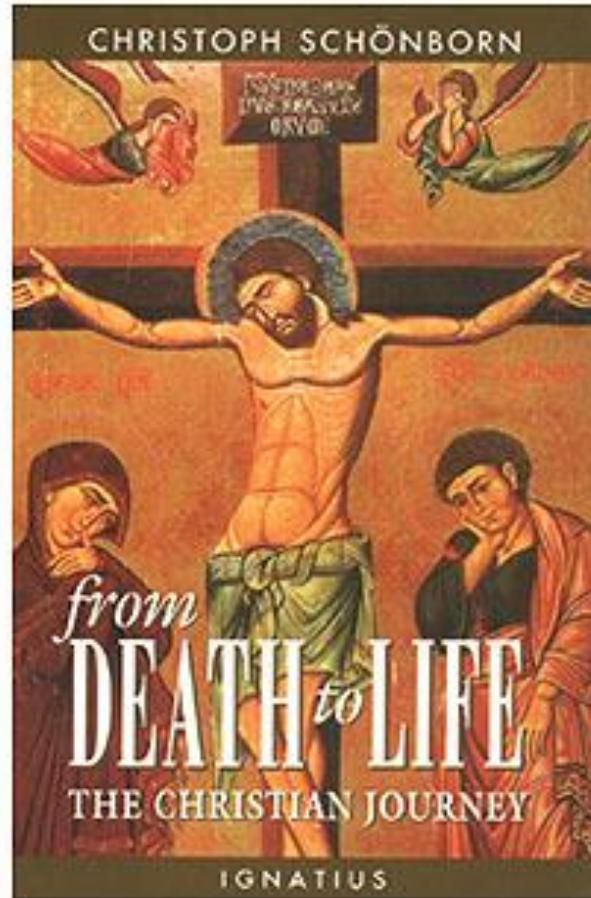


A Summary of *From Death to Life* by Christoph von Cardinal Schönborn



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Summary by Kyle Johnson, written exclusively for The Goldhead Group, Ltd.

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About the Author

Christoph Schönborn was born in the Czech Republic on January 22, 1945, though his Austrian family moved back to their native land shortly after the end of World War II. He joined the Dominican order at age 18 at Bonn, Germany, and was ordained to the priesthood at age 25. He continued his studies and received a licentiate in 1971 and a doctorate in theology in 1974. He taught theology from 1975 to 1991 at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. During that time he took part in a large number of Vatican and local commissions, most notably being the secretary of the commission which drafted the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. He was appointed auxiliary bishop of Vienna by Pope John Paul II in 1991, and at the relatively youthful age of 50, became the archbishop of Vienna in 1995. He was elevated to the cardinalate at the remarkable age of 53, and thereupon became the President of the Austrian Bishop's Conference. Schönborn was the 6th youngest cardinal to participate in the election of Pope Benedict XVI.

General Overview

A collection of texts and speeches written at various times by Cardinal Schönborn, *From Death to Life* attempts to give modern emphasis to the dichotomy of the Catholic Church's journey as an earthly pilgrim with a heavenly home. He recoils from the age-old accusation that the Church despises the earth in its longing for heaven, though acknowledging that the Church has always attempted to "strive to attain what is above, not what is on earth" (Col 3:1-2). But, if in fact we look to eternity as our goal, why then build cathedrals and encourage the arts?

Schönborn believes that in a misguided attempt to prove to Marxists and Nietzschean philosophers that our heads are not only in the clouds, modern preachers have forgotten the language of the eternal. By playing down the emphasis on heaven, people have responded to our "eschatological amnesia" by turning away from the Church for answers about eternity and death.

The book is arranged into six chapters, dealing with 1) Christ as bridge between heaven and earth as the God-Man, 2) the "deification" of man, 3) the Church as the Body of Christ, sharing in his mission to span time and eternity, 4) the tensions between the Church as Christ and earthly political kingdoms, 5) the false doctrine of reincarnation as a perversion of reality, and 6) the ancient and true understanding of the Church concerning death as a "migration of the soul."

