

Heaven is for Real:
A Meditation for the Canonizations of St John Paul II and St John XXIII

Divine Mercy Sunday 2014
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Claims to divine revelation are a fact of human experience. There's no denying that people are fundamentally religious. So everyone has to decide, "Is God for real, or is God a delusion? And is heaven for real, or is heaven a delusion?" There is no way to avoid the question. There is no consistent way to be neutral about it. As Catholics, we believe in God, in heaven and hell, and in divine revelation. And we believe that God is a Person, not a force. In all ages and in all cultures, in every human person's life and in every human person's heart, God reveals himself. God is the Person who has created us and wants to be known by faith. God is our Father. God is real. God is there. God is not silent. God speaks to us in the depths of our hearts, and we listen. God gives us everything we need in order to believe that he exists and rewards virtue.

But some people have greater needs than others. Indeed, some people must undergo a great personal struggle in order to believe. We see this in the Gospels as people struggle to believe in Jesus. We see this in the Apostles of Jesus themselves. We see this especially in the Apostle Thomas after the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Jesus has mercy on him in his unbelief. Jesus gives him a revelation which helps him to have faith. Jesus does the same for Saul on the road to Damascus. St Thomas and St Paul come to believe not only that Jesus is resurrected but also that Jesus is God. Many religious people believe in resurrection and immortality, but they do not necessarily believe that Jesus is God. That Jesus is God is a dogma that is hard for many people to accept. Dogma is always a good thing. It brings clarity even when it is not believed. That Jesus is God is one of those dogmas that make Christians what they are. In order to be a true Christian, you have to believe it.

Christians have always made a distinction between public revelation and private revelation. Public revelation was completed in Christ and given to the Apostles of Christ to preserve and transmit. Private revelation is ongoing and personal and is given in many different ways to help people have faith in Christ. Private revelation is a great gift, a great act of mercy from God, but it is also a problem. Why is it a problem? It is a problem because not all private revelations are really from God. And even when a private revelation is from God, it must be interpreted and properly understood, which is not easy. People of faith often make mistakes, so Christians have always known that there must be a rule of faith.

Consider the book and now the movie *Heaven is for Real*. It's an amazing story of faith. Colton Burpo at the age of four has a near-death experience and sees heaven, Jesus, angels, and family members who have died. Many other children have such experiences and see visions. Some even produce paintings or drawings of what they see. Adults often have such experiences as well. The experiences vary in content. They are found in various religions. It is difficult to

believe that all such experiences are delusions. It is much more probable that some of them are real revelations, that some of them are truly given by God.

But how do you know which ones are for real? And how do you know how to interpret them properly? Christians are divided about the Colton Burpo experience. Was it a true revelation? Who knows? Maybe it was. He said some amazing things at a very young age. His parents had every right to be amazed. But he also said some silly things, things that were rather childish, things we should probably doubt. But as Catholic Christians we have absolutely no doubt that heaven is for real. Why exactly is there no doubt about that? There is no doubt about it because it's not a private interpretation. It's not a theory. It's a dogma.

All private revelations must be submitted to the rule of faith. What then is the rule of faith? All Christians recognize the Bible as normative, as a rule of faith. But is that sufficient? Catholics have always understood that the Bible itself is a revelation that must be interpreted. The Bible is necessary, but not sufficient. What more is needed? Sacred Tradition is. Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition together are the remote rule of faith. They are inseparable. But we also need the proximate rule of faith: the living teaching office of the Catholic Church. If we don't have that, then sooner or later we are going to fall into error. You can bet on it. We need the clarity of dogma. We need good judgments to be made about claims to private revelation. That's why God gave us the Catholic Church, to be nothing less than the rule of faith for all people. That's why God gave us bishops, and the office of the pope, the bishop of Rome. Some popes are better than others, but it is not difficult to recognize the need for the office and its teaching authority. Revelation is often private and personal, but it must also be mediated, for otherwise it cannot be communal. Christ is the one mediator, but he gives authority to his bishops to make judgments about revelations.

As Catholics, we are devoted to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life and to the breaking of bread, just like the early Christians in the book of *Acts* (2:42). We have the teaching, and we have the sacraments. What more do we need? We need to be devoted to prayer. We need the proper disposition. We need to practice prayer, to listen to God. We need to live our faith, to avoid sin, to be pure, to be God's holy people. That takes personal prayer. We need our communion and relationship with Christ to be personal as well as mediated. Many Protestants have a problem with the mediated part. And many Catholics have a problem with the personal relationship part. Perhaps it sounds Protestant to them, but it has always been an essential part of the Catholic and Apostolic faith. We might consider the lives of the Catholic Saints. They all had a personal relationship with Christ. Indeed, Christ wants to have that kind of relationship with *everyone*. The question is: do *we* want it? Sometimes it seems like we do. Sometimes it seems like we don't.

Today we celebrate the canonizations of two great popes: St John Paul II and St John XXIII. St John XXIII gave us Vatican II. St John Paul II was one of the main contributors to that Council and helped draft one of its Constitutions. I got up at 4:00am this morning and watched the live

broadcast of the canonizations. It was worth every minute of sleep I lost! Certainly it was a celebration of the great gift that we received in Vatican II. Back in 2005, I also got up early in the morning to watch the funeral of John Paul II. What a moving experience that was! It's still very vivid in my memory. From 1978 to 2005 he was our leader, our father, our vicar of Christ.

