

## The resurrection of the dead -- Part 2

Richard McBrien | May. 31, 2011 | Essays in Theology

[Last week's column](#) [1], on the resurrection of the dead, was supposed to make reference to the deaths of some of my fellow priests in the Archdiocese of Hartford, but I ran out of space.

I am writing this sequel on Holy Thursday. Easter is very much on my mind. And so is Bill Maher's appearance last Sunday at a local theater here in South Bend, Ind.

Maher took predictable, but well-aimed, swipes at religion in general, and at Catholicism in particular. He had been raised Catholic, but is now an atheist.

Included among his repertoire was a critical comment about Christianity's apparent certitude regarding the existence of heaven and hell, and life everlasting generally.

The latter jibe struck home because a few days earlier I had completed my column on the credal affirmation of the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

I referred to that belief as a central tenet of Christian faith, and so it is. But it is also something that we Christians take on faith. It is not based on scientific evidence.

In other words, we could be wrong about this belief, as we could be wrong about the Resurrection of Christ, which is the basis of our belief in the resurrection of the dead.

Religious people do not like to be told that they cannot claim certitude for their beliefs. While faith does accord a certain kind of *religious* certitude, it is not *human* certitude in the sense that we conventionally understand the concept.

Thus, when a person dies, we often say, to comfort the bereaved, that the individual is now reunited with a spouse, for example, who preceded her or him in death.

But do we have any basis, apart from our faith, to say such a thing? Faith may be sufficient for people who are religious, but we need to realize -- and admit to ourselves, if not to others -- that we do not really know whether our words correspond to reality.

Critics like Bill Maher do not believe that this affirmation of faith is based in reality, which is why he is now an atheist. He does not disparage people of faith, as other atheists do, only those who are too sure of themselves and look down their noses at those who do not share their beliefs.

Why is it, for example, that an avowed atheist could not run for president of the United States, much less win? Americans expect their presidential candidates to disclose their faith-credentials, including those who have been married three times!

Comedians like Bill Maher love to tweak such people for their hypocrisy. And he is right to do so because every

person of faith is vulnerable to that charge in one way or another.

People of faith need to acknowledge (a) that they could be wrong, even as they firmly believe in the tenets of their religion; and (b) that they respect those who do not share their faith, even agnostics and atheists, like Bill Maher.

In the days leading up to the great feast of Easter, Christians reaffirmed their faith in the resurrection of the dead.

But they could do so while at the same time being open to the possibility (not the probability) that they could be wrong, and that the critics could be right.

The Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*) wrote extensively about atheism (nn. 19-21), not to condemn it but to better understand it and to challenge believers to acknowledge their own responsibility for the existence of atheism today (n. 19).

What does the most to show God's presence clearly is the familial love of the faithful who, being all of one mind and spirit, work together for the faith of the Gospel and present themselves as a sign of unity? (n. 21).

My fellow diocesans who died in recent months prompt some of us to reaffirm our faith in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come: Fathers Bernard Killeen, who was a young curate (associate pastor) in my home parish of St. Justin in Hartford, Conn.; William Brenza, who attended the same seminary as I did in the Brighton section of Boston; William Mullen, who was Archbishop Henry J. O'Brien's faithful and able secretary; Thomas Farrell, who was one of my teachers at St. Thomas Seminary in Bloomfield; and John Stack, a professor of Theology at St. Joseph's College in West Hartford.

May their example continue to inspire us to live a truly Christian life and, like them, to share in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. In other words, may we live by what we say we believe.

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