Chapter One: "God Wants to Remain a Man Forever"

On the Meaning of the Article of the Creed: "He Sits at the Right Hand of the Father"

Schönborn begins with a quotation from John Damascene, a great Greek Father, who is attempting to explain this article of the Creed. Damascene's two main points, which are seized upon by the author, are that 1) Christ does sit bodily at the Father's right hand since Jesus' body flesh was glorified at the Resurrection and 2) this phrase is used symbolically to mean that Jesus has always existed as God and is one in being with the Father. Schönborn emphasizes that these two points are the Christian faith in a microcosm.

1.1 WITNESSES OF THE "RULE OF FAITH"

Schönborn quotes a whole series of theologians from the earliest days of the Church who also expound upon this article of the Creed, proving constant teaching through history. Bishop Melito of Sardis (ca. 160-70) proclaimed Christ's resurrection, victory, and kingship. Irenaeus of Lyons, of the same time period, also

stressed that Jesus Christ was man and God, sufferer and Lord, crucified and Risen. Fulgentius of Ruspe (ca. 500) wrote that Jesus “lay in the grave, rose from the grave; and the same incarnate God ascended to heaven...and sits at the right hand of God.” Cyril of Jerusalem writes about this paradox explicitly: “It is not the case, as some have held, that [Jesus] was in some sense crowned by God after His suffering; nor did He gain the throne at His right hand because of His patient endurance; rather, He has possessed the royal dignity for as long as He has existed – but he is begotten eternally – and shares the Father’s throne, since He is, as we have said, God, wisdom and power.” Pope Leo the Great, too, writes that the humanity of Christ has brought to all men a share of the divinity of God.

Although this teaching is the rich deposit of faith, Schönborn wants to convince those with possible questions. He quotes St. Augustine’s forceful exhortation to belief in the possibility of a bodily Christ with God, in the Resurrection and Ascension. Thomas Aquinas builds upon Augustine and together they interpret the “right hand” as authority and perfect happiness, without dismissing Christ’s human body at all.

1.2 THE ARTICLE OF FAITH IN CONTROVERSY

It is not possible to list the teaching of the Church while ignoring its detractors. Prominent among these were the second century Gnostics (who believed that only the soul could attain any kind of permanent salvation, while the body was doomed to evil). The Gnostics interpreted the Faith through their prism, believing that Christ’s Ascension was merely His soul returning to Heaven. They supported their view with surprisingly contorted logic, using selected Scripture verses as proof. The end result is the pessimistic idea that this world contains all that is evil, and our spiritual side struggles to get out of it to the “right hand of the Father”, (i.e. all that is good).

The Arians (ca. 325) saw the “right hand” statement as a sign of Christ’s inferiority. Eusebius of Caesarea thought that Christ was merely the highest creature of God, but certainly not God Himself. The Arians’ main ammunition was Acts 3:36 (“God has *made* him Lord and Messiah”), which they felt proved conclusively that Christ had to be artificially exalted. St. Athanasius of Alexandria responded with the idea of consubstantiality, that Christ is God and the Son of God. Athanasius said that when Christ was born, it was then that He was *made* what He was already, but this time in bodily form. This idea brought Christology full circle: “The one who created us has also become our Redeemer through the Incarnation, and His eternal Lordship is extended to all men through His glorified humanity.

But Marcellus of Ancyra had a new objection, as he felt that the “right hand” statement referred only to Christ as a man, and therefore had a beginning and an end. This meant that Christ’s humanity had no place in eternity. Taken further, it meant that Christ could have not reign eternally, since only God can exist after time ends. Origen, another great thinker, also had to step into metaphors. Evagrius of Pontus, one of Origen’s followers, wrote of the Spirit-Christ, denying bodily significance in heaven. These men exhibited “pneumatomonism”: only the spirit matters. The iconoclasm of the Eastern Church (that pictures of the human Jesus lessened His value) grew out of these ideas. Iconoclasm was well answered by Theodore Studites and St. Cyril of Jerusalem.

St. Teresa of Avila, too, taught against those who attempted only to transcend images, which inhibited contemplation. She wrote that “the visible presence of the Lord would not have been any hindrance to the apostles”. She received many remarkable visions of Jesus Christ, and interestingly, always in the form of a transfigured, glorified body. She relates these visions and experiences of Christ with the Eucharist.

