

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER DEATH—THE LAST THINGS

(C 988-1065, USC Ch. 13)

*...I look forward to the resurrection of the dead
and the life of the world to come. Amen*
(Nicene Creed)

In this final article on the Creed, we look at:

- Preparing for Death
- Particular Judgment
- Heaven, Purgatory, Hell
- Resurrection of the Body
- Second Coming of Jesus
- Last Judgment
- Communion of Saints

The final article of the Creed proclaims the Church's belief in life after death, her belief in an age to come. Christians believe that our final destiny is a heavenly state in which we will live forever with God. For Christians, the question is not *whether* we will live forever, but *how*.

Eschatology (from the Greek word *eschata*) means "last things." Eschatology is a branch of theology that focuses on what is called the *four last things*, individually (death, judgment, heaven and hell) and universally (Second Coming of Christ, resurrection of the dead, Last Judgment, and the end of the world leading to a new heaven and a new earth).

Preparing for Death

Death is not something most of us like to think about. In fact, there is a great denial about death in our culture. Many wonder if there is anything after death. For the Christian, death is the gateway to eternal life with God. Paul the Apostle looked forward to death: "*I want to be gone and be with Christ*" (Phil 1:23).

During his life on earth, Jesus demonstrated his power over death when he raised Lazarus from the tomb (Jn 11:43-44). During that event, Jesus said: "*I am the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in me, though he dies, shall come to life*" (Jn 11:25). Jesus gave a "live demonstration" of this teaching on Mount Tabor when Moses and Elijah joined Peter, James and John. They were not dead, but very much alive (Mk 9:2-4).

The presence of one's own family members and our Church family should bring us much comfort at the time of our dying. The *Catechism* states: "*The dying should be given attention and care to help them live their last moments in dignity and peace. They will be helped by the prayer of their relatives, who must see to it that the sick receive at the proper time the sacraments that prepare them to meet the living God*" (2299). It also

states: "*The bodies of the dead must be treated with respect and love.... Burial of the dead is one of the corporal works of mercy*" (2300). Furthermore, "*The free gift of organs after death is legitimate and can be meritorious. The Church also permits cremation provided it does not demonstrate a denial of faith in the resurrection of the body*" (2301).

Reincarnation. The *Catechism* (1013) states: "*When the single course of one's life is completed, we shall not return to other earthly lives.*" [As the Letter to the Hebrews 9.27 states:] "*It is appointed for men to die once.*"

Pause: What is the closest you have gotten to death personally or with a loved one? What was that experience like for you? What do you want your legacy to be? What words would you like written on your tombstone?

Particular Judgment: What Happens After Death (C 1021-1022)

"In death, the body separates from the soul, the human body decays, and the soul goes to meet God, while awaiting its reunion with its glorified body" (C 997).

Drawing from the riches of Scripture and Tradition, Catholics affirm the following beliefs of what happens after death.

At the moment of death, the soul is separated from the body and the human person is judged and continues to exist, even though the person's body has ceased to function. At the time of the Last Judgment, one's body will be reunited to its soul. The judgment that takes place immediately after death is called in Catholic theology the "*particular judgment.*" In 2Cor 5:10, Paul states that each of us "*must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil according to what he did in the body.*"

The Church's belief in the 'particular judgment' immediately after death is based on the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31) and the words of Jesus to the repentant thief on the cross (Lk 23:43). At the particular judgment, there is "*no condemnation for those who die in Christ Jesus*" (Rom 8:1-2). Nevertheless, those who die in Christ but with some remaining unrepented sin or with selfishness in their hearts, will go through some period of purification known as "purgatory." For those who have deliberately rejected God and the saving grace of Christ, there will be total separation from God, which is called "hell" (Mt. 18:7-9,

Mk 9:47). We will now look a little more at the Catholic belief about heaven, purgatory and hell.

Pause: When judgment time comes, what do you think you will be judged on?

Heaven—Beatific Vision (C 1023-1029, USC pp. 153-154)

The *Catechism* states: “*Those who die in God’s grace and friendship and are perfectly purified live forever with Christ. They are like God forever, for they see him as he is, face to face*” (1023). *The Church calls this contemplation of God in his heavenly glory “the beatific vision”* (1028). *This perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity—this communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, with 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*” (1024). *Heaven is the blessed community of all who are perfectly incorporated into Christ*” (1026).

The goal of our existence on earth and the reason God created us is to enjoy him forever in heaven. We have no lasting city here, but we seek the city that is to come (Heb 13:14).

What will heaven be like? Golfers wonder if there will be golf courses in heaven, and shoppers wonder if there will be ‘out of this world’ shopping malls. Jesus did not comment on either. But Jesus did describe heaven as a joyous wedding feast (Mt 22:1-14) and a great banquet (Lk 14:16-24). The Book of Revelation (21:4) states that in our heavenly glory, “*God will wipe away every tear from our eyes and there will be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain.*” But in the end, we must say that we cannot begin to imagine the joys in store for us in heaven. Paul writes: “*What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who loved him*” (1Cor 2:9). Finally, we should remember that here on earth, we get a foretaste of heaven as we learn to live in Christ and love one another.

