

Here on the Way to There

William H. Shannon, St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005, 170 pp., \$12.95

Summarized by Dan Brent

Shannon starts the book with a delightful story about the catechist working with young children. “How can I get to heaven?” she asked. One of the children answered, “You gotta be dead!”

“Our American secular culture is uncomfortable with death, even embarrassed by it.” (p.3) Yet, at the motherhouse where he is chaplain, people can’t get over the spirit of joy that typifies the funeral services for a sister who has died. “This book is written,” he writes, “to make clear that [for the Christian] death begins something new and wonderful.” (p.4)

The process of dying can be difficult. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, in her classic book *On Death and Dying*, names five stages that people go through when they are confronted with death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and then acceptance. The believer will challenge God: Why this? Why the suffering? Why me? But “at death, there is no longer anything to allure us into false affirmations, nothing to prevent us from speaking out a resounding, joyful, wholehearted *Yes* to God.” (p.13)

“In death, we see the face of God.” (p.14) And we also see our own face. The who-we-really-are that eludes us in life is opened up at death. “We become in God the totally unique persons that each one of us is. In death I get to see my own face.” (p.17) For the Christian (as the funeral mass Preface puts it), life is changed, not taken away. We move into a new mode of living. And it’s for ever. “Far from being a lot of time, eternity actually takes us out of time and releases us from the limitations time imposes on us in our mortal existence.” (p.23)

The model for our new life is the resurrected Jesus, the first-born from the dead. “After the resurrection, he was the same Jesus they had known and followed.” But “there was something bewilderingly different about the risen Jesus.” (p.24) For us too, the promise is that our beat-up bodies will be “transformed and glorified”. And – Shannon makes a clear point of this – we will live as whole persons with bodies, not just as disembodied souls. Plato thought death freed the soul from the pesky body and Plato’s influence has warped much of our prayer. (“May the *souls* of the faithful departed rest in peace.”) No, “personal immortality in an *embodied* form is what we mean by the Christian belief in the *resurrection of the body*.” (p.29) Even in normal life, the cells of our bodies are continuously replaced. So God doesn’t need cellular continuity to give us our own body. The church now allows cremation. No problem for God. In fact, there is merit in donating organs from our deceased bodies.

The book’s middle section deals with issues related to growing old and preparing for death. Old age represents an opportunity to unclutter our lives, reflect, get perspective, and mend fences. As a practical matter, it makes sense to gather the information and do

the planning for our demise and funeral. This will be an enormous help to our survivors. Included in his list are things like financial information, personal papers, a list of whom to notify, and desired funeral arrangements. Shannon urges the preparation of documents for power of attorney, living will, health care proxy, and (if desired) a do-not-resuscitate order. Catholic moral theology does not demand the use of “extraordinary” means to prolong life. Some procedures like artificial hydration are still being debated and a clean list of do’s and don’t’s is impossible to construct.

The last few decades have seen the emergence of hospices to provide palliative care for the dying. The goal is to make the person comfortable in their last weeks of life. This often is given at home with the family supported by outside specialists. It’s a beautiful arrangement. The book also explains the sacrament of the anointing of the sick.

Grieving (the inner feelings) and mourning (the expression of grief in action and ritual) are things the survivors need to deal with. A spiritual mentor and sharing with people who have similar experiences can be helpful. Shannon recommends not protecting children from dealing with death. “If a family believes in life after death, it may well be a comfort to the child to know that grandma and grandpa will be united with one another in heaven with God.” (p.95)

In the final section of his book, Shannon deals with the “last things”. He concedes that now hell is a controversial topic. “In the context of the gospel and the universal saving love of God, hell must be seen as a self-chosen state of alienation from God rather than as a punishment inflicted by God.” (p.102) As far back as the early church fathers, there were experts who thought that in the end God would take everyone to heaven. This is based on the premise that “even human sinfulness is ultimately no match for God’s saving grace.” (p.105)

Purgatory as a hell-like punishment also does not fare well in contemporary theology. (“It casts God in a very bad light.” -- p.106) Shannon is in line with most theologians now when he says, “It seems eminently reasonable to me to speak of purgatory as simultaneous with death.” (p.109) He describes it as the experience of purification. Limbo has also vanished in contemporary Catholic theology – including this book. Medieval theologians invented it; now theologians see no sense in it.

Heaven is fairly easy to describe in abstract terms. “Heaven is simply God and God’s people become fully one.” (p.119) It is “the life of God communicated to us.” (p.123) But our lives fail to give us the experiences to meaningfully understand heaven. So we scratch for metaphors and concepts that we hope are somewhat on track. Homecoming. Security. Peace. Hospitality. Reunion. Banquet. Garden. Rest. Talking about going to heaven is misleading. “Death is not going somewhere. It is finding Someone.” (p.123) He suggests that the dead have not left us spatially. They remain. They see us. They are present to us and to our prayers.

Shannon thinks there will be animals in Paradise. After all, the “kingdom” that Jesus called us to prepare is not somewhere else. It is here in a transformed world! So why

would animals be excluded from the world renewed? “I can hope for their presence as one of the surprises in our heavenly home.” (p.137) Perhaps Paul summed it up the surprises best: “It has not even entered into the human mind what God has prepared for those who love God.”

Theologians guess about what age people will be in heaven. One guess is 33 – Jesus’ age. Peter Lombard thought a baby who died will be the person he would have been had he lived to adulthood. Mark Twain has his own contribution. He suggested that each person could choose the age, and change it if he or she wanted; but most will choose the age at which they died.

Jesus told the Sadducees that there will not be marriage in heaven. But surely genders and intimacy will be part of the experience. And heaven is not reserved for Catholics. Other faith traditions, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, etc. have a positive role to play in the saving plan of God. “God is not just our God. God is God of all peoples.” (p.152)