On the other hand, the heretic John Calvin taught that if Jesus Christ is bodily in heaven, only His spirit can be on earth (thereby denying the Sacrament of the Eucharist). He also rejected images of Christ. Other early Protestants like Oecolampadius and Zwingli agreed with Calvin against the Eucharist, reducing the Mass to a memorial service. The heretic Luther went the other direction, and declared that Christ’s body is nearly omnipresent.

1.3 THE MYSTERY OF HIS PRESENT LORDSHIP

All of the above history and exposition is necessary, “since what is at issue here is precisely the *present-day* relationship of Christ to His Church.” St. Augustine was clear in writing about Christ as the Head and the Church as His body. “The Head has already risen: thus, we bear our Head in heaven.” A quotation from John Chrysostom closes the chapter: “No one has yet been raised up, except in the sense *that we are risen because the Head has risen*. It was in this way that God gave us a share in His throne.”

Chapter 2: Is Man to Become God?

On the Meaning of the Christian Doctrine of Deification

St. Athanasius once famously wrote that “God made Himself a man in order that man might be able to become God”. This is the highest wish man can make, though one that has been forgotten. Moderns seem to attempt the “humanization of man”, instead. Some theologians find the whole idea ridiculous, others ambiguous. Should this idea be perpetuated? Is it important?

2.1 THE CHRISTIAN MEANING OF DEIFICATION

Pico della Mirandola, a mind of the Renaissance, believed that man’s free will gave him the ability to pervert himself or “to be reborn in higher divine forms”. Hippolytus of Rome had long before introduced much the same idea: that if man becomes man fully, he becomes god.

a. *Christ as the “Humanized” God and “Deified” Man.* Christ is fully God and fully man in the Christian Creed, and thus deification is “possible only through a reference to the mystery of Christ.” For man, salvation lies in adopting morals and attitudes as close to God’s as possible, and can do so with the help of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The Church Fathers made very clear that man is not capable of self-deification, but that deification comes only from God.

b. *In What Does Deification Consist?* Maximus the Confessor wrote: “The one deified through grace receives for himself *everything* that God possesses, apart from the identify of substance.” [sic] The goal of man’s existence, therefore, is divine life. Such deification occurs through what St. Paul refers to as adoption through grace.

c. *Redemption and Deification in Christ.* Deification is not strange, but rather what humans were created for, and therefore deification is actually the perfect realization of human nature, “reestablishing...fallen man in his innate dignity.” Ergo, the work of the devil is broken, and the work of the Father shines clearly through the work of the Father.

d. *Deification of Man through the Sacraments of the Church.* To become deified is to follow Christ perfectly, since He was the perfect man. He left us doors to His grace in the Sacraments, through which we become like him. We are born anew in baptism, etc. Interestingly, Clement of Alexandria long ago stressed that those who are baptized are already deified. Rather than subject deification to an automatic ritual, Diadochus of Photice wrote well that even baptism is dependent upon God’s grace working in us. Those who are priests share in the grace of God’s deification, spreading His Sacraments among the Body of Christ, in *persona Christi*: “the priest becomes God and deifies others.”

2.2 MAN’S SELF-DEIFICATION AND SELF-DESTRUCTION

The love of God has thus not only allowed God to become man, but also man to allow God's incarnation of love in his own life (deification). Without love, this can become a destructive temptation for man. Outside Christianity, there are two main forms of self-destruction, each of which interpret the Delphic phrase "Know thyself" differently: 1) the gnostic interpretation holds that we are already gods without knowing it, and therefore we gain this self-knowledge through life; 2) we are *only* man and cannot become god: but eventually the finitude itself becomes absolutized, creating an "arrogance that blasphemes against God" (Gabriel Marcel). Both of these forms emphasize a separation between God and man.

2.3 "HUMANIZATION" THROUGH "DEIFICATION"

Man cannot be satisfied by anything other than God. When he tries to replace God with "things", he is actually expressing in a deep way his longing to be with God. He deifies the world without God rather than deifying himself with God. It is grace which prevents self-destruction and exalts man.

Chapter 3: The Kingdom of God and the Heavenly-Earthly Church

The Church in Transition According to *Lumen Gentium*

Since Christ is in Heaven, the Church is a Heavenly Church. Since the Church is earthly in terms of her Body, she is also a pilgrim Church. *Lumen Gentium* (LG), the Constitution on the Church from the Vatican Council II, sees the Church in terms of her goal, and considers the Church in terms of her transitional existence.

