

The more I invite God into my heart, the closer I am to my daughter

“Forever in our hearts.”

It’s a saying we hear every time someone passes away. It’s on the brochures at funeral parlours; it’s written on banners at candlelight vigils; it’s engraved in tombstones.

Something about that phrase used to bother me. It might sound nice, I thought, to say that a dead loved one continues to live somehow in our memory, but our memories are unreliable and transitory. They pass away, just as we do. The vast majority of people who have ever lived have been utterly forgotten on earth. This is why the immortality of the soul is such a comforting doctrine, I always thought (though there is always the complicating possibility of hell).

But my attitude changed when my wife and I lost our daughter two years ago.

On the one hand, she was alive long enough to be baptized, and so I have absolute theological certainty that she has eternal life. This does comfort me, and gives my prayers to her confidence. But, contrary to my expectations, that is not what comforts me the most. There is something else – some kind of presence that those vivid, painful but beautiful memories of holding her in my arms still have – that make her continue to feel real to me.

It is hard to put into words, but it has already been put into words for me in an unlikely place: St. Thomas Aquinas’ discussion of the Holy Trinity.

Aquinas’ Trinitarian theology might seem like dusty, inaccessible scholasticism, and yet studying it prepared me for this devastation I experienced with an idea I’ve never heard better expressed. I will do my best to summarize it here.

For Aquinas, when the will chooses to love, reach out towards someone in love (for that is what love is for Thomas: not a feeling, but the act of willing the highest good of the other as other), this means that the person who is loved has a new kind of life in the one who loves them. As the theologian Rowan Williams puts it, love is “a kind of living of the object in the subject, a presence of the beloved in the lover.” If you have an idea of something, that idea now lives in your mind; if you love someone, that person now lives in your heart.

In the eternal Trinity, the Father has an idea of Himself. This is the “Word” of God (remember that a word always stands for an idea, just as the word “tree” summons the idea of trees in your mind), the Son who is the perfect likeness of His Father. The Father and the Son love one another with a perfect love, and

thus they live in each other. This is the procession of the Holy Spirit, who, as Aquinas puts it, "is said to rest in the Son as the love of the lover abides in the beloved." The Spirit is the love between the Father and the Son, revealed even on the Cross, when Jesus feels farthest from His Father, and yet "gives up His Spirit" into His hands; the Spirit bridges that distance between them even in death.

The incredible memories I have of my daughter are an idea in my mind. And, when I look at her through those memories, I feel myself reaching out to her through my grief in love. The only place I have ever heard anything like my love for my daughter described is in Aquinas' account of the Father's love for His Son, and it is something more powerful than the simple idea that she is in heaven.

But what does it even mean to say that she is in heaven? The Catholic Catechism has an amazing explanation of what we mean when we pray to "our Father, who art in heaven" in paragraph 2794. It quotes St. Augustine, who said: " 'Our Father who art in heaven' is rightly understood to mean that God is in the hearts of the just, as in his holy temple." "Our Father in heaven," according to Augustine, means "Our Father, who lives in our hearts."

My daughter is in the heaven of eternal glory, yes, but what that means is that she is with God. The more I invite God into my heart, the more I let my heart become the kingdom of God, the closer I am to her. The more I look at my wife and see both my daughter and Christ in her beautiful face, and the more I pray for her and with her, the closer I come to seeing her again. This is perhaps the most important thing it means to say that she is "in heaven."

This takes me back to the legions of people who have died, and whose personal histories and names are lost to those on earth. We have no idea of them anymore. They are in the hands of the living God, but many (most?) of them have no one to pray for them. One day, you and I will probably be among them.

This is why the Church does the great mercy of putting the idea of the dead before our minds, especially in November, and reminds us constantly to pray for them, whether in the great liturgies of All Saints (Nov. 1) and All Souls Day (Nov. 2), or in the oft-neglected prayer after meals ("May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace"), or in the Fatima Prayer that was commended to us to pray with the Rosary ("Lead all souls to heaven, especially those in most need of Thy mercy").

Even if our own fragile human memories have forgotten them, the Church still implores us to consciously invite them into our hearts through prayer. They will not enter the heaven of eternal glory until they have entered the heaven of our hearts.

And, when we ask the saints enjoying the Beatific Vision to pray for us, we open up the heaven in our hearts to be filled up and expand with the heaven of eternal glory.

God does "remember" those who have died. "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." He "remembers" them with a love even stronger than I have for my baby. But when we consciously choose to remember to pray for them, and reach out to them with love through the life-giving Spirit that binds us together in communion, we join with Him in that beautiful "remembering," and journey with our spiritual family into the love that has forever been in the heart of God.

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