

THE “LAST THINGS”

INTRODUCTION

1. The Bible has no one coherent view on these subjects but a multitude of images, reflecting a variety of possible scenarios as to what happens at death and what ‘life beyond death’ might mean.
2. The Church’s teaching is greatly influenced by a particular Greek philosophical understanding of the human person as a unity of body and soul. This is not easily compatible with the Jewish understanding of the unity of the whole person whether in life or death. This is made even more complex by the early Church’s belief that the second coming of Jesus, called the Parousia, would take place soon, even in their lifetime. And so there was no sense of urgency to speculate on “where” or “how” people are after death, only whether they will share in that resurrection. All these worldviews must be kept in mind when unpacking the meaning of the language the Church uses in its teaching.
3. In dealing with such ‘limit language’ one always needs to ask: what core concern is being protected or feared to be lost, if this belief is let go of? This will help us not hold too tightly to images that are not meant to be taken as literal or absolute descriptions.
4. In the end there are two fundamental issues that frame the entire discussion. First, who is God and what kind of God is God? Secondly, did God the Father raise Jesus from the dead, and if so, what does that mean for the rest of humanity?
5. We need to have a certain humility in terms of what it means to die, to live in eternity, and all that is related to such ideas, because our language and concepts are limited and can as easily distort a proper understanding as provide one.

What We Profess:

Apostles’ Creed: *“I believe ... he [Jesus Christ] will come again to judge the living and the dead....I believe ... in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.”*

Nicene Creed: *“We believe...he [Jesus Christ] will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead....We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.”*

What We Pray:

When Gathering in the Presence of the Body:

“God of faithfulness, in your wisdom you have called your servant out of this world; release him/her from the bonds of sin, and welcome him/her into your presence, so that he/she may enjoy eternal light and peace and be raised up in glory with all your saints.”

At the Vigil:

“Lord our God, the death of our brother/sister recalls our human condition and the brevity of our lives on earth. But for those who believe in your love death is not the end, nor does it destroy the bonds that you forge in our lives. We share the faith of your Son’s disciples and the hope of the children of God. Bring the light of Christ’s resurrection to this time of testing and pain as we pray for [Name] and for those who love him/her.”

At the Funeral Mass:

“O God, in whom sinners find mercy and the saints find joy, we pray to you for our brother/sister, whose body we honor with Christian burial, that he/she may be delivered from the bonds of death. Admit him/her to the joyful company of your saints and raise him/her on the last day to rejoice in your presence forever.”

“In him who rose from the dead, our hope of resurrection dawned. The sadness of death gives way to the bright promise of immortality. Lord 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.”

“By your power you bring us to birth. By your providence you rule our lives. By your command you free us at last from sin as we return to the dust from which we came. Through the saving death of your son we rise at your word to the glory of the resurrection.”

At the Committal:

“Because God has chosen to call our brother/sister from this life to himself, we commit his/her body to the earth [or elements or resting place], for we are dust and unto dust we shall return. But the Lord Jesus Christ will change our mortal bodies to be like his in glory, for he is risen, the firstborn from the dead. So let us commend our brother/sister to the Lord, that the Lord may embrace him/her in peace and raise up his/her body on the last day.”

What We Live?

- How does faith in Jesus Christ and hope in sharing in his resurrection affect the way we live our lives?
- What awaits me/us when we die?
- Does faith in Christ’s resurrection take away from efforts to make this world a better place or give me/us courage to risk more to change things, since death is not the final word?
- Does the possibility of “hell” influence us at all?

