

**HOW WE KNOW GOD AFTER DEATH:
RESPONDING TO THE UNIVERSAL CALL TO HOLINESS**
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God created us to share in his own divine life here on earth and in heaven. When we die, we do not become divine in Heaven, that is, we do not lose our personal distinction from God or cease to be human by nature - we have a sharing in the divine life as finite humans, therefore, our knowledge is finite, for only God is omniscient. Also, God is finitely understandable to the human person - the soul in heaven does not behold all that God does and can do.



This is not to say that our spirit was not made for the infinite, for the insatiability of finite things shows that we were made for an infinite good and the only infinite Good is God. Only in union with God do we attain that Good, the essential beatitude of Heaven. Thus, how we know God after death consists in this beatitude which is marked by how we know God here on earth. Knowing God on earth has implications for eternity based on the responsibility of living a holy life, of daily making choices of love; simply put, loving as Christ loves. We know by faith that the blessed in heaven, those who loved as Christ loves, actually behold God's essence. Therefore, to explain how we know God after death, we must first establish how we know God on earth in light of its implications for how we live our lives here on earth by living the beatitudes, so that we can describe how we know God after death in light of the beatific vision.

God gave us our reason so that we could use it to come to know Him, for only the intellect can behold God. Because of original sin, our reason, however, became imperfect and left us with the need of the help of God to heal, perfect, and elevate our reason. God provides us with this help through the gift of faith, which heals our reason of the effects of sin, perfects it so that we can know more clearly and truly, and elevates it so that we can contemplate the supernatural mysteries of faith. Hence, we need faith and reason to know God. Every man has a natural desire to know the cause of any effect that he sees. The human person, thus, has a natural desire to know God as First Cause, to know the ultimate purpose of everything in the world and in our lives. The human person can fulfill this desire on earth by contemplating God's effects in the world, but this desire remains imperfect. As our reason needs to be elevated to come to know God, our desire to know God as First Cause also needs to be elevated and perfected. This occurs when God provides the Revelation and the grace necessary to formulate an unconditional and perfect desire that leads us to Him through His grace. God exceeds every kind of knowledge. However, even if God exceeds the power of any mind to fully know Him, God is nonetheless supremely knowable because He is supremely actual¹, that is, fully real, existent. However, we cannot come to know God with the bodily senses and the imagination, for these cannot apprehend an image of God in His essence. God is seen by the intellect and using our intellect means using our highest function, which means ultimate beatitude. Thus, if our intellect could never see God, it would never attain beatitude and this is opposed to faith and reason. "Hence it must be absolutely granted that the blessed see the essence of God."²

Beatific vision is the essential reward of the blessed in heaven. The blessed are those who loved heroically here on earth and faithfully lived their path of holiness in their daily living of the beatitudes. "The Beatitudes reveal the goal of human existence, the ultimate end of human acts: God calls us to his own beatitude. This vocation is addressed to each individual personally, but also to the Church as a whole, the new people made up of those who have accepted the promise and live from it in faith."³ Every person is called to live the beatitude of God. If we were made in the image of God⁴ and since the beatitudes "depict the countenance of Jesus Christ and portray his charity,"⁵ then they surely will illuminate the actions and attitudes which are characteristic of the Christian life. In order to authentically live this Christian life, God continually grants us supernatural and actual grace to respond, since by our own fallen human nature, we will not have the strength to respond and we may even miss the opportunities we are given by God to enfold the graces He provides. This is why we must be pure of heart: to be attentive to the graces from God, to purify ourselves from everything that separates us from loving God above all things, and because the Lord promises that the

pure of heart shall see God⁶. As Saint Irenaeus understood, "It is true, because of the greatness and inexpressible glory of God, that "man shall not see me and live," for the Father cannot be grasped. But because of God's love and goodness toward us, and because he can do all things, he goes so far as to grant those who love him the privilege of seeing him.... For 'what is impossible for men is possible for God'."⁷ Furthermore, the blessed understood the deification of their human nature, that is, to respond to the knowledge of being created in the image of God. As Saint Maximus the Confessor wrote:

"A sure warrant for looking forward with hope to deification of human nature is provided by the incarnation of God, which makes man god to the same degree as God himself became man.... Let us become the image of the one whole God, bearing nothing earthly in ourselves, so that we may consort with God and become gods, receiving from God our existence as gods. For it is clear that He who became man without sin (cf. Heb. 4:15) will divinize human nature without changing it into the divine nature, and will raise it up for his own sake to the same degree as He lowered himself for man's sake. This is what Saint Paul teaches mystically when he says, '...that in the ages to come he might display the overflowing richness of His grace' (Eph. 2:7)."⁸

God became flesh and by the free gift of His grace, we are continually given the opportunity to share in His own life. In His humility, God lowers himself, for there is no other direction He can move. In lowering Himself, He elevates us as beloved children of God. "Beatitude makes us partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life. With beatitude, man enters into the glory of Christ and into the joy of the Trinitarian life."⁹ Thus, we have seen that the object of our beatitude is God and that beatitude lies in how we unite ourselves with God. We do not unite ourselves to God through our senses; it has to be through our intellect and our will. Our union with God will be in knowing God perfectly and loving Him perfectly. The way, then, that we "see" God is through a "divine illumination", not a created image of God since God's essence is his existence, and a created image is too far below God Himself. Furthermore, since God is not a body, we do not see His essence with our bodily organs, for our material senses, like our eyes, cannot be raised to see the immaterial because they are material. Therefore, we see God directly with our minds because our minds transcend the material and can be raised by grace beyond what it is naturally so that the mind can "see" God's essence in the beatific vision. This illumination of the intellect, "divine illumination" is a created grace which perfects and strengthens our natural intellect to allow us to grasp the form of God. The "light" or "glory of God" is the intelligible form that this divine illumination creates within our minds. This requires faith which illuminates and strengthens reason. Beatific vision is important because it bestows a greater intellectual capability upon us to see God and what we know from the beatific vision is enough to satisfy our natural desire for knowledge. What is enough is to see the face of God. As Archbishop of Munich and Freising, Joseph Ratzinger explained that "God totally permeates the whole man with his plenitude and his utter openness. God is "all in all," and thus the human person enters upon his boundless fulfillment."¹⁰

Pope Benedict XII gives another dimension of the beatific vision, "The souls of the just see the divine essence by an intuitive vision and face to face, so that the divine essence is known immediately, showing itself plainly, clearly and openly, and not immediately through any creature."¹¹ "Moreover, the souls of the saints clearly behold God, one and triune, as He is."¹² From this definition, we can distinguish beatific vision from the knowledge of God attained here on earth: beatific vision is called an intuitive vision for it is the intellect, the highest use of our faculties, which beholds the essence of God in Heaven. For there to be perfect happiness, you need perfect knowledge of God and a perfect love that would follow from that perfect knowledge. This perfect knowledge of God is attained if that knowledge is not being drawn from creatures and is not being mediated by a created finite concept in a creature's mind. No created mind can imagine what it means to see God face to face. It is infinitely greater than we have seen or heard. As the theologian Heinrich Lennerz wrote: "The blessed see the infinite divine perfection, which is of itself knowable in an infinite way, after the manner of the infinite, but in a finite way."¹³ Furthermore, to know God perfectly, to see God face to face is proper only to God. It is proper only to God to be able to know God as He is. Every creature is disproportionate to God in the sense that the difference between God and the highest creature is infinitely greater than the difference between the highest creature and the lowest creature. Despite the immense difference, God extends to the souls of the just, that is, those who are blessed - those who responded to the universal call to holiness, those who loved the Lord with all their heart and with all their

soul - being able to see him face to face in eternal life. Beatific vision not only transcends the barrier of the material limitation of our eyes to contemplate but also our minds to comprehend as God does.

