

The Four Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. ~ Daniel 12:2

BECAUSE OF THE BUSYNESS OF OUR LIVES, and the speed with which the world around us moves, it is somehow possible for us to spend all our time caught up in our everyday joys, sorrows, concerns, and work, without ever thinking about those things which are most important in life. Why are we here? How are we to find true fulfillment in life? What happens after we die? Throughout history Christians have seen great value in remaining focused completely on Christ, and it is impossible to be focused on Christ without pondering these ultimate questions.

The Church has constantly encouraged us to prayerfully ponder the inescapable realities of death, personal judgment, and Heaven and Hell. These things are of the greatest significance and have traditionally been called the four last things.

Death: An Event Shrouded in Mystery

"Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned" (Rom 5:12).

One thing that is certain in life is that there will be death. It is inevitable. Yet if our first parents had not sinned, death would not be our lot. God had commanded Adam to avoid only one desirable thing, *"for in the day that you eat of it you shall die"* (Gn 2:17). Yet Adam and Eve, seduced by the serpent who told them that God had lied to them (see Gn 3:4), ate the forbidden fruit and, as a result, death entered the world: *"you are dust, and to dust you shall return"* (Gn 3:19).

At some point in time, our lives will end, and

the world as we know it will fall away. But what happens after we die? Do we cease to exist and fall into eternal nothingness or is there something else, something greater and even more vast on the other side of death? Human beings, left to their own reason, cannot find an answer to this question. Death is perhaps the greatest of mysteries. It is the question that is perhaps closest to the human heart, because the truth about death closely concerns us all.

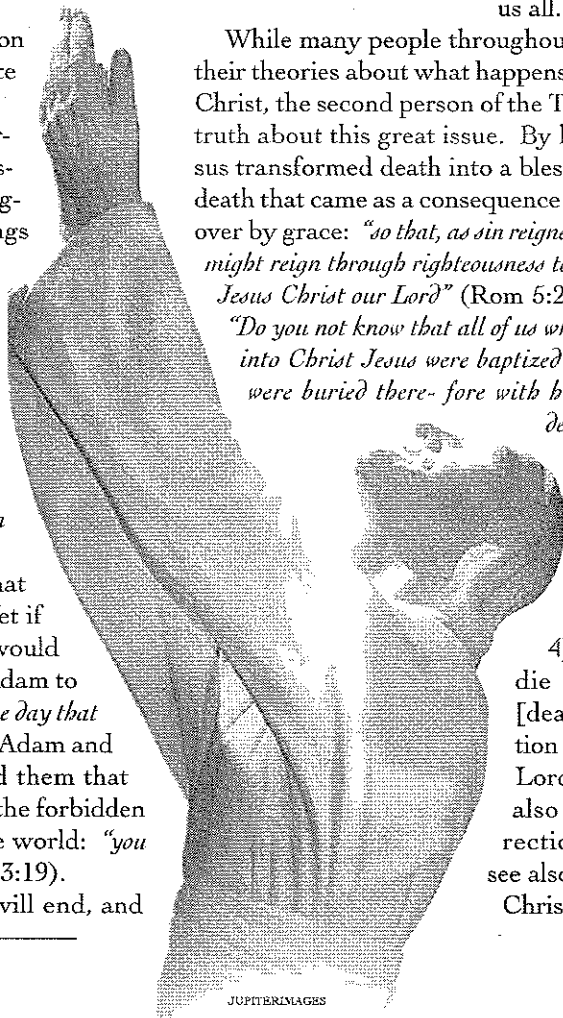
"By his own death, Jesus transformed death into a blessing."

While many people throughout history have had their theories about what happens after death, Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, revealed the truth about this great issue. By his own death, Jesus transformed death into a blessing. The curse of death that came as a consequence of sin is now taken over by grace: *"so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord"* (Rom 5:21). St. Paul asks, *"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried there-*

fore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:3-4).

"For those who die in Christ's grace [death] is a participation in the death of the Lord, so that they can also share his Resurrection"¹ (CCC 1006; see also 1 Cor 15:21).

Christian death, then, is



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¹ Cf. Romans 6:3-9; Philippians 3:10-11



Jesus as Judge, 12th century carved ivory panel

a consoling positive reality; we do not have to die alone. The baptized Christian knows that his or her life belongs to Christ and that death is the physical completion of the “dying with Christ” that began at Baptism. Jesus opens up his own death to allow us to die with him; his obedience and love to God the Father can become our obedience: *“For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life”* (Rom 5:10).

It is in dying and departing from this world that the Christian becomes fully incorporated into the redeeming death of Jesus Christ and reaches out in hope towards the promised final home in Heaven: *“If, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ”* (Rom 5:17).

While death will always remain shrouded in mystery, the teaching of Christ gives us firm hope and assurance in preparing for our own death and in coping

with the death of those we love. Many people today stand panicked and helpless in the face of death. It seems such loss and a great uncertainty. It is difficult enough dealing with the loss of one we love, but it is devastating to face death without a deep faith in God and some understanding of the last things. *“When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?’”* (1 Cor 15:54-55).

