

Spirit and Matter

The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord, searching all his innermost parts. ~ Proverbs 20:27

FROM THE BEGINNING OF TIME, God created both spiritual and material creatures. Only one, humankind, is a spiritual-material creature. This means that, when creating a human person, God combines spirit and matter to form a single being who is free to know and love. To un-



A priest blesses two souls – mother and baby

derstand ourselves and the world we live in, it is vital to come to grips with these terms. They must become a comfortable part of daily thought.

As vast and complex as it is, the existence of the material world is easier to verify, as is the existence of our own material being. The material aspect of our being is all of our physical characteristics — our tissues and organs, blood cells, glands, vessels, appendages, and everything else one can readily see or place beneath a microscope. In short, our “matter” is simply our body and all its constitutive parts. Like all matter, our body can be seen, touched,

measured, and weighed.

The spiritual world, on the other hand, and in particular the spiritual facet of the human person, presents us with more of a challenge. Unlike matter, it cannot be seen or touched. It has no size or weight, and it cannot be measured. In fact, it doesn't even have parts, so it doesn't occupy space. Yet spirit does exist. It is *something* — or, better, *someone*.

The mystery of the human person is a fact attested to by everyone: “As you do not know how the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything” (Eccl 11:5). Few will deny that people have within themselves an *interior life* that remains largely concealed. And if they are true to themselves, most people want to discover their own mystery, and move deeper into the mystery of others.

This is a natural inclination and prompts us to ask the fundamental questions: “Who am I?” “Why am I here?” But what in reality is this mystery of a person? Can it be measured? Does it have size and shape? Does it take up space? Can it be laid out on a table or studied under a microscope? The answer, of course, is no. That which is most intimately ourselves, our spirit, can never be investigated with the tools we use to examine matter. Under any circumstances, it is impossible for anyone to measure the length of our thoughts, or the weight of our love. Why? Because what is most intimately “us” is spirit.

Simply put, spirit is that element of our being by which we know and love. It is the real power behind all we think and do. We may speak of the heart as that which loves, but in reality the heart does not love anything. It is only an organ that keeps our blood pumping. In the same way, the brain doesn't really know anything. It, too, is only flesh. Rather, it is the human spirit that knows, loves, decides, and makes use of the body to achieve its own ends. It is the human spirit that conquers the material world. Matter is not even aware of its own existence.

The fact that we are spirit separates us from all other creatures on earth. In our world, all living creatures — plant or animal — are material and possess an animating principle or soul. In plants and animals, this animating principle allows

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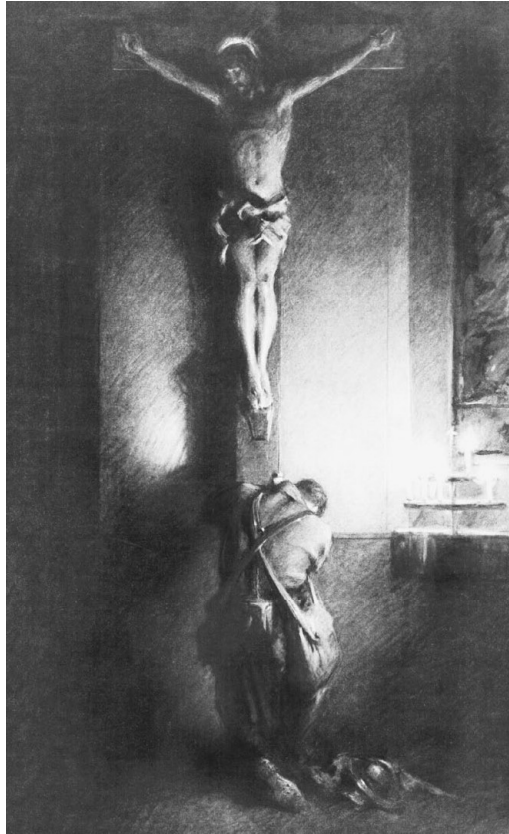
for reproduction and growth and is governed by the laws of nature. In animals, the soul is governed largely by instinct. In any case, when a plant or animal dies, so does the soul. But in us, the *soul is also a spirit*. This means that persons have the capacity to know, love, and act freely on their own responsibility. Only spirit has that power, and when the body of a person dies, the soul continues to live. The human soul is immortal.

How is this possible? It was said previously that spirit has no parts and doesn't occupy space. This is probably the most challenging truth to grasp, while at the same time being among the most crucial truths. Because we spend our earthly lives in space and are always dealing with parts, saying that something has no parts and doesn't occupy space is a lot like saying it doesn't exist. How can something "be" if it doesn't take up space, even the tiniest bit of space like a subatomic particle?

Breaking it down, a part is any element that is not the whole of something. A hand, for example, is part of a human body, and a branch is part of a tree or shrub. To lose a hand is not to lose the whole body, and the loss of a branch does not mean the destruction of the entire tree. These are only parts of a whole. Hence, everything in the material world has parts and, therefore, occupies space. Space is that in which matter spreads out. Spirit, however, is immaterial and intangible, and therefore needs no space in which to spread out. Spirit is always whole and indivisible.

As perplexing as this idea may seem, it has very important implications. The spirit is always what it is. *Its identity is permanent*. Thus, since the human soul is the only one that is also a spirit, we can never be changed into anything else. We will never become anything else and will never lose our identity: *"I know that whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything*

"Spirit is entirely superior to matter. That is not to say that matter is evil, only that spirit is greater."



Soldier and crucifix, World War I era print

taken from it; God has made it so, in order that men should fear before him" (Eccl 3:14). This doesn't mean that we will never experience changes. We will certainly acquire new knowledge and lose knowledge that we already have. We will increase in wisdom and stature before God and our neighbors as Jesus did (see Lk 2:52), and our material bodies will eventually grow old and die — but with all these changes, we will always remain who we are, conscious of ourselves, and permanent. That is because any natural process cannot destroy a "part-less" being. Accordingly, the only way a spirit can be destroyed is through direct annihilation by the Creator, and God has promised not to destroy us utterly.

The second implication is that spirit is entirely superior to matter. That is not to say that matter is evil, only that spirit is greater. After all, *"God is spirit"* (Jn 4:24), and God *created matter*. He also saw that matter was good (see Gn 1:3-31). So spirit is greater than matter. Spirit knows and loves and is the abiding element of

our being. Matter will fade away, dissolve, decay, be torn apart and destroyed, but not spirit. Spirit abides. That is why we must never get too attached to the material world. For the man or woman who understands the existence of God and of his own deepest mystery as spirit, materialism holds no power. Jesus reminded us of this when he said: *"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in Heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also"* (Mt 6:19-21).

Understanding spirit and matter is the key to unlocking the mysteries of the universe. When we understand this, we will begin to grasp the greatest of spirits, indeed, the infinite and eternal Creator Spirit, almighty God.

(CCC 327, 362-368)