Think about and write down one current image or idea you have regarding the focal topics for this evening:

- **Death**
- **Judgment**
- **Heaven**
- **Hell**

PART ONE: DEATH AND JUDGMENT

A. DEATH

Biblical Images:

1. As an accepted part of life; a long life with children and honor and status considered a blessing from God, for which a person will be duly esteemed and remembered.
2. As an entry into Sheol, considered as “in the depths of the earth”, the nether world, that the dead person goes down into ([Numbers 16.30](#); [Job 7.9](#); [Psalm 88.3](#), etc.); a place with ‘gates’ ([Isaiah 38.10](#), [Psalm 9.14](#), etc.). The Greek translation of the Bible uses Hades as the equivalent and this comes into the New Testament ([Matthew 11.23](#); [Luke 10.15](#), etc.) with the same type of imagery. [NB: as use of these images develops in late Judaism and in early Christianity the ‘place of the dead’ is sometimes demarcated between the ‘wicked dead’ who go into Gehenna and endure punishment there and the ‘righteous dead’ who await the resurrection from Sheol.]
3. As a consequence of sin and the power of sin, not part of God’s original plan for the universe ([Romans 5.12](#), [6.23](#); [1 Corinthians 15.21](#), [Revelations 2.11](#), etc.); in late Judaism and early Christianity it is tied as well to the seeming power the devil holds over the world.

Church Teaching:

“Death is the end of earthly life. Our lives are measured by time, in the course of which we change, grow old and, as with all living beings on earth, death seems like the normal end of life. That aspect of death lends urgency to our lives: remembering our mortality helps us realize that we have only a limited time in which to bring our lives to fulfillment.” [\[CCC #1007\]](#)

“Death is a consequence of sin...Even though man’s nature is mortal, God had destined him not to die. Death was therefore contrary to the plans of God the Creator and entered the world as a consequence of sin.” [\[CCC, #1008\]](#)

“Death is transformed by Christ. Jesus, the Son of God, also himself suffered the death that is part of the human condition....The obedience of Jesus has transformed the curse of death into a blessing.” [\[CCC, #1009\]](#)

Commentary:

1. The definitive and complete separation of the human soul from the human body is the Church’s way of describing the moment of death. At that time the body is honored as the symbol of all that the person was and lived, but the body ‘goes to dust,’ finishing out its mortality. The soul, as a direct creation of God, non material and immortal, ‘goes to God’ with all the experiences that have been integrated into it, many or few, good or bad, life-giving or sinful.
2. Death enables a person’s life to be put into a complete whole. There can still be many unfilled strands of life at death, but what a person has done or failed to do in their freedom on earth is now complete. I.e., no reincarnation, no second or third chances.
3. In a theological rather than natural sense, death is an evil, contrary to God’s plan for the creatures created in his image and likeness; often characterized as a power of or even under the rule of the devil; something that must be destroyed, and so Christ’s resurrection has in principle done just that.

4. Remember that death takes us “out of time and place” so that our language has to be carefully interpreted if we use phrases such as “he/she is going to heaven” or “he/she is in a place of happiness” or “has to spend some time in purification before going to heaven,” etc. [The late Pope John Paul II talked about translating such time and place language into relational language.](#) Death allows our ‘state of being’ in relationship with God to reach an unbreakable communion with God or a definitive refusal of such communion.

B. JUDGMENT

Biblical Images:

1. [Romans 14.7-13](#) (each will ‘stand before the judgment seat of God’).
2. [Matthew 25: 31-46](#) (the ‘sheep and the goats’);

Church Teaching:

Particular (Individual) Judgment

“Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ” [\[CCC, #1021\]](#)

“Each human being receives their eternal retribution in their immortal soul at the very moment of their death, in a particular judgment that refers their life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven—through a purification or immediately—or immediate and everlasting damnation.” [\[CCC, #1022\]](#)

Final (Last) Judgment

“The Last Judgment will come when Christ returns in glory. Only the Father knows the day and the hour; only the Father determines the moment of its coming. Then through his Son Jesus Christ he will pronounce the final word on all history. We shall know the ultimate meaning of the whole work of creation and of the entire economy of salvation and understand the marvelous ways by which his Providence led everything toward its final end. The Last Judgment will reveal that God’s justice triumphs over all the injustices committed by God’s creatures and that God’s love is stronger than death.” [\[CCC, #1040\]](#)

Commentary:

1. Not that God or Christ judges us in some way known only to them. Rather, our lives form a judgment on us, which is definitively confirmed at the time of death and judgment. All truly human action has both an objective and subjective judgment attached to it. It is either, truly and objectively, acting in a way that moves the world toward wholeness or not. Subjectively, one freely embraces that action or to some degree or other has that freedom obscured.

