

10-The Last Things: What Happens After We Die?

Is there life after death?

*Lord Jesus Christ,
Who willest that no man should perish,
and to Whom supplication is never made
without the hope of mercy,
for Thou saidst with Thine Own holy and blessed lips:
“All things whatsoever ye shall ask in My name,
shall be done unto you”;
I ask of Thee, O LORD,
for Thy holy Name’s sake,
to grant me at the hour of my death
full consciousness and the power of speech,
sincere contrition for my sins, true faith,
firm hope and perfect charity,
that I may be able to say unto Thee with a clean heart:
Into Thy hands, O LORD, I commend my spirit:
Thou hast redeemed me, O God of truth,
Who art blessed forever and ever.
Amen (St.Vincent Ferrer)*

The Church has long taught the four last things - death, judgement, heaven, hell. It is when we eventually take these matters seriously that we truly start to grow and mature. It is in our life choice responses to these last things that our relationship with God takes on true meaning. Absent a response our lives lack true meaning and focus.

Christians believe that death is not the end, but rather a beginning. At the moment of death we all experience what Catholics call a Particular Judgement which results in eternal reward of heaven or eternal penalty of hell. If we die in friendship with God and in perfect purity, we immediately see God. If we are not in perfect purity and our love is imperfect, then we experience a time of purification – purgation – in purgatory. If we die outside of God’s friendship and reject His loving mercy we remain separated from God for ever in Hell.

At the final Judgement Christ comes again in glory. Our bodies are resurrected, the truth of each of our relationship with God is made known, and the consequences of our actions revealed.

Video Links:

The Four Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell – Ascension Presents - Fr. Mark-Mary (8 mins) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M6Vpdb8zBc>

The Key to a Happy Death – Ascension Presents – Fr Mike Schmitz (8.5 mins)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wEfN7ZB3ixs>

Why Hell Exists (Fr. Gregory Pine, O.P.) – Ascension Presents (10 mins)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0nIDbouOlo>

Suggested Scripture readings:

Hebrews 9:27 John 5:24 1 Corinthians 15:51-57

Catechism of the Catholic Church

I. THE PARTICULAR JUDGMENT

1021 Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ.⁵⁹² The New Testament speaks of judgment primarily in its aspect of the final encounter with Christ in his second coming, but also repeatedly affirms that each will be rewarded immediately after death in accordance with his works and faith. The parable of the poor man Lazarus and the words of Christ on the cross to the good thief, as well as other New Testament texts speak of a final destiny of the soul--a destiny which can be different for some and for others.⁵⁹³

1022 Each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven--through a purification⁵⁹⁴ or immediately,⁵⁹⁵ -- or immediate and everlasting damnation.⁵⁹⁶

At the evening of life, we shall be judged on our love.⁵⁹⁷

II. HEAVEN

1023 Those who die in God's grace and friendship and are perfectly purified live for ever with Christ. They are like God for ever, for they "see him as he is," face to face:⁵⁹⁸

By virtue of our apostolic authority, we define the following: According to the general disposition of God, the souls of all the saints . . . and other faithful who died after receiving Christ's holy Baptism (provided they were not in need of purification when they died, . . . or, if they then did need or will need some purification, when they have been purified after death, . . .) already before they take up their bodies again and before the general judgment - and this since the Ascension of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ into heaven - have been, are and will be in heaven, in the heavenly Kingdom and celestial paradise with Christ, joined to the company of the holy angels. Since the Passion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ, these souls have seen and do see the divine essence with an intuitive vision, and even face to face, without the mediation of any creature.⁵⁹⁹

1024 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.

1025 To live in heaven is "to be with Christ." The elect live "in Christ,"⁶⁰⁰ but they retain, or rather find, their true identity, their own name.⁶⁰¹

For life is to be with Christ; where Christ is, there is life, there is the kingdom.⁶⁰²

1026 By his death and Resurrection, Jesus Christ has "opened" heaven to us. The life of the blessed consists in the full and perfect possession of the fruits of the redemption accomplished by Christ. He 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.