3.1 ONE SINGLE CHURCH OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

The unity of the heaven-earth Church is displayed in the artistry of the Church of Sant'Ignazio in Rome. St. Robert Bellarmine is also buried in this Church: he who wrote much about the Church militant, the Church in purification, and the Church triumphant. Since St. Robert's life, *LG* has adopted the term "the pilgrim Church" to better emphasize our longing over the institution.

Cardinal Henri de Lubac has expressed concern over ecclesiology that abandons the fundamental concept of Church as being essentially heavenly. Schönborn agrees and believes that some theological strains since Vatican II have illustrated de Lubac's concerns. Since the Church is where Christ is, the Church is heavenly. Schönborn quotes from some of his reading in support of this theological point.

Finally, does the earthly Church ascend to heaven, or does the heavenly Church descend to earth? Neither. It is the single, same Church with one true dwelling place in heaven.

3.2 DISPUTED QUESTIONS

a. *The Church and the Kingdom of God.* St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Jacques Bonsirven, and Cardinal Charles Journet confirm that the Church is the kingdom of God. This one-to-one association has recently been challenged, however, by the notion that the Church merely symbolizes the Kingdom of God.

b. *Is the "Eschatological Character of the Pilgrim Church" (LG 48) the Eschatological Character of the Kingdom of God?* Notwithstanding misconceptions to the contrary, the Council never called the Church "the sacrament of the Kingdom". Instead, the Church was called the "seed and beginning of the kingdom". She is not the "perfected" kingdom yet, but she still is the Kingdom. There is no distance between the Church and the kingdom, but there is a difference of status.

c. *“The Fata Morgana of Eschatology”*. It is important, then, to remember that the path of the Kingdom of God is therefore the path of the Church. What were the views of Jesus Himself (and therefore of the Church) on the Kingdom? After much theological exposition and historicity borrowed from Jean Carmignac, Schönborn concludes that Jesus’ views on eschatology were surprisingly divergent from His contemporaries. The “fata morgana of eschatology”, therefore, is to assign to Jesus eschatological motives that He may not have shared.

3.3 THEOLOGICAL AND PASTORAL TASKS IN VIEW OF A MORE COMPLETE RECEPTION OF *LUMEN GENTIUM*

a. *Christocentric Eschatology*. “The fundamental error of eschatologism is its subordination of Jesus’ eschatology to the alleged apocalyptic horizon of his time.” Even the New Testament, however, remains highly Christocentric in its eschatology. All references to the end times still maintain Christ as their anchor.

b. *“Ecclesia de Angelis”*. In order to totally perceive the Church, one must remember the holy angels. They have a central position in the eschatology of the liturgy and the Apocalypse. The angels are also our model in their roles as contemplatives and intercessors.

c. *Maria-Ecclesia*. The Mother of God displays the identity of the Church and kingdom. She is the perfect human complement to Christ, the Head of the Church. We are able to contemplate the Church’s nature by considering her perfection. The Church, too, becomes a mother by receiving the Word of God.

Chapter 4: The Church between Hope in Life after Death and Responsibility for Life here on Earth

There is a large and interesting question in the relationship between the Church and politics, and the degree to which one ought to influence the other. In nearly every country and history there exists some tension between the two. The question: is this tension healthy or not? And if the Church focuses on heaven, is she not accused of neglecting earthly concerns? If she involves herself in politics, is she not accused of leaving her realm?

4.1 JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU’S THESIS OF THE SOCIALLY DAMAGING CHARACTER OF CHRISTIANITY

Rousseau, in his “Social Contract”, wrote that Christianity removes citizens from the state and is hostile to the social spirit by being a purely heavenly-oriented religion. He blamed socio-religious tensions on Jesus who, He claimed, separated theology from politics. Now men must serve religion and the state, and are thereby confused. This accusation actually contains two contradictory accusations.

First, Rousseau charges that Christians become cowards who are wholly focused on heaven and not interested in committing themselves to the betterment of the state. Second, he says that Christians cannot be integrated into society because they are actually revolutionary at heart, hoping to throw off the state in order to devote themselves to religion. Rousseau’s problems lie in his devotion to Thomas Hobbes, who also believed that Christianity ought to be subservient to the state, and thus assigned to Christian’s thoughts not their own.

