



THE LAST THINGS

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“For God formed man to be imperishable; the image of his own nature he made him. But by the envy of the devil, death entered the world, and they who are in his possession experience it.”

-Wisdom 2:23-24

“For it is appointed for men to die once; then after this, the judgment.”

-Hebrews 9:27

Death

Death is a reality in human life. All men are confronted with the reality of their own death, which can come at any time in any way and cut them off forever from the land of the living. Man lives his days under this inevitable shadow. Rich or poor, of whatever nation or race, death levels all people in the end. “For our allotted time is the passing of a shadow, and there is no return from our death, because it is sealed up and no one turns back” (Wis. 2:5).

Despite pleasant sounding platitudes about “death being part of life” and death being natural, the Catholic Church teaches that death is not natural; i.e., it was not part of God’s original creation. Death came as punishment for sin. Man was originally created with an immortal soul and a body that was meant to live immortally as well; through the sin of our first parents through the envy of the devil, death entered the world (Wis. 2:23-24). St. Paul reaffirms this in the New Testament, where he says “sin came into the world through one man 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, death loses its penal character and becomes a mere consequence of sin.

Death consists of the separation of the soul from the body. Different medical definitions notwithstanding, true death does not occur until the soul is separated from the body, a condition which cannot be monitored by scientific method.

Particular Judgment

After death comes the judgment (Heb. 9:27). There is a strong tradition that after death the soul of the departed is ushered into God’s presence by their guardian angel, but this is a matter of speculation.

Immediately after the death, the possibility of a soul meriting ends, as does its chance to repent of sin. After death, a soul is immediately judged to either heaven or hell. Pope Benedict XII in the dogmatic constitution *Benedictus Deus* (1336) taught that the souls of the just go immediately to heaven where they enjoy the beatific vision and the souls of those in mortal sin go right to hell and are subject to its torments. This immediate judgment is called the “particular judgment.”¹

¹ The General Judgment will be treated later with the Second Coming.

Catholic teaching thus opposes several other theories: the theory that the souls of the departed sleep until the Resurrection (the “soulsleep” theory), that disembodied souls can remain about the earth lingering in the form of ghosts or spirits, that souls are reincarnated into new bodies, and that people who die in mortal sin can nevertheless have a chance to repent after death.

Those who are in need of intermediate purification before entry into heaven enter the state of purgatory.

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; thus, those who died rejecting God have their wills fixed against God. Therefore, repentance after death is not possible because the souls of the damned have no desire to repent after death. They have their wills turned towards evil and it will be so for all eternity.

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. This vision is of a supernatural nature and requires a supernaturally elevated intellect. It is not a corporeal vision (though it is uncertain what we will see with our corporeal eyes) but a vision of pure intellectual knowledge, in which God is known. Here on earth God is perceived through faith; in heaven, faith comes to an end and we arrive at knowledge.

The vision of God is not passive, as when we look at something with our physical eyes. Rather, it is dynamic and active. The vision of God is an exchange of divine love and divine joy. 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 bliss derived from reunification with family and friends and the joy of receiving a resurrected body (see below). As the catechism says, “Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness” (CCC 1024).

There is inequality in the beatific vision; some 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” (St. Augustine, *In Ioan. Tr.* 67, 2).

Hell

Those who die in a state of mortal sin are judged immediately to hell. Hell, like purgatory and heaven, is better thought of as a state of being than a physical place (though there is no reason it cannot be physical as well). It is a state of eternal separation from God.

Jesus warned people more about hell than any other thing (see Mt. 3:12, 5:22,29, 8:12, 22:13,10:28, 23:15, Mk. 9:43-47, Lk. 13:28) and the Fathers are unanimous in its reality; St. Ignatius of Antioch (c. 115 AD) wrote that “any one who corrupts the faith of God, for which Jesus Christ was crucified, by evil teaching, will go into the unquenchable fire; and so will the person who listens to him” (*Ep. Ad Eph. 16*).

The pain of hell is of two types: the primary pain of hell is called the *pain of loss*, by which is meant several things: first, the pain of being excluded from God’s presence for all eternity; second, the knowledge that it’s duration will continue forever without possibility of respite; third, the knowledge that it could have been otherwise, and fourth, the understanding that it is entirely one’s own fault.

The secondary pain of hell is called the *pain of sense*. It is unknown what this pain is; the Bible uses words like “fire”, “worm” and “brimstone” to describe the pains of hell. Theologians are uncertain as to what these refer to; some Church Fathers took them to refer to literal fire, others simply posited some kind of external agent that caused pain to the souls of the damned. What causes this pain has never been dogmatically clarified, but it is Catholic doctrine that such a pain exists.

It is of faith (*de fide*) that Hell, like Heaven, is eternal in its duration.

