

Usual images of heaven don't impress Christians

VATICAN CITY – A recent sermon by the papal preacher, Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, took aim at John Lennon's famous line, "Imagine there's no heaven," saying it represented an empty, secularized vision of human destiny.

But an Italian biblicist, Father Carlo Buzzetti, has approached the question from a different angle: The modern church, he said, does a lousy job imagining what heaven is like and communicating it to the faithful.

Most Catholics, Father Buzzetti said, understand heaven as a vague place of eternal survival, where happiness can become monotonous and where the absence of human passions creates an "anemic" atmosphere.

In other words, boring. And if heaven is seen as a dull routine of perpetual bliss, how can it possibly stimulate people to live a good and moral life in this world?

Father Buzzetti posed the questions in a long article in a recent issue of Italian Clergy Review. He based his analysis on extensive discussions with pastors, who told him the traditional images of heaven – a vision of God, a banquet or eternal repose – were making little or no impression on modern Christians.

Most people, in fact, seem to relate more to the concept of purgatory, where sinners atone for their faults in a final reckoning, than to a paradise that lacks any sense of interior struggle, he said.

Throughout the ages, Christian pictorial representations of heaven, with placid rows of angels, have always seemed bland compared to the interesting if gruesome goings-on in hell or purgatory.

The Bible, Father Buzzetti pointed out, has little to say about heaven, and most of its references to paradise are in images: life, the feast or the heavenly Jerusalem.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says the lack of specific description is part of

the point: The “mystery of blessed communion with God and all who are in Christ is beyond all understanding” (No. 1027).

But Father Buzzetti argued that this vision is unlikely to fascinate or attract anyone – which it should, if reaching paradise is still a goal for contemporary Christians.

One major problem with heaven in the eyes of many Christians is the idea that family ties, particularly marriage, no longer count. According to the Gospels, Jesus told his disciples that those in paradise neither marry nor are given in marriage, but will be like angels. That has led many to assume people married in this life will become free agents in the next.

But Father Cantalamessa took a different view in a commentary last fall. He said Christ’s words leave open the possibility that marriage – like friendship or family relations – will be transfigured, not nullified, in heaven.

Even spouses whose marriages were difficult and the source of suffering may find that, in heaven, the defects drop away and true love is experienced for the first time, Father Cantalamessa said.

Father Buzzetti took a similar view and said more people need to understand that heaven is not emotionally sterile. Many people, he said, view the prospect of losing relationships of love and friendship as terribly sad and not at all paradisiacal.

The church, he said, needs to urgently find a way to describe heaven in a “simple, accessible and imaginable” way that builds on the positive things in earthly existence. Pastors should explain to the faithful that this life will be present in the next life, in a way that infancy is present in the life of an adult, he said.

Describing heaven is a challenge, even for popes.

In a series of talks in 1999, Pope John Paul II set aside the traditional geography of the afterlife. Heaven and hell exist, he said, but not as places of celestial merriment or eternal fire.

The best way to imagine heaven, he said, is to reflect on the happiness one feels when doing good. He characterized paradise as “neither an abstraction nor a place

in the clouds, but a living, personal relationship with the Trinity.”

Pope Benedict XVI explored the topic eloquently in a 2001 book, “God Is Near Us: The Eucharist, the Heart of Life.” Many modern men and women find heaven unimaginable, and without any kind of mental picture it becomes an abstraction, he said. Moreover, the thought of endlessly continuing one’s existence strikes them as being “condemned to boredom.”

But it’s still a basic human drive to expect something greater from the next life, he said, and one of the deepest yearnings is for justice.

In this sense, he suggested heaven may be envisioned as the place where innocent people no longer suffer, where the strongest no longer win all the arguments, where “all the luck in the world” no longer drops into the laps of the guilty, and where gossip, cruelty and misery come to an end.