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Does God Judge as We Judge?



By
Father John
Dietzen

CATHOLIC NEWS SERVICE

Q I just finished reading your column on the Catholic concept of hell. I am old enough to think about the eventualities of this life and appreciate your thoughts. God loves me and forgives me. What a wonderful consolation that is. My mandate then is to live a moral life.

But what of my friend down the street, the guy who cannot seem to stay out of the wrong bed? Or Suzie with a tongue that could filet a shark? God is merciful to all his children, yes. But I have a problem applying that concept specifically. At what point do I fall into the abyss while my brother watches from a cloud? Our sins were similar. Perhaps one time I made a terrible mistake, and because I am human and flawed I simply could not repent.

Augustine argued that only through baptism does one gain the right to eternal salvation. As a Christian that sounds favorable. But does that leave out Gandhi? My Jewish best friend? Millions of Muslims? Not if God is just and merciful.

What then am I to believe? I do believe in God, a merciful God. Otherwise, we are all doomed. My God is not ma-

nipulative. Nor is he a puppeteer. God does not cause disease, famine, hatred or burning depression. Such things are of our nature, not God's. God did not choose my wife's cancer; it happened, that is all.

We are mortals with huge imperfections. But something magical happens at death. I believe we come to a total realization, an absolute, stark knowledge of God. We realize God is the essence of goodness. Maybe there is no separation between heaven and hell. Only, for all of us, the starkly clear realization of the life we have lived in this mortal world. As we have lived a good life, God's radiance reflects on us, and we are in ecstasy. That is our heaven. If we lived our lives poorly we have seen goodness, and we are not it.

I do not know I am right. I do know it is my responsibility to think and probe, and that my conscience is what will determine my eternity. (Illinois)

A Thank you for your delightful and profound letter, which unfortunately I had to abbreviate for this column. Obviously you do not expect me to have an answer to all your questions. But most of what you say expresses well where many people are in confronting the great mysteries of God, life and our final destiny.

As you wisely point out, our individual understanding of these eternal realities depends most of all on what kind of a God we believe in. Is God basically like us, only bigger? Does he think and judge and react as we do, only more authorita-

tively and powerfully? Just putting these questions into words convinces us that this way of thinking must be off track. Someone like that would not be God, totally transcendent, totally other.

Only this kind of God, one who acts in ways unfathomable to us, makes sense of comments by many of the great theologian saints. St. Therese, the Little Flower, for example, now proclaimed a doctor of the church, rejected the idea of a God who had to be worshipped with anxiety and placated with heroic acts of reparation.

This for her was not our Christian faith. Even if she had committed every possible sin, she said, she would still have the same confidence in God. She came to see in one sense that it really makes no difference whether we are virtuous or not. Either way, we are beneficiaries of the same divine love, even if its method is different in the two cases. Whether God keeps us from sin by his grace or picks us up after we stumble, we depend on him and trust him the same way.

Other great spiritual writers whose works the church has embraced as authentic theology and spirituality have spoken with this same conviction.

(A free brochure in English or Spanish answering questions Catholics ask about baptism practices and sponsors is available by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to Father John Dietzen, Box 5515, Peoria, IL 61612. occc

(Questions may be sent to Father Dietzen at the same address, or e-mail: jjdietzen@aol.com.)

Stressed? Have Faith!

By Maureen Pratt
CATHOLIC NEWS SERVICE

More than ever, the medical community is recognizing stress as one of the contributing factors to a variety of physical and psychological disorders. But unlike other factors such as smoking, lack of exercise or poor diet, stress is just about impossible to avoid.

The American Institute of Stress reports that stress "is difficult to define because it is so different for each of us." For example, someone might feel stressed sitting in bumper-to-bumper traffic. Someone else might look upon the snarl of cars as a way to reflect on the day ahead or to unwind listening to music on the radio.

Effects of stress can also vary from person to person. Among the 50 signs and symptoms of stress on the AIS Web site (www.stress.org) are "heartburn, stomach pain, nausea"; "increased anger, frustration, hostility"; "sudden attacks of panic"; "social withdrawal and isolation"; "difficulty in making decisions"; "insomnia, nightmares, disturbing dreams"; and "neck ache, back pain, muscle spasms."

Any of these can negatively impact a person's personal and professional life — and some might lead to more serious

health problems such as heart attack, stroke and digestive or immune-system disorders.

If we cannot avoid stress and if it can have such a negative impact on us, what can we do about it?

Some people turn to therapists and other mental health professionals to assist them in working through specific or lifelong stress issues. Others enroll in stress management programs where instructors work one-on-one or use techniques such as meditation, yoga, biofeedback and therapeutic exercise. Some people "go it alone" by engaging in activities they hope will release built-up stress, such as strenuous exercise or a hobby.

These ways of dealing with stress have their merits. But a crucial way to approach the stresses of daily life is through faith. In Scripture we have examples of the role of faith when people face difficult or potentially dangerous and devastating situations. There are the beautiful words of some psalms:

"The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack. ... Even when I walk through a dark valley, I fear no harm for you are at my side; your rod and staff give me courage" (23:1, 4).

In Luke 6:20-26 we hear Jesus say

that those who are poor, who hunger and weep are blessed and shall reap a great reward in heaven. Comforting words indeed!

Through examples from the time of Noah's ark through Jesus' resurrection, we see that God brings his loved ones through trials toward the light.

A strong faith helps us put our stresses into perspective: Is it really so devastating that our neighbor has a bigger car than we do? Is it worth risking good health and dear relationships to snap in anger over the proverbial spilled milk? Do we who lector, make music or serve at Mass let stress and worry take hold, instead of the Holy Spirit?

The death of a loved one can bring great grief — and stress. This is natural and part of our human journey. But through our faith we also believe in the resurrection, the promise fulfilled. Surely that can lessen our stress — if we let it.

There are many techniques that can help our bodies relax and our minds focus on things other than what stresses us. By inviting God's comfort and nurturing the mighty influence of a faith focus, we can surely put stress into its proper perspective, encourage health and achieve an attitude of joy that is more than skin deep. occc