Because the doctrine of hell is so often attacked by those that deny the Catholic faith and is often disbelieved by many, it bears some delving into. The objections to Hell can be reduced to a few arguments:

God is pure love. A loving God would not send anybody to Hell.

First, God is indeed pure love, but He is also perfectly just and infinitely *holy*; furthermore, 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. Therefore, he does not act out of love sometimes and then out of justice at other times. All His actions are loving and just.

Second, no person is condemned to hell that did not merit it during their 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 earned; those who die in mortal sin without God’s grace cannot enter God’s presence and thus have nowhere else to go but to hell.

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 in that sin, because mortal sin deprives us of God’s grace, which is the prerequisite for entering heaven. No sanctifying grace, no heaven. Furthermore, none of us are really that good; except for some of the saints, most of us will commit at least one mortal sin sometime in our lives. It is presumptuous to think that you are too

good to be sent to hell. But for the grace of God, every one of us is capable of committing any sin.

We must also remember that those who die in mortal sin have their wills irrevocably fixed on evil; even if God offered them repentance, they would not choose it. In choosing sin they have preferred something before God and would stubbornly cling to their sin even if it took them to hell. The damned are miserable in hell, but they would be miserable in heaven, too.

Second Coming

In the Nicene Creed we profess, “He shall come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.” This coming of Christ at the end of time was foretold repeatedly by Jesus Himself: “The Son of Man shall come in the glory of His Father, and all the holy angels with Him; and then will render to every man according to his work” (Lk. 9:26. See also: Mt. 24:20, Lk. 21:27, Jn. 6:39). This coming again is referred to as the “Second Coming” of Christ.

As to the nature of the Second Coming, this is beyond the realm of speculation, but Jesus says that “as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so shall be the coming of the Son of Man” (Matt. 24:27). It is certain that the Second Coming will be an event of cosmic significance and will be witnessed by all men (*Didache* 16:8). This is opposed to the doctrines of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the adherents of the Protestant “Rapture” doctrine, both of which affirm a secret coming known only to the elect.

Though theoretically the Second Coming of Christ could happen at any moment, Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition list several things that are signs that the Second Coming is near; “signs of the times” as Christ calls them (Mt. 16:3).

- 1) The Preaching of the Gospel to the whole world (Mt. 24:14, Mk. 13:10)
- 2) The Conversion of the Jews (Rom. 11:25-32)
- 3) The Great Apostasy (Mt. 24:4, 2 Thess. 2:3)
- 4) The Appearance of the Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:3,9-11, 2 John 2:7, *Didache* 16:4)
- 5) Severe Tribulations (Mt. 24:9,29, Is. 13:10, 34:4)

Despite these signs, the time of the Second Coming is unknown to men. St. Paul teaches that “the day of the Lord shall come as a thief in the night” (1 Thess. 5:1-2). Some Catholic theologians also place a “Reign of Peace” between the tribulations of last days and the Second Coming.

Resurrection of the Dead

The bodily resurrection at the end of time was implicit in pre-Christian Judaism (see Hos. 6:3, Ezk. 37:1-14) though by no means explicit, and many Jews did not accept the doctrine of the resurrection (like the Sadducees). Jesus Himself corrects their error and teaches not only the resurrection of the just, but also of the wicked (Lk. 14:14, Mt. 5:29, 10:28). The General Resurrection is intimately linked with the Resurrection of Christ Himself:

“But now Christ is risen from the dead, the first fruits of them that sleep...as in Adam all die, so in Christ all shall be made alive. But every one in his own order: the first fruits, Christ: then they that are of Christ, who have believed in His coming.”

-I Cor. 15:20, 22-23

In His Resurrection, Christ unites humanity to Himself and links faith in the resurrection of believers to His own person: “I am the Resurrection and the Life” (John 11:25). “It is Jesus Himself who on the last day will raise up those who have believed in Him, who have eaten His body and drunk His blood” (CCC 994). Belief in the Resurrection of the dead is an essential element of the Christian faith from the earliest times.

“Let us consider, beloved, how the Master is continually proving to us that there will be a future resurrection, of which he has made the Lord Jesus Christ the firstling, by raising him from the dead. Let us look, beloved, at the resurrection which is taking place seasonally. Day and night make known the resurrection to us. The night sleeps, the day arises. Consider the plants that grow. How and in what manner does the sowing take place? The sower went forth and cast each of the seeds onto the ground; and they fall to the ground, parched and bare, where they decay. Then from their decay the greatness of the master’s providence raises them up, and from the one grain more grow and bring forth fruit”

-Pope St. Clement I, *Letter to the Corinthians* 24:1–6 [A.D. 80]

Aside from being taught by all of the Fathers and codified in all of the Creeds, the Resurrection was infallibly proclaimed by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), which taught, that at the second coming Jesus “will judge the living and the dead, to render to every person according to his works, both to the reprobate and to the elect. All of them will rise with their own bodies, which they now wear, so as to receive according to their deserts, whether these be good or bad [Rom. 2:6–11]” (Lateran IV, *Constitution* 1).