4.2 “NO ONE CAN SERVE TWO MASTERS” (Mt 6:24)

In the pre-Christian world, there was no separation between God and the temporal rulers (emperors). Man was the citizen of a city, and the gods of each city were predetermined. The Roman Empire expanded this principle beyond the city walls. The pagan world was understandably shaken by the Christian attitude, which they

interpreted as rebellion. Christ identified Himself as the Lord of a Kingdom with unconditionally devoted subjects. Early Christians did feel like pilgrims moving through the world due to their devotion to Christ as their King.

It is, however, false to believe that the Church was created only after an immediate Apocalypse did not materialize for early Christians. Christ did indeed say that “all authority on heaven and *on earth* has been given to Me.” (Mt 28:18) The early Church, therefore, did act quickly and decisively to leaven the world. This *now* is already the end time, but it belongs to Christ. Rousseau would like to end this God-state separation (which he believes is more politically acute than it actually is), but the dualism cannot be undone. It is man’s duty to be a good “citizen” of both.

De Lubac recognizes that at times the State has persecuted and the Church has dominated. The delicate equilibrium is difficult, if not impossible, to set. Man is oriented to the common good, but he is not completely subsumed into the community. Christianity proclaims that no man is completely the State’s, but he *is* completely God’s. Immediate ancient Christian opposition to socially-accepted abortion, for example, clearly demonstrates this principle. Another example was the emancipation of women in early Christian life.

4.3 THE KINGDOM OF GOD, SOCIETY, AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

But are the Church and the world truly irreconcilable foes? Is society always a negative entity that needs the Church present to criticize it? Is the Church so flighty that the state must weigh it down?

There are two basic temptations in this thought: 1) the Manichaeic temptation would see the state as perpetually evil and the Church as perpetually good, with an irreversible conflict between them; 2) the naturalistic temptation denies the existence of evil, referring only to conquerors and the conquered. 1 is Marxist and 2 is Darwinistic, or, using Jacques Maritain’s labels, 1 is “right” and 2 is “left”. Cardinal Charles Journet pointed out the dangers of both temptations in their horrific ideological personifications in this past century.

Vatican Council II defined the relationship between the Church and society, renouncing any desire to direct temporal power in favor of being a ferment in society through a dialogue with the world. There is a certain power of true evil, however, that weighs down the positive relationship between the Church and the world.

Three conclusions: 1) there is no utopia on earth, and accepting this principle frees politics from attempting to create one through force; 2) still, joy, success, and justice can and does already exist in this life since heaven is already on earth (in the correct sense); 3) the true struggle is not of class but against evil, and can only be won through sacrifice since none can be spared from suffering and death.

Chapter 5: Reincarnation and Christian Faith

The belief in reincarnation has attracted an astounding number of devotees (as many as twenty-five percent in modern Europe). Is it that this life seems too short for meaning? Or that our earthly freedom is limited? Or are human achievements too minimal to be left by single lives? Amazingly, reincarnation is seen as an image of hope and opportunity by its newest adherents. In the ancient East, it was the opposite of hope (the aim was to be eventually freed from reincarnation’s monotony).

5.1 WHAT POSITION DID EARLY CHRISTIANITY TAKE ON REINCARNATION?

The doctrine of the transmigration of souls was an extreme position at the time of Jesus, and invited ridicule. Aristotle posited a close relationship between soul and body that naturally rejected reincarnation. Early

Christianity, too, rejected reincarnation without hesitation. Gregory of Nyssa wrote strongly against it, and even Origen (who is often falsely referenced as a supporter of reincarnation) called the doctrine of the transmigration of souls “meaningless”. Origen said that reincarnation makes “punishment” an illusion and thus destroys morality.