Furthermore, of those who see the essence of God, some see God more perfectly than others. The intellect which has more of the light of glory will see God the more perfectly. According to Saint Thomas, he who has more charity will have a fuller participation of the light of glory. Thus, those who had greater charity on earth will see God the more perfectly and will be the more beatified. Charity itself opens the eye of understanding, for more charity means that there is more desire, which means more willingness to understand. Through God's revelation, we have a higher access in knowledge to God - knowledge of faith. Love that follows on our knowledge of God by faith is supernatural love, charity, a higher love than a philosopher can have because it is based on a higher knowledge of God. Love follows on knowledge. After all, you cannot love something you cannot understand. A higher knowledge of God through faith enables a greater love for God. This is why the blessed who showed heroic degrees of love enjoy the beatific vision. As archbishop, Ratzinger taught that in heaven, "Everyone sees God in his own proper way. Everyone receives the love offered by the totality in the manner suggested by his own irreplaceable uniqueness."¹⁴ This is to be seen in light of the actualization of every person's highest potential as his "I" is integrated into the body of Christ in Heaven. Everyone sees God in the measure that each loved. Ratzinger further explained that

"It is sufficient to know that God gives each and every person his fulfillment in a way peculiar to this or that individual, and that in this way each and all receive to the uttermost. Perhaps such reflections should encourage us, not so much to consider this way or that privileged in the Church, but rather to recognize the task of enlarging the vessel of our own life."¹⁵

The more we love, the more perfectly we will see God. The only way to know God perfectly is to see him not in a reflection of Him, but to see him in Himself. Every created concept is infinitely deficient reflection. Every created word, except the Word, that is the Perfect Word, falls short. That is the only way to know God perfectly, to see him through that Word and not through our words. A finite creature should not receive infinite perfect knowledge in the infinite God because the finite creature receives according to its mode, which is finite. Our knowledge of God is imperfect in the sense that we have to shrink God to fit our minds. So in God's immense love and mercy, God promises us in Heaven something inconceivable and something we could not know would be possible if he did not tell us it was possible - that He could '*enlarge the vessel of our own life*' so that it could receive the living God. He expands our hearts so that we do not receive Him through our own created concepts, but through his own Word. He has to make us like Him so that we can know Him as he knows himself. This is why the gift of sanctifying grace here on earth is so important to begin our deification, our sanctification so that we come to a full participation in the divine nature, the seed of glory. In heaven, in glory, that seed fully blossoms. That seed we receive in baptism comes to full fruition in heaven. And then we will be like Him.

At the end of our lives, our goal is to behold God face to face. God continually draws man closer to Him so that we can come to know Him and recognize all the ways He reveals Himself. If we know God here on earth, we will sustain, nourish, and deepen our relationship with Him. This is necessary to fulfill our purpose for having been created: to have a share in the very life of God here on earth and its fulfillment in heaven. This immense gift, however, entails sojourning through the path of holiness delineated to us by God for the purpose of attaining blessedness and thus enjoy eternal life with Him. Thus the fullness of the Christian life goes hand in hand with the perfection of charity, both of which are attained in the beatific vision and are the goal of our striving here on earth. As Blessed John Paul II explains, " 'In his goodness and wisdom, God chose to reveal himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of his will (cf. *Eph* 1:9), by which, through Christ, the Word made flesh, man has access to the Father in the Holy Spirit and comes to share in the divine nature.'¹⁶ This initiative is utterly gratuitous, moving from God to men and women in order to bring them to salvation. As the source of love, God desires to make himself known; and the knowledge which the human being has of God perfects all that the human mind can know of the meaning of life."¹⁷

"See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we

shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope based on him makes himself pure, as he is pure."¹⁸

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¹ Summa Theologiae, Saint Thomas Aquinas, I.q12, a1

² Summa Theologiae, Saint Thomas Aquinas, I.q12, a1

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), 1719.

⁴ cf. Genesis 1:27

⁵ CCC 1717.

⁶ Matthew 5:8

⁷ Saint Irenaeus, *Adv. haeres.* 5, 32, 1 PG 7/2, 210

⁸ St. Maximus the Confessor, Philokalia, Volume II, page 178

⁹ CCC 1721

¹⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, Dogmatic Theology, Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life, ch.7.

¹¹ Pope Benedict XII, Constitution *Benedictus Deus* (1336)

¹² Pope Benedict XII, Constitution *Benedictus Deus* (1336)

¹⁴³ Heinrich Lennerz, *De Deo Uno*, Romae : Apud Aedes Universitatis Gregoriana, 1931.

¹⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, Dogmatic Theology, Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life, ch.7.

¹⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, Dogmatic Theology, Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life, ch.7.

¹⁶ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, no.2

¹⁷ Blessed John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, no.7

¹⁸1 John 3:1-3

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