2. A God of love and mercy but also a God of justice. We will not understand the Church’s teaching unless we recognize the interplay of these two realities. God is love and God’s love and mercy is stronger than sin and death. But God’s love includes perfect justice and so we are accountable for all

that we have freely chosen to do or freely failed to do. We are asked to have complete faith in both God's love and God's justice so that we don't live life in fear of a vengeful God, but also that we do live life responsibly.

3. Ultimately only two possibilities: communion with God (heaven) or freely choosing to reject such communion (hell).

4. Near death experiences and faith: Much has been written on 'near death experiences' where a person 'sees a light' or loved ones or a tunnel, etc. But remember, heaven or the afterlife is not a place, has no physical dimensions. Those experiences tie into the psychic imagination of the person and are not a sure guide as to what awaits us. Our faith is not in some scientific proof or assured personal experience that life after death exists but is in a loving God who shared in our human life in Jesus of Nazareth, whose death and resurrection is now permanently part of the reality of the universe. In other words, we trust in God; let God be God and know that what needs to happen, will happen.

Questions? Comments?

PART TWO: HEAVEN AND HELL

A. HEAVEN

Biblical Images:

1. "heaven and earth" [[Genesis 1.1](#)]: a way to describe the whole universe.
2. As a way to distinguish the dwelling place of God from that of humans, though God cannot be "confined" to heaven or seen as literally in a place. [[Psalm 104.2](#), [Psalm 115.163](#)]. Out of this will come the Jewish use of "Heaven" as another way to simply name God. [[1 Maccabees 3.18,19](#); also "kingdom of heaven in Matthew rather than Kingdom of God as other gospels].
3. The place of eternal life lived in/with God through Jesus Christ. [*"This day you will be with me in Paradise"*, [Luke 23.43](#); *"we shall become like him and see him 'face to face'"*, [1 John 3.2](#); etc.]

Church Teaching:

"This perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity—this communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, the angels and all the blessed—is called 'heaven.' Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness." [CCC, #1024]

Commentary:

1. We are destined for heaven, *"God predestines no one to go to hell."* [CCC, #1037] Heaven and hell are not equal options in Catholic teaching. Not equal on a balancing scale, teetering between the two. Rather, weighted in favor of heaven. We are constituted, pointed toward, made to find our fullness in communion with God. Hell is a possibility due to our freedom, but we are predestined for heaven, not

hell, because God desires that all people be saved (1 Tim 2.4). We are made to be in full, complete and permanent union with God. *You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.*" (St. Augustine, Confessions, Book I).

2. Heaven is not a place but a relationship of complete and full communion with the triune God. Notice some implications from this. Heaven not 'dull and boring' or an endless succession of doing 'there' what we do 'here.' Rather, it is an ever-deepening experience of the mystery of God's love. Just think, we can spend an eternity learning more about, becoming more like, enter into a deeper relationship with the one who loves us more than anyone else and through God with all who share in that love, including our families, friends, those we do not yet know, etc.! God's reality is inexhaustibly more than we can ever imagine. There is still 'work' to do 'in heaven'—the work of the saints in communion with the whole body of Christ. And there can be 'growth and new experience' 'in heaven', because God's mystery is inexhaustible.

3. Purgatory: In Catholic teaching this reality of the power of God's love but also perfect justice led to a sense that a process of purification must take place for those souls that are not so alienated from God as to be judged worthy of hell but are not so in communion with God to enter into the full communion of heaven. The Eastern Church generally preferred to talk of 'purification' whereas the western (Roman) Church developed the language of purgatory; talked about the 'poor souls in purgatory'; offered indulgences (sacrifices and prayers) to 'lessen' the 'time spent in' purgatory.

Again, not a place and so it needs to be re-interpreted in relational terms. The core understanding of purgatory is that one is already claimed for heaven and that is not in doubt. Thus it is not an experience of punishment so much as a purification, a stripping away of all that keeps us from full communion with God, a state of knowing what full communion means but not being able to experience it yet.