What is “rising?”

“God, in His almighty power, will definitively grant incorruptible life to our bodies by reuniting them with our souls, through the power of Jesus’ Resurrection” (CCC 997). The resurrected body is the same body which we now possess. I Cor. 15:53 says, “This corruptible must put on incorruption; and this mortal must put on immortality.”

Who will rise?

CCC 998: “All the dead will rise: “those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment.”

How will they be raised?

According to Tradition, the body will rise again in complete integrity, free from distortions, malformations and defects. St. Thomas teaches, “Man will rise again in the greatest natural perfection,” therefore in the state of mature age.

How will the Resurrected bodies differ from our earthly bodies?

The essence of understanding the Resurrected body is that all its properties come from the transfiguration and conformity of the soul to Christ and the perfect subjection of the body to the transfigured soul. Following the teaching of St. Paul and the Apostles, the Scholastic theologians distinguished four gifts of the Resurrected bodies of the just:

- 1) Impassibility: refers to the incapability of suffering, that is, inaccessibility to physical evils of all kinds, such as sorrow, hunger, sickness or death. The reason for this is the perfect subjection of the body to the soul.
- 2) Subtility: a spiritualized nature, *not* to be conceived as a transformation of the physical body into an ethereal substance. The model of the spiritual body is that of the risen Christ, who possessed, among other things, the ability to move through closed doors and had mastery over the laws of physics and nature.
- 3) Agility: the capability of the body to obey the soul with the greatest ease and speed of movement. This agility was manifested by the risen Body of Christ, which was suddenly present in the midst of His apostles, and which disappeared just as quickly (Lk. 24:31, Jn. 20:19-26). The intrinsic reason of agility lies in the perfect dominion over the body of the transfigured soul, to the extent that it moves the body.
- 4) Clarity: being free from everything deformed and being filled with beauty and radiance. Jesus assures us: “The just shall shine as the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Mt. 13:43). The archetype of this clarity is the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor. The reason for this *claritas* is the overflowing of the beauty of the transfigured soul onto the body. The grade of the transfiguration of the body will vary according to the degree of clarity of the soul, which is in proportion to the measure of the merits.

When will the Resurrection occur?

The Resurrection will definitively on the last day, at the end of the world. The Resurrection is closely linked with Christ’s Second Coming; some Fathers believed that the Resurrection and the Second Coming would happen simultaneously.

General Judgment & End of the World

Though every person is judged either to heaven or hell at the moment of death, after the Resurrection there will be a second judgment called the General Judgment. At this judgment, all men are judged together and every secret and desire of the heart is made manifest. The General Judgment serves the glorification of God and of the God-Man Jesus Christ by revealing the wisdom of God in the government of the world, His goodness and patience towards sinners and above all His rewarding justice.

“While in the particular judgment the human being is judged as an individual person, in the General Judgment he will be judged as a member of the human society, before the whole of humanity. The punishment or reward will be completed by its extension to the re-awakened bodies” (Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 494). At the General Judgment not only persons but also families, organizations, communities and nations will be judged collectively. The angels will participate in this judgment. By extension, all the just participate in the General Judgment as well. In consequence of their intimate association with Christ they pronounce with Him the sentence of rejection on the godless by appropriating to themselves Christ’s judgment.

Though not much is known about it, it is the common consensus of Tradition that the present world will be destroyed on the Last Day. As to the manner of the destruction of the world, nothing can be said with certainty. After this destruction, the world will be renewed. The nature of this new world is uncertain, but like our resurrected bodies, it is a spiritualized nature. The relation between the “new heavens and the new earth” and the state of being in heaven (the beatific vision) is still open to debate.

When God will be All in All...

“The end of the world and its renewal brings to a conclusion the work of Christ. As all enemies of the Kingdom of God are conquered, He surrenders overlordship to God the Father (1 Cor. 15:24), without however divesting Himself of the lordship and royal power founded in the Hypostatic Union. With the end of the world there begins the perfected lordship of God which is the ultimate object of the whole Creation and the final meaning of all human history.”

-Ott, pp. 496

For Further Reading: Ezk. 37:1-14; Wisdom 2:1-24; Matt. 24; Rom. 5:12-14; 6:20-23; 1 Cor. 15; Pope St. Clement I, *Letter to the Corinthians* [A.D. 80]; Constitution 1 of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215); Benedict XII, *Benedictus Deus* (1336); *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §988-1014; 1020-1060; C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*; Dr. Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, pp. 473-496;