

Can Catholics believe in reincarnation?

Dear **Father Kerper**: Since the soul is the only part of the person that really matters, what's wrong with believing in reincarnation? What difference does it make whether the soul is in a man or lion or bird or just free? I can't find anything in the Bible that condemns reincarnation.

Thanks for asking about reincarnation, an issue that touches upon two key Christian beliefs: first, the very nature of the human person; and second, the resurrection of the dead.

To begin with, reincarnation is the belief that a soul can move from one physical body to another. According to some non-Christian religions, this movement from "higher" to "lower" life forms, say, from a Persian king to a mosquito, happens because one has done either good or evil, deserving reward or punishment. The particular body acquired by a soul somehow reflects the deeds of its past life. This process of moving from body to body can continue repeatedly until the soul gets sufficiently "purified" and eventually freed from bodily life, which is understood as a prison.

This dualistic understanding of the human person extends far beyond religious concerns and appears in various forms of philosophy, especially those deriving from Plato. Through the centuries, some key philosophers have defined the human person as a "spiritual entity" or "consciousness" with no lasting connection with a body. Such ideas, though long popular among some Christians, devalue the human body and distort the biblical understanding of the human person.

Now, let's take a look at Sacred Scripture. It's true that nothing in the Bible directly rejects reincarnation. However, you will discover a remarkably consistent depiction of the human person as a living union of spirit

and matter, both being valuable and necessary.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, we immediately meet this understanding in Genesis. In chapter 2, the inspired writer shows God forming a human body from clay. Then God blows the divine breath into the body. Here God's act causes human life, which is simultaneously spiritual and material. God does not insert an independent "soul" into a material "container." Rather, body and soul exist together. As such, the notion that the "soul" of Adam could somehow freely migrate to another body while remaining Adam is completely foreign to the text.

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A look at Israel's understanding of the "after life" also shows an avoidance of any body/soul dualism. Take, for example, the description of Abraham's "post-death" situation: "Then he breathed his last, dying at a ripe old age, grown old after a full life; and he was taken to his kinsmen." (Genesis 25:8) Here we have a very earthy image of the

afterlife as a gathering of bodily human beings whose original relationships somehow endure.

More important, later texts clearly assert some sort of bodily resurrection of previously dead bodies. For a very graphic image, take a look at chapter 37 of Ezekiel. This dramatic prophesy culminates when a collection of human skeletons, "came alive and stood upright, a vast army." (Ezekiel 37:10) The point is clear: God will eventually restore — and transform — the unique relationship between a particular body and particular soul.

Everything we read in the Scriptures about the body/soul unity of the human person and eventual bodily resurrection receives ultimate validation in and through the life, death and resurrection of Christ. To begin with, the Son of God is not an independent spiritual entity implanted into a human body temporarily. The Prologue of John makes this abundantly clear: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." (John 1:14) Note the key phrase "became flesh," which means that the Son of God became fully and permanently human.

Because of the incarnation of the Word, which means the union of humanity and divinity in the divine person of Christ, his resurrection is not merely the survival of his soul. Rather, the resurrection necessarily involves his whole person, which is also bodily. Without the body, the Risen Christ would not be truly human. Moreover, the Gospels, especially John's, stress that



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Saint Raphael

the Archangel

the body of the Risen Christ is the same body that suffered crucifixion.

What difference does this make for us? Lots. The New Testament tells us that Christ's resurrection is a preview of our own ultimate destiny. Two passages from St. Paul show this: "For if we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection," (Romans 6:5) and, "He will change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body by the power that enables him also to bring all things into subjection to himself." (Philippians 3:21)

This brings us to your statement, "the soul is the only part of the person that really matters."

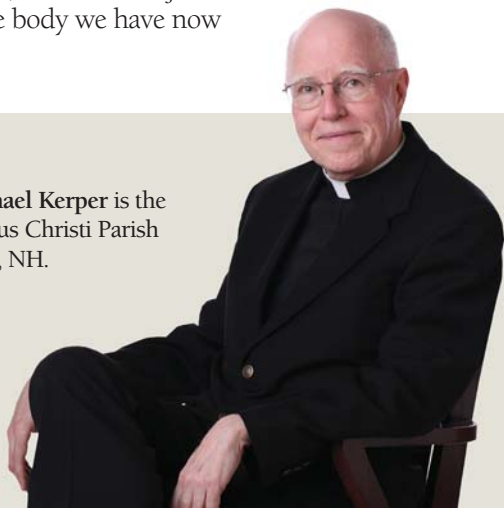
True, we often forget our spiritual dimension. However, a person's specific body is crucial to his or her future identity. Indeed, we believe that our personal identity after death will extend the bodily existence we now have. In other words, at the time of our resurrection, we will rise in the identifiable — though transformed — bodies we have now, not in some new "container."

But how can this body/soul linkage survive the inevitable decomposition of the corpse. Ludwig Ott, the author of the classical theological handbook called *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (1954), explained it this way: "The identity must not be conceived in such a fashion that all material parts which at any time, or at a definite moment belonged to the earthly body, will be present in the body in the resurrection. As the human body always remains the same in spite of the constant changing of its constituent matter, it suffices for the preservation of the identity, if a relatively small share of the amount of the matter in the earthly body is contained in the body after resurrection."

Take, for example, the case of John Henry Cardinal Newman, who will soon be beatified. Last year, when his grave was opened with the intention of moving his body to a chapel for veneration, nothing was left. The sole bodily relic of Cardinal Newman is a single strand of hair! In a sense, that single hair can act as the seed of a risen body. God needs nothing more.

A simple line from Ludwig Wittgenstein, the great Austrian philosopher who lived from 1889-1951, serves to summarize: "The human body is the best picture of the human soul." Because we each have a unique and unrepeatable soul, we also have just "one picture," the body we have now and in eternity.

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FEAST DAY: September 29

PATRONAGE: The blind, happy meetings, nurses, physicians, and travelers

PATRON SAINT AND NAME-SAKE OF St. Raphael Parish in Manchester. This statue is over 140 years old and was carved in Italy. It can be seen at St. Raphael Parish standing to the right of the tabernacle.



■ Saint Raphael is one of three well-known Archangels; the other two named in the Bible are Saints Michael and Gabriel. There are seven Archangels in the service of God, but the last four Archangels are not named.

Throughout history, Archangels have been given important tasks to complete for the glory of God. Michael is known for his success against Satan, and Gabriel announced that Mary was chosen to be the mother of Christ. Raphael is a main figure in the book of Tobit, a book of the Bible.

In Tobit, God hears the prayers of both Tobit, who is blind from cataracts, and Sarah, who was widowed seven times, and sends Raphael to heal them.

While preparing for his death, Tobit sends his son, Tobiah, on a long journey to collect his inheritance. Raphael appears in human form to accompany Tobiah. While traveling, Raphael teaches Tobiah about the medicinal properties of a particular fish. He explains that when Tobiah burns the heart and liver, it will free a person who is afflicted by a demon, and the gall will cure cataracts.

Raphael and Tobiah stop to rest at the house of Sarah's father. Raphael encourages Tobiah to marry Sarah, even though she was married seven times and each time her husband was killed on their wedding night by a demon. On their wedding night, Tobiah burns the heart and liver of the fish. The odor sends the demon away.

When the couple go to visit Tobit, Tobiah, using the fish gall, cures his father of cataracts.

info **Read the whole story:** The book of Tobit is the seventeenth book of the Bible, right in between Nehemiah and Judith. This is a great story of hope, trust, and fidelity. Share it with your family and consider the questions in the *Parable Education Guide*, available at www.parablemag.com.