Thus, not helpful to think of indulgences as automatic 'get out of purgatory free' cards. Indulgences were/are a way for the Church to encourage spiritual practices that can lead to conversion and to doing good works that help repair the damage the consequences of sin has done. Remember, that 'time' does not exist after our death and so how a soul is present to us or is affected by our prayers and actions has to be left to God. Just like communion with God or refusal of such communion begins in our life now, so too does our working to heal the consequences of sin. Think of the consequences of sin. Even when we are sorry and are forgiven, the effects ripple outward. All actions that help heal those effects are 'indulgences', are lessening the consequences of sin that keep us and others from full communion with God.

But because of the abuse of such ideas, even thinking that such indulgences can be bought, and the way they helped precipitate the Reformation, the language of indulgences tends not to be very helpful and easily misunderstood, even though the Church still believes in the reality behind them, rightly understood.

4. Limbo: The recognition of the primacy of God's love makes unnecessary the hypothesis of limbo, a medieval way of trying to do justice to the biblical passages that says one must be baptized to be saved (even if only baptism of desire) and those that talk about God's love. How can God send an innocent child to hell or non-Christians who have no real ability to choose Christianity? The hypothesis suggested that God might give such people a 'natural happiness' on the 'limbus' or 'margins' of heaven but not full communion. Again, when we no longer think of 'places' where the souls are, the idea of

limbo becomes very difficult to maintain, and in fact the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no longer teaches it in any way.

B. HELL

Biblical Images:

1. In some passages, *Sheol / Hades* refers to the abode for the wicked who are dead, not all the dead, a pit of darkness, where one cannot praise God ([Isaiah 38.18](#); [Psalm 6.6](#). etc.)

2. *Gehenna* and its fires. The valley of Hinnom, southwest of Jerusalem, the scene of child sacrifice, was repugnant to faithful Jews and became a place to toss refuse and garbage. The concept of Gehenna was used in the period between the Old and New Testaments as a symbol of fiery judgment on all the wicked, a use that Jesus takes up in the gospels ([Matthew 5.22, 29-30](#); [Mark 9.43](#); [Luke 12.5](#), [Revelations 20.10](#), etc.). This allowed for a distinction between Hades (the netherworld of all the dead) and Gehenna (the place of final judgment and torment of the wicked). It also solidifies the imagery of fire that became the standard image in our tradition.

Church Teaching:

"We cannot be united with God unless we freely choose to love him. But we cannot love God if we sin gravely against him, against our neighbor or against ourselves....This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called 'hell.' [CCC, #1033]

Commentary:

1. Hell is a possibility for all, due to our freedom. But the Church has never declared that someone is 'in hell,' even if it was commonly thought that many ended up in hell.

2. Again, need to think in terms of a state of being and a relationship. Hell is that state of being which permanently and definitively refuses communion with the triune God. God always honors human freedom. Communion with God is never coerced.

3. Although the typical imagination focuses on the punishment and torment that is inflicted on those in hell, the definitive punishment is self-afflicted—refusing the communion with God that God offers. It is our sense of justice, of needing people who have done evil to experience the full extent of the evil they have done, that leads to images of punishment and torment.

4. Question that many theologians ask today: Can God's invitation of love, relentless and consistent, be refused for an eternity? And many think "No, in the end God's love will find a way." If so, then all will one day share freely and consciously in the salvation achieved by Jesus' death and resurrection. The technical theological term for this belief is *apokatastasis*. We do not have to believe this to be true, but Catholic teaching does not forbid it, and at the very least we all are asked to pray for and hope for the salvation of all, because that is God's desire.

5. On the other hand, we should not doubt that God's justice is a perfect justice. How that plays out is in God's hands. But it means that we have our time on earth to do right by God, self, and others. That is the time within which we need to strive to live the way God wants us to and to help repair and heal the brokenness of this world. In doing so we will suffer at times and take on burdens that can be

difficult. The Church's teaching on hell is a warning or reminder to us that it is much better for us to have conversion in our lives now, and take on the necessary burdens now—no matter how difficult—than face God's justice after we die.

