

Question Corner: No heaven?/A vengeful God?

Q. I am 86 years old. I was baptized as a child, educated for 12 years in Catholic schools and am still a regularly practicing Catholic. Some weeks ago, I read a column of yours that absolutely floored me and my family as well.

Since I was very young, I have always been taught to believe that St. Peter is at the "Golden Gate" to meet us, but you say that there is no "specific" heaven. Then what have we been aspiring toward, waiting for, longing for all these years if there is no place called heaven?

Has my faith all been in vain? And if one can't go to heaven, then why not sin? Shame on you, Father Doyle, for what you wrote. Can you even imagine all the damage that your column did? (Richmond, Virginia)

A. The temptation is to dismiss such a letter quickly, to assure myself it was just this one particular reader who had misread the column. But I wish it were that easy; instead, a letter like this one prompts some distress on my part, together with a fair amount of reflection.

I went back and reread the column in question, asking myself if I might have expressed anything differently. Faith is a precious and a fragile thing; I want, of course, always to treat it with reverence and not threaten it.

The writer of the letter has a certain picture of heaven, which includes St. Peter greeting arrivals at a golden gate, and that is fine. But the futility comes with trying to express transcendent ideas in human pictures and words.

I did say in the column that heaven is not “some remote geographic corner of the physical universe.” I quoted the Catechism of the Catholic Church, that heaven “does not mean a place (‘space’) but a way of being,” and St. John Paul II, who said that heaven is “neither an abstraction nor a physical place in the clouds, but a living, personal relationship with the Holy Trinity.”

I want to assure the letter writer that I believe with all my heart that heaven does exist — and that my highest hope is one day to reach that goal, to be united with God in everlasting and perfect joy. What exactly that will look like, I do not know; I only know that it will be a whole lot better than I could ever dream it to be.

Q. I am a Catholic priest who has long been puzzled by Leviticus 20:9-21. In that passage, God gives Moses a long list of people who should be put to death: those who curse their parents, adulterers, homosexuals and many others.

In my own mind, God could not have given this order for two reasons: First, he would have been violating his own Fifth Commandment, which says “You shall not kill”; and secondly, these offenses do not deserve the death penalty.

I once asked a noted Catholic biblical scholar about this, and he said that this passage — like so many in the Old Testament — is a mystery, echoing the words of St. Augustine regarding the deception Jacob used to gain the inheritance of Esau. (“It’s not a lie, but a mystery.”)

This matter is very relevant since the church has been trying for decades to have the death penalty abolished. Your comments, please. (Little Rock, Arkansas)

A. I would not look to the Old Testament to situate the church’s current position on the death penalty. In fact, that position has developed over the centuries, to the point where now it is virtually one of total opposition.

Some of the church's greatest theologians (notably Augustine and Aquinas) supported the right of society to use the death penalty, and even the current Catechism of the Catholic Church says that the death penalty may be used if that is the only possible way of defending society against an unjust aggressor.

However, that same section of the Catechism (No. 2267) is quick to point out — quoting St. John Paul II's encyclical “Evangelium Vitae” (“The Gospel of Life”) — that in today's society, cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity “are very rare, if not practically nonexistent.”

In June 2016, Pope Francis told the World Congress Against the Death Penalty that “nowadays the death penalty is unacceptable, however grave the crime of the convicted person.”

I would look instead to the New Testament — to Matthew's Gospel, for example, where Jesus teaches (5:38-39): “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on (your) right cheek, turn the other one to him as well.”

Passages like this one seem to argue for leaving vengeance and violence to God, the author of life. As to why the Old Testament differs so sharply, I would agree that it is something of a mystery.

Perhaps it had to do with the culture of the time and what people could then accept and understand. (I am reminded of the explanation Jesus gave in Mt 19 for why Moses had allowed divorce — because of the “hardness” of people's hearts.)

Read more Question Corner columns [here](#).

Copyright ©2017 Catholic News Service/U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.