a. *Gnosis and Reincarnation.* The only Christians who preached reincarnation were on the fringe: they were called Gnostics. The Gnostics took Christian materials but altered their meanings to support radical ideas. Schönborn uses several surprising Gnostic Scriptural exegeses as evidence of their distortions in order to propagate reincarnation. Even if certain out-of-context Scriptural quotations could be twisted to “support” reincarnation, St. Irenaeus rightly remarks that one cannot take quotations piecemeal to present a thoroughly different whole picture. Reincarnation is actually the keystone to a whole “system” completely incompatible with either the Bible or Christianity. In fact, the Gnostics believe that there is a difference between Christ and Jesus: Christ descended onto the body of Jesus, and it is Christ who rose Jesus up in a “psychic, pneumatic body”. Jesus then discovered the bizarre truth that His Father was actually a lesser god in war with the true God. The conclusions become only more fantastic. Finally, Christ’s salvation (for the Gnostics) is reduced to the knowledge of the many errors of the world.

b. *Christian Anthropology in Contrast to Reincarnation.* St. Irenaeus of Lyons argues against reincarnation, using the points that the supposedly transmigrated souls never recall past lives, and that the Christian Faith (based on revelation) ought to be used to interpret reincarnation and its “experiences”. Man is a God-made creature, willed with a significant identity. Each person is thereby unique, and mankind is thereby unique. Irenaeus also explains how a created being can have an immortal soul. Origen, notwithstanding propaganda to the contrary, also rejects reincarnation, though he did teach (erroneously) the preexistence of souls and their incarnation in bodies. Since there is a large amount of controversy concerning Origen’s teachings, Schönborn spends a great deal of time with his texts and reasoning. Tertullian contraposes the Resurrection to reincarnation. Lactantius, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, Nemesius of Emesa, Augustine, and others echo Christian teaching

5.2 REINCARNATION TODAY: THE ANSWER OF FAITH

Modern psychotherapies and hypnoses seem to reveal personal experiences which had been repressed, or even events that had occurred in “previous lives”. Is this really “scientific”? Even the famous case of “Bridey Murphy” cannot prove reincarnation scientifically, no matter what its proponents say. Schönborn distinguishes between “experiences” and the interpretation of events. Reincarnation is not a system of thought in itself, but rather arises from a philosophical mindset.

a. *Every Fourth European Believes in Reincarnation.* Arguments about reincarnation must necessarily be philosophical or theological. Schönborn prefers the theological. The appeal of reincarnation arose in Europe with the Enlightenment era, and is championed by Goethe, and enhanced even by Darwin: it becomes a kind of ongoing progress (far removed from its Eastern roots). Since reincarnation has been so clearly opposed to Christianity, Christianity has never even considered a formal condemnation necessary.

b. *“But Christ Is the End” (Holderlin).* For Christianity, life in Christ is already its goal, making reincarnation less than unnecessary. What more is needed?

Chapter 6: Living the Transition

Death and Homecoming in the Light of the Ancient Ritual of Death

The existence in transition that has been discussed is only possible in a frank discussion about death (a discussion which is anything but morbid). Death, in the Christian tradition, is a “homecoming”, the ultimate living of the transition.

6.1 THE LITURGY OF THE TRANSITION (*TRANSITUS*)

Even in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus’ death was considered an “exodus”. The Christian death rites are similar to those of other cultures, but it is surprising that modern cultures have such a difficult time with even discussing death. The Dominicans’ death rites carried out the phases of death liturgically (though now very few people die at home), and all the brothers would gather around the deathbed for the rites (called the *transitus*). Schönborn elaborates and leads the reader through the entire *transitus* as an illustration of the Christian perspective on death.

6.2 *ARS MORIENDI* AS AN AID TO LIVING

To rediscover death’s place in life, we must learn from ancient rites and practices.

a. *Dying as a Human Celebration*. Death is a human event, especially when seen through the prism of materialism. A “peaceful” death was longed for, not a “sudden” death, that the rites of the transition would be well celebrated.

b. *Dangers of the Transition*. Even ancient Egypt tried to “ease” the transition, which indicates an awareness of “danger”. For Christians, the angels lead the soul into paradise (beyond the reach of the devil and his terrors).

c. *Transition as Judgment*. Dangers in the transition lay not only without, but also from within, from the reality of the bared soul. Life is stripped naked by death, and the soul’s wounds are revealed for the Judge.

d. *Life in Transition*. The dangers of the transition are identical to the dangers of life, for life is revealed by death. If death is transformation, this is only because the transformation began in life. Thus, to live in transition is to have already passed from death to life before bodily death occurs. Love, and love alone, can create this transition.