Questions? Comments?

PART THREE: RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

Biblical Images:

1. Growing belief in a resurrection from the dead, a final and general resurrection that would necessarily for Jewish faith include a bodily dimension.
2. Jesus' appearances in his resurrected body (see [Luke 24.13-35, 36-43](#); [John 20.19-31](#), etc.): Clearly there is a bodily dimension to the disciples' experience of the risen Lord; they had already seen/heard that the tomb was empty. But they don't immediately recognize Jesus until he speaks or does something. And his body is not bound by the laws of nature, a way to convey the difference of the resurrected body.
3. [1Corinthians 15.16-58](#) is the key NT text on the resurrection of the body; NB: for Paul he thought in terms of the Jewish general resurrection and the Christian (of the day) idea that Christ was coming soon and so some still living will see that consummation, though their bodies too would be transformed.

Church Teaching:

1. *"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]
2. *"For man, this consummation will be the final realization of the unity of the human race, which God willed from creation and of which the pilgrim Church has been 'in the nature of sacrament.' ...For the cosmos, Revelation affirms the profound common destiny of the material world and man..."* [CCC, #1045, 1046]

Commentary:

1. This is an important component in Christian faith. It is very common for people to talk about 'life after death' or the 'afterlife,' presuming that the human person continues to live in some spiritual way after death. But Christian faith insists on the resurrection of the body as part of the total picture. If the body (and thus creation) does not share in the final transformation, then the body (and creation) is not important. This was a heresy that the Church had to fight from the beginning. And, indeed, even though Christian theology used a lot of language from Greek philosophy to explain its concepts, faith in the resurrection of the body safeguarded it from becoming too negative toward creation. In classic Greek philosophy the soul was immortal and only temporarily attached to the body. That led to one of

two conclusions for many. Either it didn't matter how one treats the body—and thus there were no moral limits to what one did with one's body or another person's body—or, the body was holding the soul down and bodily things were bad. In that case, the best thing to do was to discipline and minimize the body's hold on one's life. Faith in the resurrection of the body means that both of those alternatives were not accepted by the Church's teaching. We must honor the body, ours and everyone's, indeed all creation, as a gift that one day is meant to share in the full communion of heaven.

2. Because Scripture can be used to support both a 'rising on the last day' (cf. [1 Thessalonians 4.16](#), etc.) and give us a sense that we already partially share in the resurrection here and now (cf. [Colossians 2.12](#), [3.1](#), etc.), the Church's language is ambiguous as to how and when the resurrection of the body will occur. Language referring to 'on the last day' means that full consummation of the universe will not be complete until such resurrection occurs for all the just in its fullness, but the Church leaves open what that might mean for those who have already died. As noted previously, for Paul and the early Christians it was a common belief that the dead simply were dead and awaited the resurrection that would occur shortly. The Church's further reflection on what it means to be a body united with a soul led to the image that the souls of the saints are already with God 'in' heaven but await the final resurrection of their bodies at the end of time. But the doctrine on Mary's Assumption (that she has already been given her resurrected body) and reflection on the fact of Jesus' resurrection leaves open the possibility that such final resurrection takes place at the time of death.

3. What is clear is that 'body' does not mean our current bodies or a reconstituting of our bodily identity as it is now. 'Body' means that communion with God is not complete unless all of God's creation can one day share in it or definitively reject such communion. Also, it means that heaven is not a state of being absorbed into God and losing our own selves but a free communion of ourselves with God and through God with all others who are in communion with God.

4. "New heaven and a new earth": One way the NT captures this sharing of the whole universe in transformation is by talking about a 'new heaven and a new earth' (cf. [2 Peter 3.13](#), [Revelations 21.1](#)). The transformation of all creation is anticipated, not just individual lives. Again, the saints of God have work to do, are part of that transformation in and through God. Such a belief is not meant to minimize the work of justice we do now, of having ecological concern for the environment and so forth. Just the opposite. How we treat creation and the creatures within creation and how we take responsibility for the environment, forms us into greater or lesser communion with God, which we will have to answer for in a definitive way at death.

Questions? Comments?