



# The Holy See

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JOHN PAUL II

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday 28 October 1998*

## **"Life in the Spirit transcends even death"**

1. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (*Jn* 3:16). In these words from the Gospel of John, the gift of "eternal life" represents the ultimate purpose of the Father's loving plan. This gift gives us access through grace to the ineffable communion of love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit: "This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (*Jn* 17:3).

The "eternal life" that flows from the Father is communicated to us in its fullness by Jesus in his paschal mystery through the Holy Spirit. By receiving it we share in the risen Jesus' definitive victory over death. "Death and life", we proclaim in the liturgy, "have contended in that combat stupendous: the Prince of life, who died, reigns immortal" (*Sequence for Easter Sunday*). In this decisive event of salvation, Jesus gives human beings "eternal life" in the Holy Spirit.

2. In the "fullness of time" Christ thus fulfils, beyond all expectation, that promise of "eternal life" which the Father has inscribed in the creation of man in his image and likeness since the beginning of the world (cf. *Gn* 1:26).

As we sing in Psalm 104, man experiences that life in the cosmos and, particularly, his own life have their beginning in the "breath" communicated by the Spirit of the Lord: "When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your Spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the earth" (vv. 29-30).

Communion with God, the gift of his Spirit, more and more becomes for the chosen people the pledge of a life that is not limited to earthly existence but mysteriously transcends and prolongs it

forever.

In the harsh period of the Babylonian exile, the Lord rekindles his people's hope, proclaiming a new and definitive covenant that will be sealed with an abundant outpouring of the Spirit (cf. *Ez* 36:24-28): "Behold, I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you home into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live" (*Ez* 37:12-14).

With these words God announces the messianic renewal of Israel after the sufferings of the exile. The symbols used are well suited to suggesting the faith journey that Israel is slowly making, to the point of intuiting the truth of the resurrection of the flesh which the Spirit will accomplish at the end of time.

3. This truth becomes firmly established in the period shortly before the coming of Jesus Christ (cf. *Dn* 12:2; *2 Mc* 7:9-14, 23, 36; 12:43-45), who vigorously confirms it and rebukes those who deny it: "Is not this why you are wrong, that you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God?" (*Mk* 12:24). According to Jesus, belief in the resurrection is based on belief in God, who "is not God of the dead, but of the living" (*Mk* 12:27).

Moreover, Jesus links belief in the resurrection to his own person: "I am the Resurrection and the Life" (*Jn* 11:25). In him, through the mystery of his Death and Resurrection, the divine promise of the gift of "eternal life" is fulfilled. This life implies total victory over death: "The hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear the voice [of the Son] and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life ..." (*Jn* 5:28-29). "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day" (*Jn* 6:40).

4. Christ's promise will thus be mysteriously fulfilled at the end of time, when he returns in glory "to judge the living and the dead" (*2 Tm* 4:1; cf. *Acts* 10:42; *1 Pt* 4:5). Then our mortal bodies will live again through the power of the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us as "the pledge of our inheritance, the first payment against the full redemption" (*Eph* 1:14; cf. *2 Cor* 1:21-22).

However, there is no need to think that life after death begins only with the final resurrection. The latter is preceded by the special state in which every human being finds himself after physical death. There is an intermediate stage in which, as the body decomposes, "a spiritual element survives and subsists after death, an element endowed with consciousness and will, so that the 'human self' subsists", although lacking the complement of its body (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter on Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology*, 17 May 1979: AAS 71 [1979], 941).

Believers also have the certitude that their life-giving relationship with Christ cannot be destroyed by death but continues in the hereafter. Christ in fact said: "He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (*Jn 11:25*). The Church has always professed this belief and has particularly expressed it in the prayer of praise she offers to God in communion with all the saints and in her prayer for the dead who are not fully purified. On the other hand, the Church insists on respect for the mortal remains of every human being because of the dignity of the person to which they belonged and because of the honour which is owed the bodies of those who became temples of the Holy Spirit through Baptism. Particular evidence of this is the funeral liturgy and the veneration given to the relics of the saints, which has developed from the earliest centuries. The latter's bones, St Paulinus of Nola says, "never lose the presence of the Holy Spirit, whence a living grace comes to the sacred tombs" (*Carmen XXI*, 632-633).

5. Thus we see the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of life not only in every stage of our earthly existence, but equally so in that state which, after death, precedes the full life that the Lord has promised even for our mortal bodies. All the more so, thanks to the Spirit, we will make in Christ our final "journey" to the Father. St Basil the Great notes: "If anyone reflects carefully, he will understand that, even as we await the Lord's appearing from heaven, the Holy Spirit will not be absent, as some believe; no, he will also be present on the day of the Lord's revelation, when he will judge the world in justice as its blessed and only sovereign" (*De Spiritu Sancto*, XVI, 40).

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*To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:*

I extend a special greeting to the priests taking part in the Institute for Continuing Theological Education at the Pontifical North American College, to the members of the Gregorian University Foundation, and to the *Across Trust*. I warmly welcome the Lutheran visitors from Sweden and the choir from Taiwan. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, Ireland, Sweden, Denmark, Malaysia, Belize, Taiwan, Canada and the United States of America, I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Now I would like to invite you to pray with me for several intentions that are particularly close to my heart:

1. The Mixed Commission of the Orthodox and Greek Catholic Churches in Romania, established to promote mutual dialogue between the two communities, is beginning its work today. I commend this initiative to your prayer, that it may bear the desired fruits for the good of the Church and of all Romanian society.

2. Four months of armed conflict in Guinea-Bissau have caused enormous displacements of people. Many have taken refuge in mission stations, where the ecclesiastical and religious

personnel — whom I strongly encourage — are doing everything possible to alleviate their suffering. Let us pray together that all the parties in conflict will put an end to this prolonged suffering.

3. War continues in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, causing destruction and involving neighbouring countries. Let us beseech the Queen of Peace to calm hearts and to let the noble quest for honourable and peaceful solutions prevail over designs to intensify the conflict.

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