Who will attain heaven? The Book of Revelation speaks of 144,000 elect. This is a symbolic figure suggesting a perfect number. Rather than speculating about who or how many will be in heaven, we can say two things for certain:

- No one just drifts into heaven. Our final eternal destiny—heaven or hell—depends on the choices we make here on earth, choices that will lead us to either heaven or hell.
- No one enters heaven without cooperating with the grace of Christ. We are saved by God’s grace through

his gifts of faith and love, a self-sacrificing love that is expressed in witnessing him and serving others.

Pause: What would some ingredients of a perfect week or month be for you? What do you hope heaven will be like? What do you think it will be like?

Purgatory—Final Purification (C 1030-1032, USC p. 154)

The *Catechism* (1030-1031) states: “*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. The Church gives the name purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned.*”

Speaking about Purgatory, Blessed John Paul II said: “Those who live in this state of purification after death are not separated from God but are immersed in the love of Christ. Neither are they separated from the saints in heaven...nor from us on earth... We all remain united in the Mystical Body of Christ, and we can therefore offer up prayers and good works on behalf of our brothers and sisters in purgatory” (General Audience, August 4, 1999).

The Church’s belief in purgatory is one not shared by most other Christians. They say it has no basis in Scripture. One does not find the word “purgatory” in the Bible. But neither will one find the words “incarnation” or “trinity”—two central doctrines of the Christian faith.

Catholic belief in purgatory is rooted in *Sacred Tradition* and *reason*. It is implied in Scripture. Let’s look briefly at all three.

Scripture. Catholics believe the reality that we call purgatory is hinted at in Scripture texts like 2Mac 12:42-46, 1Cor 3:11-15 and 1Pet 1:17. In the Maccabees text, people are urged to pray for the dead. Prayers for the dead only make sense if our prayers benefit the dead in some way. If the dead have reached their final destination, praying for them makes no sense. The Christian text speaks of a purifying fire that the saved will experience. Those early Christians believed that Christians who died in an imperfect state would undergo a purification process before entering heaven.

Sacred Tradition. As we saw in Article 2, Sacred Tradition, along with Sacred Scripture, is, for Catholics, their source of Divine Revelation. Catholics believe that Sacred Tradition affirms our belief in purgatory. Around 211 AD, Tertullian wrote that Christians offered prayers and mass for deceased loved ones. Sainly and

scholarly pastors in the early church urged their people to pray for the dead. As stated earlier, such prayers would make no sense if souls had already reached their final destination.

Reason. The Book of Revelation (21:27) tells us that “*nothing unclean will enter heaven.*” Most of us will die with some imperfection, making us unworthy of heaven—hence, the need for final purification which the Church calls purgatory. Purgatory is God’s way of purifying us from all sin, from the effects or wounds of sin and any attachment we may have to particular sins. Purgatory is God’s way of cleansing us of imperfections that would hinder us from fully enjoying heaven.

The pain and joy of purgatory. The pain of purgatory will probably involve the sense of horror we will feel as we become fully aware of the ugliness of sin. The joy of purgatory will be the joy we will feel as we get closer to God. St. Catherine of Genoa, a fifteenth century mystic, wrote that the “fire” of purgatory is God’s love “burning” the soul so that, at last, the soul is wholly aflame.

The Church does urge us to pray for the souls in purgatory. The Church prays for them at every Mass. Nov. 2 is the *Feast of All Souls* when we pray for *all the faithful departed*. In summary, we can say that Catholic teaching on purgatory is twofold: (a) purgatory exists and (b) our prayers can help the souls in purgatory move through their purification process.

Hell—Eternal Separation from God (C 1033-1037, USC p. 154)

The *Catechism* states: “*To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God’s merciful love means remaining separated from him forever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called ‘hell’*” (1033). *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*” (1035).

Many people have a difficult time reconciling the existence of hell with the all-loving and merciful God. How could our all-loving God send someone to a place of endless torment and unhappiness? Jesus could not be clearer about this issue. The reality of hell, of eternal separation from God, is mentioned many times in Scripture (Lk 16:19-31, Mt 5:30, Mk 9:43-48). The best known Scripture text is probably Mt 25:31-46 dealing with the Last Judgment—in which the just are taken to heaven and the wicked are sent to hell.

It is important to note that God does not send anyone to hell. Rather, he allows persons to live forever with their

free choice to reject God. God’s will is that *all* be saved, but he is not going to force anyone to accept his offer. In Jn 3:19, Jesus says: “*The verdict is this, the light came into the world but people preferred darkness to light because their works were evil.*” God does not send us to hell; unrepentant mortal sin does.

The Church’s teaching on the existence of heaven and hell is a call to responsibility and to ongoing conversion of heart (C 1036). Awareness of our eternal destiny should motivate us to cooperate with God’s saving grace to avoid sin and do good.

