

RESURRECTION & THE SOUL

Catholic beliefs about what life after death is like are based on St Paul's analogy. It is offered as a possible explanation of what belief in a bodily resurrection might be like.



Theories about Jesus' Resurrection

St Paul: The Soul

Jesus' Resurrection



Catholic beliefs about life after death start with the Easter story. The resurrection of Jesus is an essential part of Christian belief. Each of the four Gospels includes scenes of the disciples finding the empty tomb. The body of Jesus was laid in a tomb on the Friday evening. Early on the Sunday morning some women went to the tomb to anoint to body. They found that the tomb was empty and Jesus' body was gone. The Apostles and some other disciples describe events where they met the risen Jesus.

This led them to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead and that this was a resurrection of the body.

This means that his body, not just his soul, had physically risen from the dead. Belief in this event led the early Christians to believe that bodily resurrection and eternal life with God is possible for all people. Like those first

Christians, Catholics believe that because Jesus died for our sins and then overcame death by rising again, now human beings will also experience resurrection of the body.

Summary

- Death is not the end; Christians believe there is an eternal life after death.
- Catholics do not accept euthanasia or assisted suicide; they believe there are alternatives.
- There are many different opinions about whether people should have the right to end their own lives.
- Due to Jesus' bodily resurrection, Catholics believe that the soul and the body are resurrected.
- There are different opinions about Jesus' resurrection and about what happens to us when we die.

Early Christian Beliefs

At first the belief was that Jesus' resurrection would be followed quickly by all people being taken to the presence of God. Early Christian preaching was to encourage people to be ready for the return of Christ and the end of time. Those ideas are still part of the readings and liturgies during Advent.

'Be on your guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come.'

Scholars refer to this as 'imminent eschatology', the belief that the end of time will be soon. Gradually, Christians began to realise that there was a responsibility to live now in the light of the resurrection. Preparation for eternal life in the presence of God involves resisting evil and doing good. Guided by the Holy Spirit, this world can be transformed by Christians following the teachings of Christ. The inspiration is found in the Lord's prayer:

'...Thy Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.'

St Paul: Bodily Resurrection

Catholic belief in a bodily resurrection

What would this resurrection of the body mean for people? What would it be like?

In his first letter to the people of Corinth, St Paul offers an explanation. He makes a distinction between earthly bodies and heavenly bodies. The analogy he offers comes from nature. The grain of wheat is very different to the fully-grown plant. It ceases to be like that seed when it becomes a plant. Our observation of the world helps us understand that the existence of the seed has led to a different physical existence, that of the wheat plant. In a similar way, St Paul says that it is possible to understand a distinction between earthly, physical bodies and heavenly, spiritual bodies.

St Paul had an extraordinary encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus after his resurrection.

He explained the importance and meaning of this experience in the first of his letters to the Christian community in Corinth:

"But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection for the dead?" - 1 Corinthians 15:12

'For what I received I passed onto you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also...' 1 Corinthians 15:3-8

'So it will be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.' 1 Corinthians 15:42-45

'And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.' 1 Corinthians 15:49

The grain of wheat vs the plant

The Resurrection of Jesus remains a matter of faith. It cannot be proven beyond all doubt but neither can it be disproved. Belief in the Resurrection would be weakened if it were proven that Jesus did not rise from the dead. Various alternative theories have been offered to explain the empty tomb:

- **Jesus' body was stolen:** Could the Romans or some other have stolen the body? Their motivation might have been to reduce the likelihood of Jesus' followers making extraordinary claims about him. This theory is countered by asking why did they not present Jesus' body when the Apostles started preaching that Jesus had risen from the dead?
- There have been some who have said **the Apostles themselves stole Jesus' body**, although that begs the question why would they have risked their own lives for something they knew to be untrue. The Gospel accounts emphasise that the tomb was guarded to protect it from robbery.
- **Jesus was revived:** Theories have been offered suggesting that Jesus **did not really die at all.** They suggest that he was given pain relief and that he merely seemed dead. Then perhaps the women were able to revive him when they went to the tomb. This is countered by asking why are there no stories about Jesus' life and death in the years that followed?

Different Beliefs

- ✓ Some Christians believe that death is the end of bodily existence and **only the soul lives on.** They might use the accounts of near-death experiences as evidence of a separation of body and soul. Philosophers have a term for such a **clear distinction between body and soul**, they call it **'dualism'**.
- ✓ Some people use this dualism to explain a very different approach to life after death - **reincarnation.** Reincarnation is the belief that the soul continues to exist after death and may be placed in a different body. There are people who claim that they can remember past lives. This belief is not part of mainstream Christianity, nor of the other monotheistic religions (Judaism and Islam). Within religious beliefs reincarnation is associated with Hinduism and Buddhism.
- ✓ There are those who would simply reject each of these explanations and **reject any belief in a life after death.** Those people would simply say that death is the end of human life.

St Paul has an understanding of the soul that informs his explanation of what resurrection means. It is clear that he does not think that Jesus' body was simply revived. St Paul also rejected the view that humans are mere physical bodies with a finite existence on earth. **There is something about being human that gives us our identity; this is what he understood the soul to be.**

He also rejected the view that eternal life was restricted to 'disembodied' souls. It is not possible to fully understand human experience without a body. **So for St Paul, our earthly, physical identity is both body and soul. Our heavenly spiritual bodies are both body and soul.**

Knowledge Check

1. When was Jesus' body laid in the tomb?
2. When was it discovered that Jesus' body had gone 'missing'?
3. What theories have been offered to explain Jesus' empty tomb? (Give three examples)
4. Who had an extraordinary encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus?
5. According to St Paul what is the soul?
6. What is imminent eschatology?
7. What is dualism?
8. What is reincarnation?

Choose a Task

1. Create a detailed mind-map (try to make this visual)
2. Create a multiple-choice quiz (aim for at least 10 questions)
3. Create a poster/leaflet

CHALLENGE!

Turn over the mat and try to complete your task without looking at the information. Then refer back to the task mat to see what you have missed/could have included.

Exam Question

b) Describe Catholic teachings on the soul [5]