St John XXIII and St John Paul II, like all popes, believed in private revelations. Which ones did they accept? Today the Catholic Church throughout the world celebrates Divine Mercy Sunday. Divine Mercy Sunday was established in the liturgical calendar only very recently, in the year 2000. It came about through the pontificate of John Paul II and the private revelations received by a humble religious sister in Poland. Helena Kowalska was born into a very poor and devoutly Catholic family in Poland in 1905. Her father was a carpenter by trade, and she was the third of ten children. She began to hear the voice of God speaking to her in her heart at a very young age. That voice kept calling her to pursue the religious life. When she asked her parents, however, they would not permit her to enter the convent. As a teenager she had to work as a housekeeper to help her parents cover the household expenses. So she thought about marriage and participated in dances and the ordinary social life of a teenager in Poland.

When she was nineteen years old, she was at one of those dances with her sisters. And while she was dancing she had a vision that would forever change the course of her life. She kept a diary in which she recorded that vision and all the private revelations that she continued to receive. In her diary for that day she wrote that while she was dancing and having a good time, she suddenly saw Jesus standing at her side, racked with pain, and covered with wounds. The music and the room and everyone in it faded away for a few moments. She was standing there alone with her Lord, who was about to be crucified. Then Jesus looked at her and spoke to her directly, and he said, "How long will you keep putting me off?" She was badly shaken, and she had to sit down. People thought that she had become ill. She slipped away from the dance and ran to the nearby Cathedral. She went in and threw herself down in front of the Tabernacle. She prayed to Christ present there in the Blessed Sacrament. She begged him to tell her what he wanted and what she should do. Then she heard the words, "Go at once to Warsaw. You will enter a convent there."

So she went home and told one of her sisters what Jesus had commanded her to do. She asked her sister to say good-bye to everyone for her. Then she secretly boarded the train for Warsaw, without telling anyone else what she was doing. She got off the train in Warsaw, all alone, with no possessions, and only the one dress she was wearing. She went and sat down in a church where Masses were being offered all day long. Then she heard the words, "Go to that priest there, and tell him everything. He will tell you what to do next." So she did, and the priest believed her and encouraged her to pursue the special calling she was receiving. He sent her to stay with a devout family in his parish who were looking for a housekeeper. This allowed her to work and live there and to begin to apply at the various convents in the city of Warsaw. She was turned away several times, but finally she knocked at the door of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy. They accepted her, and she spent the next thirteen years of her life as a member of this Congregation.

She received the name Sister Mary Faustina and took her first vows in 1928. Her parents were able to attend the profession and to give her their blessing. To all outward appearances, there was indeed nothing special about her life as a nun. She worked mainly as a cook, a gardener, and a porter. But she continued to receive many private revelations, which she faithfully recorded in her diary. God gave her a special mission to remind the world that he desires to show mercy to every human person. She emphasized that God desires his people to practice the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. She also recorded special prayers and devotions to God's mercy. She said that Christ had asked that these be offered especially for those who needed to receive God's mercy. One of these devotions was the establishment of a special Feast of Mercy on the Second Sunday of Easter. She died of tuberculosis in 1938 at the age of 33.

After her death, everything that her diary said that Jesus had asked for eventually came to pass. But it was not without a long struggle and much resistance. In fact, she had written that her message would be opposed for a while but then later accepted. In 1958, her private revelations were under investigation, and the Vatican understandably suppressed her diary and the special devotions it proposed. In 1978, after twenty years of consideration, the ban on her writings and devotions was finally lifted. Six months later that same year, Cardinal Karol Wojtyla of Poland, was elected Pope John Paul II. He had been promoting Sister Faustina's cause. He immediately made God's mercy one of the primary themes of his pontificate. He beatified her on the Second Sunday of Easter in 1993. Then he canonized her on the Second Sunday of Easter in 2000. He decreed that, from now on, the Second Sunday of Easter was to be observed as Divine Mercy Sunday. And in 2005, he died after the Vigil Mass for Divine Mercy Sunday was celebrated. Yes, he died on the very Feast that he had established in the universal calendar only five years earlier.

So the Church chose Divine Mercy Sunday as the day on which to beatify John Paul II in 2011. And today on this Divine Mercy Sunday the Church has canonized both him and John XXIII. The meaning of this Feast of Mercy is summed up in the Gospel for the Second Sunday of Easter (*John 20:19-31*). It is also summed up in the image which Jesus asked Sister Faustina to have painted. Some people do not like the painting. That's okay, Sister Faustina did not like it either. She wept with disappointment over the image, because it failed to capture the beauty of the Lord, whom she had gazed upon and her eyes had seen. But our Lord said to her, "Not in the beauty of the color, nor of the brush, lies the greatness of this image, but in my grace." The scene in the painting is the very scene described in the Gospel. Our risen Lord is addressing his Apostles, and he is instituting the Sacrament of Reconciliation. He has come through the locked door to impart the Holy Spirit to them in a new and special way. He breathes on them and tells them, "Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven. Whose sins you retain, they are retained." Then he sends them out to the whole world on a mission of mercy.

Jesus is alive and well and helping everyone to believe in him and follow his sacrificial way of life. He calls everyone who believes in him to receive his sacraments and to practice forgiveness and mercy. He has given the power of binding and loosing to the ministerial priests of the New

Covenant that he established in his own Blood. Such priests possess the divine mission and the divine power to forgive sins sacramentally as Jesus did and to give Jesus to us sacramentally under the appearances of bread and wine. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation we find the fullness of God's mercy. And in the Sacrament of the Eucharist we find the fullness of God's love. Jesus has provided everything we need to live in full communion with God and his Saints. Jesus has put these signs in our presence so that we may receive and bear witness to God's mercy and love. And there are many other signs that Jesus does in our presence, that the world may come to believe that he is the Christ, the Son of God, so that everyone may have life in his name!