

The Four Last Things

Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell

- *'Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.'* - Dante's Inferno
- *'Life is passing. Eternity draws closer; soon we will live the very life of God.'* - St. Therese of Lisieux

Why are they called the “last things?”

- Because they are definitive
- Purgatory is not included in the traditional list of the last things because, by definition, purgatory is temporary.
 - All those in purgatory are destined for the eternal bliss of heaven
 - In the end, there will be no one in purgatory

Death

- Death is not natural; i.e., it was not part of God's original creation. Death came as punishment for sin.
 - St. Paul reaffirms this in the New Testament, where he says "sin came into the world through one man (Adam) and death through sin" (Rom. 5:12) and a little later says, "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23).
- In the case of those justified by grace in Jesus Christ, death loses its penal character and becomes a mere consequence of sin and the gateway to eternal life in heaven.
- Death consists of the separation of the soul from the body

Death

- It is wise to remember the fact of our own mortality often...
 - “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain wisdom of heart.” (Ps 90:12)
 - “What mortal can live and not see death? Who can escape the power of the grave?” (Ps 89:49)
 - Monastic traditions – “Hodie mihi, cras tibi”
- Not macabre – rather a reminder that our time on earth is limited and that what we do now matters for eternity. Moreover, it reminds us that as Christians our hope lies with Christ in heaven – not in this world.

Particular Judgment

- After death, a soul is immediately judged to either heaven or hell. This is called the “particular judgment.”
- Catholic teaching thus opposes several other theories:
 - that the souls of the departed sleep until the Resurrection
 - that disembodied souls can remain about the earth lingering in the form of ghosts or spirits,
 - that souls are reincarnated into new bodies
 - Or that people who die in mortal sin can nevertheless have a chance to repent after death.

Fixity of Will

- When death occurs, the will of the soul is fixed in whatever state it was in when it passed from its body
- At our particular judgment, in the presence of Christ – who is Truth itself – the truth of each one’s relationship with God will be laid bare.
 - “For there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed, and there is nothing secret that will not become known and come to light.” (Lk 8:17)
- Those who died rejecting God have their wills fixed against him, and those who died in love and friendship with God have their wills fixed for him.
- Repentance after death is not possible

Hell

- Those who die in a state of mortal sin without repenting are judged immediately to hell
- It is a state of eternal separation from God.
- Hell is necessary for those who freely choose to ignore, offend or hate God
 - God will not compel love
 - Because we have the freedom to choose God and to love him, that means we also have the freedom to reject him.

Hell

- Jesus warned about the reality of hell many times:
 - Mt 3:12 “He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”
 - Mt 5:22 “whoever says ‘you fool’ will be liable to fiery Gehenna”
 - Mt 8:12 “they will be driven into the outer darkness, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.”
 - Mt 10:28 “Rather, fear the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna.”
 - Mt 25:41 “depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”
 - Mk 9:43 “better to enter into life maimed than with two hands to go into Gehenna, into the unquenchable fire.”
 - Lk 13:28 “And there will be wailing and grinding of teeth when you see (them) in Heaven and you yourselves are cast out.”

The Pains of Hell

- The primary pain of hell is called the *pain of loss*, by which is meant several things:
 - The pain of being excluded from God's presence for all eternity
 - The knowledge that it will continue forever without possibility of respite
 - The knowledge that it could have been otherwise
 - The understanding that it is entirely one's own fault.
 - From Dante's *Inferno*, the sign above the entrance to hell said: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

The Pains of Hell

- The secondary pain of hell is called the *pain of sense*.
- The Bible uses words like “unquenchable fire” and “brimstone” to describe the pains of hell
- What causes this pain has never been dogmatically clarified, but it is Catholic doctrine that such a pain exists.
- But the Saints have written about it...

Objection: A loving God would not send anybody to hell.

- God is indeed pure love, but he is also perfectly just and infinitely holy
- All of these attributes are one because God is also completely simple.
- His holiness and justice are not opposed to his love but are part of it.
- He does not act out of love sometimes and then out of justice at other times. All his actions are loving and just.

Objection: A loving God would not send anybody to Hell.

- No person is condemned to hell that did not merit it during his life.
- God has done everything to warn people about hell and induce them to avoid it
- It is people, by their own obstinate will, who persist in sin and send themselves to hell despite God.
- If the wicked are not punished, then the rewards of the righteous become unjust. God is infinitely just and will reward everybody according to what they have merited on earth.

Objection: Nobody is really bad enough to go to hell.

- This assertion misunderstands the gravity of sin. A single mortal sin committed once is enough to damn a soul if that person were to die impenitent in that sin, because mortal sin deprives us of God's grace, which is the prerequisite for entering heaven.
- We cannot be united with God unless we freely choose to love him... 'he who does not love remains in death' (1 Jn 3:14)...To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from him for ever by our own free choice." CCC 1033

Heaven

- Those souls who, at the moment of death, are free from all guilt of sin and punishment for sin, enter immediately into the bliss of heaven.
- The bliss of heaven consists primarily in the vision of God. This is called the ‘beatific vision.’
- Here on earth God is perceived through faith and pursued in hope; in heaven, faith and hope come to an end and we arrive at knowledge and of the vision of God face to face.

The Beatific Vision

- This joy in the presence and vision of God is the primary bliss of heaven.
- There is a secondary bliss of heaven that consists in perfect union in love with all the members of the Church, the saints and angels, in addition to the happiness derived from reunification with family and friends and the joy of receiving a resurrected body
- Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness (CCC 1024).

The Beatific Vision

- There is absolutely nothing better than heaven...in fact, nothing we can possibly desire or possess on earth even remotely comes close
 - “Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it so much as dawned on man what God has ready for those who love him.”
1 Cor 2:9
- There is inequality in the beatific vision;
 - Because of their merits, some will see God clearer than others and thus receive more joy and glory.
 - The Council of Trent taught that a justified person merits an increase of the heavenly glory by good works.
 - Nevertheless, “there will be no envy on account of the unequal glory, since the unity of love will reign in all”

Heaven described...

- Perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity, a communion of life and love with God, with the Blessed Virgin Mary, the angels and Saints and all the blessed
- The ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme and definitive happiness
- Full and perfect possession of the fruits of the redemption accomplished by Christ
- Christ makes “partners” in his heavenly glorification those who have believed in him and remained faithful to his will.
- Heaven is the blessed community of all who are perfectly incorporated into Christ, the perfection of the Communion of Saints
- The blessedness of heaven is without end

Heaven described...

- Eternal life, boundless joy, truth, beauty and love in eternal communion with God and all the righteous
- Scriptural analogies...
 - Life, light, peace, a wedding feast, a joyful banquet, the Father's house, the heavenly Jerusalem, paradise
 - Complete and total rest, peace, satisfaction, endless joy in the knowledge that it will last forever
 - It can't be adequately described, but the Saints tried...

Final thoughts...

- Venerable Fulton Sheen: “love without suffering is heaven, suffering without love is hell, suffering with love is purgatory.”
- Saint John Vianney: “We must get to heaven!! O my dear parishioners, let us endeavor to get there! There we shall see God. How happy we shall feel! If the parish is converted, we shall all go there in procession with the parish priest at the head.”

Next Week...

- The Seven Deadly Sins and the Sacrament of Reconciliation
- Catechumens!
 - Save the date: Sunday, February 21
 - Rite of Sending – 9:30 a.m. Mass at Nativity
 - Rite of Election – 3:00 p.m. at St. Bonaventure
- Sources: NABRE, Catechism of the Catholic Church, *Catholic Christianity* by Peter J. Kreeft.