Death: What we Learn from the Funeral Vigil Liturgy

It has been the case since the earliest days of Christianity that in order to know what Christians believe, we should pay attention to their prayers. The Church prays what she believes. What follows are some of the prayers contained in the liturgy of the funeral vigil, the prayer service the night before the funeral. The prayers shed light on the meaning of Christian death.

At the beginning of the liturgy, during the Invitation to Prayer, the celebrant prays, “My brothers and sisters, we believe that all the ties of friendship and affection which knit us as one throughout our lives do not unravel with death” (*Order of Christian Funerals* 71). The bonds of love which unite members of a family or one friend to another remain strong even after a person dies. The celebrant continues, “Confident that God always remembers the good we have done and forgives our sins, let us pray, asking God to gather N. to himself” (*Order of Christian Funerals* 72). This prayer clearly sets forth a proper Christian mindset in the face of death. While it is true that *“the wages of sin is death”*, Jesus by his death conquered death and extends to every person *“the free gift of God [which] is eternal life”* (Rom 6:23). “Lord,” the Church prays, “for your faithful people life is changed, not ended. When the body of our earthly dwelling lies in death we gain an everlasting dwelling place in Heaven”² (CCC 1012). We are pilgrims on earth because our true homeland is in Heaven. The Christian stares into the grave not only confident that the Lord is calling his loved one home but also assured that he will see these very bones resurrected into a glorified body on the last day. Jesus won the victory over death. Without the Resurrection Jesus’ death on the cross would be a sign of failure and defeat to us. But he has arisen and so we glory in the triumph of the cross and look with eyes of faith and

² *Roman Missal*, Preface of Christian Death I

hope past the tomb to the eternal life he promised.

The Church never tires in her work to bring all peoples back into the family of God and so especially at death she commends them to the Father's love and mercy with the following prayer:

Go forth, Christian soul, from this world
in the name of God the almighty Father,
who created you,
in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of the living
God,
who suffered for you,
in the name of the Holy Spirit,
who was poured out upon you....
May you return to [your Creator]
who formed you from the dust of the earth.
May holy Mary, the angels, and all the saints
come to meet you as you go forth ...
May you see your Redeemer face to face
(CCC 1020).³

The Particular Judgment and The Last Judgment

"When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food ...' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink?...' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand,

*"There is no joy more complete, no
love more rapturous,
no life more fulfilling."*



The Death of St. Joseph, by Jacob Walch, 1440-1516

"Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food ..." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?" Then he will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me." And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Mt 25:31-46).

This parable, taken from the New Testament, describes judgment in terms of the final encounter with Christ when he returns at the end of time. "He will come again to judge the living and the dead," we say in the Creed. Such a right the Father gave to him because he suffered death on the cross for our sins. On the last day, Jesus will return as this parable describes and all the dead will be raised, "those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment" (Jn 5:29). This event is called the Last Judgment and will mark the end of time and the coming of the Kingdom of God

in its fullness. All those who have died in Christ will be given back their own bodies transformed and glorified, and will enter into the fullness of God's Kingdom in Heaven.

Jesus not only speaks about the Last Judgment but also about the judgment that immediately follows death. He tells a story about the rich man who, when he died, was punished for his lack of charity toward the poor man Lazarus (see Lk 16:19-31). This story illustrates that at death our lives will be laid bare and we will be judged on our love. This immediate judgment the Church has commonly called the *particular judgment* because it is given individually to each person at death. It is not meant to scare us

³ *Order of Christian Funerals, Prayer of Commendation*

but to awaken in us the responsibility we have for our neighbor. And it calls to mind the need for our faith to bear fruit because faith without works is dead (see Jas 2:17).

Heaven: Life in Pure Love

"In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (Jn 14:2-3).

God created us out of his great love so that we might eventually be able to share in his very life. He wants us to share in the deep life of communion that exists between the divine persons of the Trinity. There is no joy more complete, no love more rapturous, no life more fulfilling. Entrance into Heaven will be the experience of entering into the perfect love that exists between the Persons of the Trinity. Trinitarian love is total. It holds nothing back. It is the full giving of self, out of love for the other. If we could imagine our most exhilarating moment of love and joy experienced on this earth, this moment is but a tiny taste of the infinite love and joys of Heaven and the ecstasy that participation in Trinitarian love will bring us. Jesus instituted the Church in order to shower us with sanctifying grace through the sacraments — grace which would make us holy and make us partakers of divine love and Trinitarian life. In God we will find true happiness; he is our final beatitude because our natural desire for happiness will be fulfilled. "Whoever sees God has obtained all the goods of which he can conceive"⁴ (CCC 2548).

While it is true that every human being was created to spend eternity in Heaven, not everyone goes there. Who then goes to Heaven? Only a person who dies in God's grace, free from any mortal sin, is able to go to Heaven. A person must also have been perfectly purified from the effects of sin in order to enter Heaven (see Rv 21:27). This purification can happen here on earth or in Purgatory (see handout on Purgatory). Why must a person be free from mortal sin and also free from the stains of that sin to enter Heaven? Sin is, by its very nature, a rejection of God. If a person dies having rejected God, God will honor his or her free choice. He will not force us to love him — we must freely choose to love him and live in obedience to

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his holy will. The damage left by sin leaves us marred and incomplete; because of sin we are not wholly ourselves.

