

FROM THE PASTOR'S



33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, November 19, 2006 B

LAST THINGS" DEATH, JUDGMENT, PURGATORY, HELL, HEAVEN

Each year as we come to the end of the liturgical year, our readings speak of what is called in theology the "Last Things," death, judgment, heaven, hell and purgatory. The Good News for the Christian is that life does not end here. As followers of Christ, we believe in a hereafter. Let us look briefly at each of the "Last Things."

Death-The Gateway to Eternal Life

Dying and/or death is our final act. For those who die suddenly, death comes like a "thief in the night." One moment we are here on earth, the next moment we are before the judgment seat of God. For those of us who are afflicted with a terminal illness like cancer, we will have time to say goodbye to our loved ones and to prepare ourselves to pass from this life to the next. The best way to prepare for death is to live life close to Christ and his ways. Also, it is a good thing to pray often for the grace of a peaceful death.

Judgment- God Accepting our "Fundamental Option"

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews says, "*it is appointed to die once and after that comes the judgment*" (9:27). (The Catholic Church does not believe in Reincarnation. As the above quote from Hebrews states: *we die once and after that comes our judgment*). Catholic theology speaks about a *Particular* and *General* Judgment. The *Particular Judgment* occurs immediately after death. No text in the scripture speaks explicitly about this judgment, though the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man in Luke 16:19-31 implies such a judgment. We shouldn't imagine the *Particular Judgment* as God pulling out his book of life to see if our good deeds outweigh our evil deeds. Rather, our *Particular Judgment* will more likely be God accepting what we opted for in this life. If on earth our "fundamental option" (i.e., our basic orientation in life) was for God, then we will go to heaven, even if we have a "stopover" in Purgatory. If on earth we knowingly and deliberately rejected God, our *Particular Judgment* will be God accepting our chosen option. In John 3:19, we read, "*On these grounds judgment is pronounced: that though the light has come into the world, people have shown they prefer darkness to the light...*" In these words, Jesus is

telling us that we judge ourselves by our response to his coming and offer of salvation.

The *General* or *Last Judgment* refers to God coming to complete his Lordship over all of creation and to finally establish his heavenly community. (See 1 Corinthians 15:20-28) Matthew 25:31-46 gives us an account of the Last Judgment where we read that the saved will be those who "fed the hungry, clothed the naked," etc. In other words, the saved will be those who showed compassion for the poor and needy. (For more on this, see *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* # 1021-22 or, *U.S. Catholic Catechism for Adults* page 156.

Purgatory-Final Purification

In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we read these words: "*All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed sure 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.*" We do not find the word "purgatory" in the Bible, but neither do we find the words "Trinity" nor "Incarnation," two mysteries central to Christianity.

Catholic belief in purgatory is based primarily on *Sacred Tradition* and *reason*. It is implied in *Scripture*.

We believe that purgatory may be hinted at in such Scripture texts as 2 Maccabees 12:45-46 and 1 Corinthians 3:11-15. In the Maccabees verse, people are urged to pray for the dead. Prayers for the dead only make sense if our prayers can benefit the dead in some way. If the dead have already reached their final destination (i.e., heaven or hell), then praying for them would be futile. Praying for the dead makes sense only if we believe that they are in some state of existence where they need our prayers. Catholics believe that such a state of existence does exist, and we call it *purgatory* because the name refers to the *purification* that occurs to the soul during this period of its journey toward heaven. Also, our Church's meditation on 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 leads her to believe that the "purifying fire" mentioned by Paul may be a reference to purgatory.

Sacred Tradition also affirms our belief in the existence of purgatory. Inscriptions on Roman

catacombs, dating back to the early years of Christianity, indicate that some of the early Christians honored and prayed for deceased relatives and friends. Around 211 A.D., Tertullian wrote that Christians offered prayers and the Mass for the deceased on the anniversaries of their deaths. Also, saintly and scholarly pastors of the Early Church urged their people to pray for the dead. As we said earlier, such prayers only make sense if we believe that some souls have not yet reached their final destination of heaven.

