

## Chapter 18 – The Four Last Things

One Sunday, the new pastor of a parish mounted the pulpit and told his congregation that he felt privileged to be their pastor. He promised that he would dedicate himself heart and soul to pastoral ministry and try his best always to be available to them in any need.

Then he said one thing that everyone remembered, even years later: “I will always love you and serve you, but I will not coddle you or tell you what you want to hear. I will tell you what you *need* to hear to get you to heaven.”

That priest’s example perfectly summarizes the Church’s teaching on the Four Last Things – they are what we *need* to hear to get us to heaven. The Four Last Things are these: Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell, and they’re too important for our eternal salvation for the Church to ignore.

As difficult as these realities are, the Church always *speaks the truth in love* (Ephesians 4:15) as a parent speaks to a son or daughter. Let’s take them one at a time.

### Death

If you walk into the Capuchin Franciscan Church in Rome, Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, the friars will take you down into the Church’s crypt to see perhaps the most shocking reminder of death in the annals of Church history.

From the 1500s to the 1800s the Franciscans had no adequate burial space for their deceased priests and brothers, so they buried them in – you guessed it – the basement of their church. There are four thousand skeletons in the huge crypt!

Some of the bones and skulls are arranged in displays, and at the very center is one skeleton standing upright and dressed in a Franciscan habit. This one holds a sign that reads, “What you are now, we once were; what we are now, *you shall be.*”

Admittedly, it’s a bit gruesome...but it gets the point across, doesn’t it?

Death is not just a physical reality. It is also a spiritual reality we all have to face. The Church describes the point of death as that moment when our souls separate from our bodies and our spiritual destiny is fixed for all eternity: “Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ” (CCC, 1021).

More specifically, each person “receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death...either entrance into the blessedness of

heaven through a purification...or immediate and everlasting damnation” (CCC, 1022).

Preparation for death, like paying taxes, is not an issue we should be lazy about because what follows death may be equally shocking if we make the wrong decision.

### Three scripture passages on Judgment

1. “And the [reprobate] will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life” (Matthew 25:46). 2. “Nor does the Father judge anyone, but he has given all judgment to his Son” (John 5:22). 3. “God will repay everyone according to his works” (Romans 2:6).

## Judgment

There is nothing more common in our morally relativistic age than to hear people scolding others about being “judgmental”. (Scolding is a pretty judgmental attitude in itself when you think about it.)

The Church is not afraid of judgment because God has revealed a final judgment as one of the last realities we must face in life. The Church is only afraid of being judged *unworthy* of heaven.

There are two types of judgment after death. The first is the immediate judgment of our souls after the moment of death, which the Church calls the “particular judgment”.

A graphic way to envision the particular judgment is this: When we die, each of us will sit down with the Lord Jesus, one-on-one. Then together we will watch an extremely detailed investigative documentary *of our own lives* from birth to death: it will feature everything we ever did, every decision we ever made, and every good and bad act.

And Jesus will let us know what He thinks of it at the end. Won’t that be fun?

Based upon the evaluation of our conduct in this life, each person will “receive his eternal retribution in his immortal soul.” Reward or punishment. It doesn’t get any clearer than that. Numerous scripture passages tell us we will be “judged according to our deeds” (Romans 2:6; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Peter 1:17, among others).

At the end of time, there will be a second judgment called the “general judgment” in which Christ will come “to judge the living and the dead” as we profess in the Creed (Chapter 6). There He will reveal God’s whole plan for the entire human race as envisioned in the Parable of the Sheep and Goats in Matthew 25.

Admittedly, the second judgment is hard for us to fully comprehend, so it's probably better to keep our eyes focused on preparing for that *first* judgment.

## Heaven

It should be clear by now that the goal of our lives is to get to heaven, and the Church's mission is to help us get there. God has not revealed in great detail what heaven will be like, but it's not a *physical* place. Rather, it is a state of being and blessedness that the Bible can only describe in beautiful and peaceful images as expressed so well in the Catechism:

"Those who die in God's grace and friendship and are perfectly purified live forever with Christ. .... This mystery of blessed communion with God 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" (CCC, 1023, 1027).

Included in the Church's understanding of heaven is the notion that we must be completely purified in soul in order to enter there (Revelation 21:27). Those who have died in grace (that is, repenting of their sins) usually undergo a period of purification that we call Purgatory as the final cleansing of the reality and effects of their sins.

Purgatory, however, is not a "third option" between heaven and hell. It is the ante-room of heaven for all who have *already* been saved by their final repentance from sin.

## Hell

The reality of Hell, on the other hand, is not very mysterious at all. Many great saints and preachers have tried to stoke its fires hot in order to break us of our denial about it and make us aware that it is *distinctly possible* for beings with free will (namely, humans and angels) to end up there.

Once again, hell is not a physical place as such. It is a state of being devoid of God. It comes about by one's deliberate rejection of God and the eternal happiness He offers to all His children. It is a deep mystery why anyone would reject that offer.

By definition, then, hell is a state of torment that a person freely chooses. If we die in mortal sin without repentance in our soul, hell is our lot for eternity. The Catechism again states:

God predestines no one to go to hell; 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’ (2 Peter 3:9). (CCC, 1037)

One final thing regarding hell: we must avoid falling for the error of the Jehovah’s Witnesses who say that God will just annihilate all sinners at the end of time. The true God doesn’t create free beings just to annihilate them. Everyone gets to choose where they want to spend eternity (even Jehovah’s Witnesses). Their doctrine in itself is a denial of the reality of hell.

For those who are uncomfortable with the idea that a loving God could allow His children to spend all of eternity in hell, remember this: the Church tells us not what we want to hear but what we *need* to hear.

*“You have seen hell where the souls of poor sinners go. To save them, God wishes to establish in the world devotion to my Immaculate Heart. If what I say to you is done, many souls will be saved and there will be peace.” ~Our Lady of Fatima to the shepherd children, Lucia, Jacinta, and Francisco in 1917*

## Summary

The teaching on the Four Last Things is the Church’s way of helping us stay vigilant about the most important realities of our salvation. In sum, the Four Last Things:

1. Remind us to “stay alert and sober” about the either/or decision we face at the end of our lives
2. Are spoken to us in “truth and love” by the Church, even though they are hard realities to face
3. Give us the key understanding of *ultimate reality*
4. Are often depicted graphically in churches, art, and preaching as reminders of the final consequences of our free choice
5. Admit of no exceptions or negotiation

Excerpt: Peter Darcy, *Flames of Faith: 18 Elements of Catholicism to Light Your Way* (Port Salerno, FL: Strength of Soul Books, 2025), Chapter 18.