Pause: What are your thoughts on this aspect of Christian belief? In your opinion, what type of person will end up in hell?

Resurrection of the Body (C 988-1004, USC pp. 155-156)

The *U.S. Catechism* (p.155) states: “*Faith in the resurrection of our bodies is inseparable from our faith in the resurrection of Christ’s body from the dead. He rose as our head, as the pattern of our rising, and as the life-giving source of our new life.*”

At the moment of death, our soul will separate from our body and begin its process of decay. “You are dust and unto dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19). The soul will go to meet God for the *Particular Judgment*. When Christ comes again, God will “grant incorruptible life to our bodies by reuniting them with our souls through the power of Jesus’ Resurrection” (C 997).

What will the resurrected body be like? We can assume we will be like Jesus, who is “the first fruits” of the Resurrection. Jesus was raised with his own body (“See my hands and my feet” [Lk 24:39]), yet he had a *glorified* body that could walk through closed doors (Jn 20:19) or appear out of nowhere as on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:15). The new and unimaginable life that we will enjoy in the age to come has begun in seed form in the sacrament of Baptism.

The Second Coming—Parousia (C 668-678, 1038-1041, USC p. 156)

In Catholic theology, the Second Coming of Christ is sometimes referred to as the “*parousia*,” a Greek word meaning *presence*. There is much that one could write about when it comes to the Second Coming of Christ, an event that will bring human history to an end. For example, some Christians believe that the Second Coming will inaugurate a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, often called the Millennium (Rev 19-20). The Bible also speaks about a time of great tribulation or trial prior to Christ’s return, a time when Satan’s power will increase. The Bible also speaks about the rise of an antichrist, an evil person who will try to destroy God’s

work on earth (2Thes 2:3-10, Rev 20:7-8). The Catholic Church has not officially spoken about how to understand all of the above. Instead, she emphasizes “readi-ness” for the return of Christ. “*Be on guard; stay awake, because you never know when the time will come*” (Mk 13:33-34).

Last Judgment (C 1038-1041, USC 156)

The *Catechism* (1040) states: “*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.*”

The best known description of the Last Judgment is found in Mt 25:31-46—Jesus will come in his glory and judge all people. Those who showed compassion to those in need will be taken to everlasting life. Those who ignored the needs of the poor will go to everlasting damnation. The *Catechism* (1039) states: “*In the presence of Christ, who is Truth itself, the truth of each man’s relationship with God will be revealed.*”

Pause: Any questions or comments on the Church’s teaching on the resurrection of the body, the Second Coming of Christ, or the Last Judgment?

Communion of Saints (C 946-962, USC p. 160)

I believe in the communion of saints.
(The Apostles’ Creed)

The term “communion of saints” refers to the bond that exists between all members of the Body of Christ: those still living (the pilgrim church on earth), those being purified in purgatory (the church suffering), and the blessed in heaven (the church glorified). These are not three different churches. They all belong to Christ and are united with him.

From very early on in the Church’s history, Christians have believed that our love and help for one another could extend beyond death. Early inscriptions in the Roman catacombs show that some of the first Christians prayed for those who had died, and also asked for their prayers. Those who had died were still part of the Christian family, loving and being loved, only temporarily hidden from the sight of those here below.

On his death bed, St. Dominic said to his brothers: “Do not weep, for I shall be more useful to you after my death and I shall help you then more effectively than during my life.” St. Therese, the Little Flower, said before she died: “I want to spend my heaven doing good on earth” (C 956).

As stated in *Article 10 on Mary*, Catholics do not pray to the saints as if they can give us grace and help. We know and believe that Jesus is our *one* Mediator before God. The saints, through their prayers for us, join their prayers to the ongoing prayer of Jesus. If we do not hesitate to seek the prayers of our brothers and sisters here on earth, why would we hesitate to seek the prayers of those who are now living a deep personal relationship with God in heaven?

“**Amen**” (C 1061-1065). The Creed, like the last book of the Bible, ends with the Hebrew word “Amen.” The Church, likewise, ends her prayers with “Amen.” The word means “I believe.” “*To believe is to say Amen to God’s words, promises and commandments; to entrust oneself completely to him who is the “Amen” of infinite love and perfect faithfulness.*” [As St. Augustine used to say to his people:] “*May your creed be for you as a mirror. Look at yourself in it, to see if you believe everything you say you believe. And rejoice in your faith each day*” (C 1064).

At the end of our lives, “Amen” would be a suitable final word.

Pause: Do you have a devotion to the saints? Do you have a favorite saint? If so, why is that saint special to you?

Suggested Action

If you do not have a Last Will & Testament drawn up, do so as soon as possible. Consider tithing a portion of your Will to the church and to organizations that seek to improve the lot of the poor. Think about your final end and what you want your legacy to be.

Meditation

*The souls of the just are in the hands of God,
and no torment shall touch them.
They seemed, in the view of the foolish, to be dead;
and their passing away was thought an affliction
and their going forth from us, utter destruction.
But they are in peace.*
(Wisdom 3:1-7)

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