

# Who is in heaven? Answer is — ‘We just don’t know’

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**Q. My dad died, but I think he was agnostic. He never clearly claimed Jesus. He tolerated faith in my mom and in us, but he never gave any indication that it reached him. Is he in heaven?**



**A.** Please accept my sincere condolences and know that I will pray for you and for the repose of your dad’s soul.

That might be the only answer that I can provide. The Church instructs us to pray for all of the dead. In doing this, she is telling us that we must always have hope.

It is interesting: The Church has never ever said that any specific person is in hell. The Church has many canonized saints, but when it comes to those who may never have said “yes” to God with their life, the Church refuses to make any declaration about their salvation.

The Church wisely does this because the truth of the matter is that we just don’t know.

A family member once asked me about her deceased husband, who had left the Catholic Church and gone to another Christian community. She asked me, “Is he in heaven?”

I had to answer honestly: “I don’t know.”

This upset her greatly, but I can’t make a judgment in a case where I don’t have enough information.

## **Take care in judging**

We can judge a person’s actions. We can do this because the data is there; we know what a person has chosen to do. But we may never judge a person’s heart. This is a distinction that Jesus himself makes in

the Sermon on the Mount. One moment, he commands us not to condemn another person (Matthew 7:1-5), and the next, he points out that we know trees “by their fruits” (Matthew 7:15-20).

What Jesus is pointing out is that we must be wise during this life, and we must discern good actions from bad actions, but there is also quite a bit going on in every choice that we do not know. We can see actions (and can therefore judge the goodness or evil of the action), but we do not know the core of the person, and therefore may not judge what we do not know.

We don't know all of the situations in your dad's life that may have prohibited him from making a clear and public “yes” to Jesus. We don't know the degree to which he may have been secretly cooperating with God's grace. Because of this, the Church tells us to have hope and to pray for those who have died.

My relative was well-loved by his friends and family. By many accounts, he brought a great deal of joy to this world and to the people around him. I am sure that your dad had many good qualities and did a lot of good in his life.

But of course, these things are not what get us to heaven. Heaven is open to us solely by the free gift of God made possible by the cross and resurrection of Christ. We have the choice to cooperate with God's grace (in our words and actions) or to ignore or reject them.

And I think that this is a very important point: I don't have to expressly reject God's grace. I may simply ignore it. I can live my life on my terms and not give God the position that belongs to him by right.

### **It's our choice**

We choose either heaven or hell with our actions. Doing God's will is how we cooperate with God. (It is, in fact, how we love him. See John 14:15.) Not doing God's will (to the extent that we know it and, of course, by the power of his grace) is making a choice for life without him.

If we choose to live this life excluding God, he will not force us to spend eternal life with him. Essentially, we get what we've chosen.

As C.S. Lewis put it, at the end of our lives, we either say to God, “Thy will be done,” or God says to us, “thy will be done.”

My relative was very troubled by what I told her about “not knowing.” She thought that I was trying to say that her husband was in hell. But I was not saying this at all. In fact, I regularly pray for him and offer up the holy sacrifice of the Mass for him at least once a month.

I think that too often, people imagine that funerals are a celebration of the person's life. While there may be a lot to celebrate in a person's life, that is not the role of the Catholic funeral Mass.

We call it “the holy sacrifice of the Mass.” We offer it for the repose of the soul of the deceased person.

We do this because we believe that it actually does something. The sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary (made present on the altar) is the thing that redeems and sanctifies us. The Mass is for the purification of the soul of the departed.

I recommend praying for your father. I recommend joining your prayers to the Church's at every Mass. It is also a beneficial practice to specifically have a Mass said for the repose of your father's soul. There is literally nothing better we can do for anyone who has died.

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