Finally, Catholic belief in purgatory is based on *reason*. We reason thus: Heaven is a place where only goodness and holiness exist. The Book of Revelations tells us "*that nothing unclean will enter heaven*" (21:27). Sin and the holiness of God are diametrically opposed. Many people die in the state of imperfection. The presence of sin and imperfection not only makes us unworthy of heaven, but also hinders us from enjoying the fullness of life that God has prepared for those who go there. Rather than seeing purgatory as a place of punishment by God for sin, we should see it as a sign of his mercy on those who die with some sin and attachment to sinful ways. As a church we believe that the Holy Spirit guides us and protects our church from erroneous beliefs. Here we reason: If God did not want us to believe in an afterlife state of existence which we call purgatory, why would he allow saintly and scholarly pastors and our official church to affirm its existence ever since the early years of Christianity?

The Pain of Purgatory

Some writers believe that the pain of purgatory is a very "joyful pain"-a paradox only understood by people who are very close to God. One such holy person is Saint Catherine of Genoa who writes: "*I believe no happiness can be found worthy to be compared with that of a soul in purgatory except of the saints in Paradise, and day-by-day this happiness grows as God flows into these souls more and more as the hindrance to his entrance is consumed.*"

Such a statement is certainly consoling for those of us who may someday spend time in purgatory.

How much time can we expect to spend in purgatory? No one has the answer to that question. In dealing with the question of "time" in the next life, we should keep in mind the words of St. Peter, "*In the Lord's eyes, one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years is as a day*" (2 Peter 3:8). Today some theologians speak of purgatory as "an instant." In an instantaneous meeting with the Risen Christ, the soul is purged of all infidelity and sin. When the good thief asked Jesus for mercy when he was dying on the cross, Jesus

answered, "*I promise you, today you will be with me in paradise*" (Luke 23:43).

Prayers for the Souls in Purgatory

Our church encourages us to pray often for the souls in purgatory. We do pray for the dead at every Mass. As a church, we remember our deceased loved ones in a special way on the Feast of All Souls, November 2, and during the whole month of November.

Hell: Eternal Separation from God.

In one of his General Audiences in July, 1999, the late Pope John Paul had this to say about hell:

"Hell is not a punishment imposed externally by God, but the conditions resulting from attitudes and actions which people adopt in this life. It is the ultimate consequence of sin itself. Sacred Scripture uses many images to describe the pain, frustration and emptiness of life without God.

More than a physical place, hell is the state of those who freely and definitely separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy. So, eternal damnation is not God's work but is actually our own doing. Christian faith teaches us that there are creatures who have already given a definitive "no" to God; these are the spirits which rebelled against God and whom we call demons. They serve as a warning for human beings: eternal damnation remains a real possibility for us, too. The reality of hell should not, however, be a cause of anxiety or despair for believers. Rather, it is a necessary and healthy reminder that human freedom has to be conformed to the example of Jesus, who always said "yes" to God, who conquered Satan, and who gave us his Spirit so that we too could call God "Father."

To merit hell one must knowingly and deliberately choose to reject God. Many theologians wonder how many people make such a choice. Most atheists were given such a distorted or crude image of God that the God they are denying is a God all of us should deny; e.g., the God who punishes people by sending them cancer, earthquakes and other terrible disasters. The pain of hell is the pain of having been created for union with God and yet through one's own free choice being deprived of that union for all eternity.

Heaven-The Fullness of Communion with God

In another general audience in July 1999, Pope John Paul spoke of heaven as the "*fullness of communion with God that awaits all those who have welcomed him into their lives and who have sincerely opened themselves to him.*" In 1 Corinthians 2:9, St. Paul tells us "*No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered*

*our minds what God has prepared for those who love him." Later on the same Epistle, Paul says: "Now, we see him dimly as in a mirror, but then we shall see him face-to-face (13:12). This face-to-face encounter with God is what Catholic theology calls the *Beatific Vision*-the vision that brings perfect happiness.*

In his book, *Christ Among Us*, Anthony Wilhelm describes heaven in this way:

"We will love and be loved in an unimaginable and ever increasing love. We will be fully possessed and continually overwhelmed by God's beauty and goodness. In this heaven-state there will be no sorrow, no pain, no hardship, no struggle or temptation of any kind. We will understand everything we have ever wanted to-the secrets of the universe, the mysteries of our faith.

Also, in our heaven-state, we will know and love all the people who lived in the universe. No one will be a stranger to us. Finally, Jesus wants us to begin to experience this heavenly state of existence here on earth. We do that when we open our hearts to his love and when we give and receive love in a detached way."

Have a heavenly week,

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