1027 This mystery of blessed communion with God and all who are in Christ is beyond all understanding and description. Scripture speaks of it in images: life, light, peace, wedding feast, wine of the kingdom, the Father's house, the heavenly Jerusalem,

paradise: "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him."⁶⁰³

1028 Because of his transcendence, God cannot be seen as he is, unless he himself opens up his mystery to man's immediate contemplation and gives him the capacity for it. The Church calls this contemplation of God in his heavenly glory "the beatific vision":

How great will your glory and happiness be, to be allowed to see God, to be honored with sharing the joy of salvation and eternal light with Christ your Lord and God, . . . to delight in the joy of immortality in the Kingdom of heaven with the righteous and God's friends.⁶⁰⁴

1029 In the glory of heaven the blessed continue joyfully to fulfill God's will in relation to other men and to all creation. Already they reign with Christ; with him "they shall reign for ever and ever."⁶⁰⁵

III. THE FINAL PURIFICATION, OR PURGATORY

1030 All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.

1031 The Church gives the name *Purgatory* to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned.⁶⁰⁶ The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence and Trent. The tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire:⁶⁰⁷

As for certain lesser faults, we must believe that, before the Final Judgment, there is a purifying fire. He who is truth says that whoever utters blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will be pardoned neither in this age nor in the age to come. From this sentence we understand that certain offenses can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come.⁶⁰⁸

1032 This teaching is also based on the practice of prayer for the dead, already mentioned in Sacred Scripture: "Therefore [Judas Maccabeus] made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin."⁶⁰⁹ From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God.⁶¹⁰ The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead:

Let us help and commemorate them. If Job's sons were purified by their father's sacrifice, why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them.⁶¹¹

IV. HELL

1033 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: "He who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him."⁶¹² Our Lord warns us that we shall be separated from him if we fail to meet the serious needs of the poor and the little ones who are his brethren.⁶¹³ 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. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called "hell."

1034 Jesus often speaks of "Gehenna" of "the unquenchable fire" reserved for those who to the end of their lives refuse to believe and be converted, where both soul and body can be lost.⁶¹⁴ Jesus solemnly proclaims that he "will send his angels, and they will gather . . . all evil doers, and throw them into the furnace of fire,"⁶¹⁵ and that he will pronounce the condemnation: "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire!"⁶¹⁶

1035 The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, "eternal fire."⁶¹⁷ The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs.

1036 The affirmations of Sacred Scripture and the teachings of the Church on the subject of hell are a call to the responsibility incumbent upon man to make use of his freedom in view of his eternal destiny. They are at the same time an urgent call to conversion: "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few."⁶¹⁸

Since we know neither the day nor the hour, we should follow the advice of the Lord and watch constantly so that, when the single course of our earthly life is completed, we may merit to enter with him into the marriage feast and be numbered among the blessed, and not, like the wicked and slothful servants, be ordered to depart into the eternal fire, into the outer darkness where "men will weep and gnash their teeth."⁶¹⁹

1037 God predestines no one to go to hell;⁶²⁰ for this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end. In the Eucharistic liturgy and in the daily prayers of her faithful, the Church implores the mercy of God, who does not want "any to perish, but all to come to repentance":⁶²¹

Father, accept this offering
from your whole family.
Grant us your peace in this life,
save us from final damnation,
and count us among those you have chosen.⁶²²

V. THE LAST JUDGMENT

1038 The resurrection of all the dead, "of both the just and the unjust,"⁶²³ will precede the Last Judgment. This will be "the hour when all who are in the tombs will hear [the Son of man's] voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment."⁶²⁴ Then Christ will come "in his glory, and all the angels with him. . . . 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. . . . And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."⁶²⁵

1039 In the presence of Christ, who is Truth itself, the truth of each man's relationship with God will be laid bare.⁶²⁶ The Last Judgment will reveal even to its furthest consequences the good each person has done or failed to do during his earthly life:

All that the wicked do is recorded, and they do not know. When "our God comes, he does not keep silence." . . . he will turn towards those at his left hand: . . . "I placed my poor little ones on earth for you. I as their head was seated in heaven at the right hand of my Father - but on earth my members were suffering, my members on earth were in need. If you gave anything to my members, what you gave would reach their Head. Would that you had known that my little ones were in need when I placed them on earth for you and appointed them your stewards to bring your good works into my

treasury. But you have placed nothing in their hands; therefore you have found nothing in my presence."⁶²⁷

1040 The Last Judgment will come when Christ returns in glory. Only the Father knows the day and the hour; only he 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 towards its final end. The Last Judgment will reveal that God's justice triumphs over all the injustices committed by his creatures and that God's love is stronger than death.⁶²⁸

1041 The message of the Last Judgment calls men to conversion while God is still giving them "the acceptable time, . . . the day of salvation."⁶²⁹ It inspires a holy fear of God and commits them to the justice of the Kingdom of God. It proclaims the "blessed hope" of the Lord's return, when he will come "to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at in all who have believed."⁶³⁰