not “un-incarnate” when he ascended.
- 7) He now uses matter to save souls in Baptism and the Eucharist.

“‘The flesh is the hinge of salvation’ (Tertullian, *De res.* 8, 2: PL 2, 852). We believe in God who is creator of the flesh; we believe in the Word made flesh in order to redeem the flesh; we believe in the resurrection of the flesh, the fulfillment of both the creation and the redemption of the flesh” (CCC 1015).

Almost all other religions are religions of spirit only. They identify goodness only with good *intentions* and good *will*. But Christianity does not separate spirit as holy from matter as unholy; matter is holy too. God did not confine religion to spirituality or inwardness only. He created bodies as well as spirits; he commanded and forbade certain external actions as well as certain inner intentions; and he redeemed us from sin and death by assuming a human body, shedding his blood, and rising bodily from death.

Other religions seek “spirituality.” But Christianity seeks *holiness*. To be a *spirit* is not necessarily to be *good*; the most evil being that exists, the Devil, is a pure spirit, a fallen angel. Sin cannot be blamed on matter or the body, which God made and will remake, but on our own bad will and choices. Our sins will be destroyed eternally, but not our bodies.

The practical moral consequences of this doctrine of the resurrection as the body’s destiny are radical, especially to contemporary culture. “This dignity entails the demand that he should treat with respect his own body, but also the body of every other person...” (CCC 1004). “Do you not know that your bodies

are the members of Christ?... Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:15, 20).

The origin of modern hedonism and materialism (especially the “sexual revolution”) is *not* the discovery of the goodness or greatness of the body, but the denial of it, by the Gnostic separation of body from spirit, by the confinement of religion and morality to subjective intention (the idea that if it’s motivated by love, it’s OK). The “materialism” of the playboy really stems from the denial of the sacredness of matter and the body, which is then used as a mere tool, a means to the end of pleasure and excitement. His end is subjectively good feelings in the soul, not the objective good of the body.

Notes from the Catechism in Order of Their Appearance in Quotations Used in this Section

⁵⁶⁸ *Rom* 6:23; cf. *Gen* 2:17.

⁵⁶⁹ Cf. *Rom* 6:3-9; *Phil* 3:10-11.

⁵⁷⁵ Cf. *Rom* 5:19-21.

⁵⁴⁴ *Jn* 11:25.

⁵³⁴ Cf. *Jn* 6:39-40.

⁵⁸⁸ *Roman Missal*, Litany of the Saints.

⁵⁸⁹ *The Imitation of Christ*, 1, 23, 1.

⁵³⁶ Cf. *Gen* 6:3; *Ps* 56:5; *Is* 40:6.

⁵³⁷ *Rom* 8:11.

⁵⁵⁰ Cf. *Acts* 17:32; *1 Cor* 15:12-13.

⁵⁵² *Jn* 5:29; cf. *Dan* 12:2.

⁵⁵⁷ *Jn* 6:39-40, 44, 54; 11:24; *LG* 48 § 3.

⁵⁵⁸ *1 Thes* 4:16.

⁵⁵⁴ Lateran Council IV (1215): DS 801; *Phil* 3:21; *1 Cor* 15:44.

“Faith is a gift of God which enables us to know and love Him. Faith is a way of knowing, just as reason is. But living in faith is not possible unless there is action on our part. Through the help of the Holy Spirit, we are able to make a decision to respond to divine Revelation, and to follow through in living out our response.”

United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, 38.

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Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* 34
Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and Mission
of the Lay Faithful in the Church and the World

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