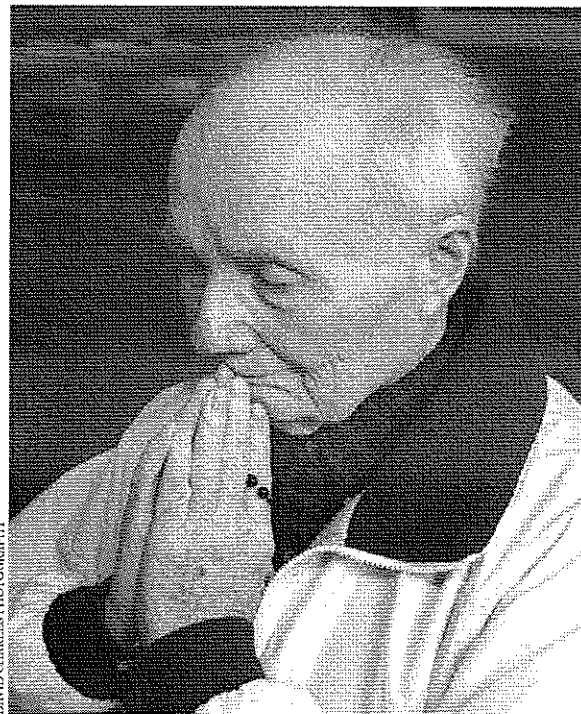
In order to be united to

God in Heaven, we must be entirely ready to greet him, with our whole being, free of all stain or wrinkle. Therefore, the damage caused by sin must be atoned for and made right, and only when a person is perfectly pure of heart will he be able to see God (see Mt 5:8). Every trial, every suffering, every moment of life provides us with the opportunity to be perfected in love. If we make our lives an effort at learning sacrificial, Christ-like love, and if we stay close to the sacraments that give us the power to be truly transformed in love, we will be made perfect. We will enter Heaven and our deepest longings will be satisfied.

Hell: Eternal Separation from the Trinity

"The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his Kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father" (Mt 13:41-43).

God loves us so immeasurably and wants us to spend life everlasting with him in Heaven, but he does



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⁴ St. Gregory of Nyssa, De beatitudinibus 6 from J.P. Migne, ed., Patrologia Graeca 44, 1265A (Paris: 1857-1866)



The Peaceful Death of the Just, 19th century lithograph

not force us to love him. He wants us to spend eternity with him — but the choice is ours. We have the chance to turn to Jesus while we are alive, but at the moment of death, our choice is frozen, suspended forever in time (see CCC 1021). We either die in friendship with the Lord or we die out of his grace, in persistent rejection of his love to the end. A person who dies in a state of mortal sin has made a tragic, yet free choice — and will spend eternity separated from God by his or her own choice.

Hell is a place of unimaginable pain and suffering. In the Gospels, Jesus uses a straightforward realism in describing the pain of Hell. He describes it as a place of consuming fire and eternal anguish (see Mt 13:42, 50; Mk 9:43, 48; Rv 21:8). It is the dwelling place of Satan, the fallen angels (called demons), and all those who have rebelled against God.

The greatest suffering that the souls in Hell experience is the pain of being eternally separated from God (see 2 Thes 1:9). The Church has traditionally called this punishment the “pain of loss.” While on earth, it is possible for us to numb our desire for God by acquiring worldly things and focusing on earthly pleasures. When we die, these things can no longer satisfy us. Sin will have lost its appeal and the pleasures we had thought so enticing will be seen in all their emptiness. We will be confronted with the fact that our souls were made for God — and it is God, who through our free choices during life, we have rejected. The person in Hell, through his or

her own choice, will have lost God who is perfect peace, love, and joy — and this loss will cause everlasting torment.

Jesus Christ: Our Just and Merciful Judge

Knowing what we know about the judgment that each of us will face when we die, knowing something about the life of hatred and despair which consumes the souls in Hell, as well as the joys of Trinitarian love in Heaven, we must throw ourselves on the mercy of Jesus. It is Christ who is our Judge — and his judgment is just (see 2 Pt 2:4-7, 9). Every offense against God, every offense against our neighbor will be recalled, and an account must be given: *“Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil”* (Eccl 12:13-14). However, if we have sought his mercy and forgiveness, our sins will be cast aside. Our Lord is just, but he is also full of mercy and compassion. He forgives us our sins and offenses, if we repent. If we stray away from him, he waits for us with open arms, calling us gently back into an intimate and loving relationship. He constantly calls. He never ceases offering us his mercy. He wants to spend eternal life with us. If we wait until tomorrow to turn to him and give him our hearts, we may have waited too long. *“Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold now is the day of salvation”* (2 Cor 6:2).

(CCC 678-682, 1005-1014, 1020-1029, 1033-1041, 2548)