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Reflection of the Heart #67



The Four Last Things

Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell

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Living and Dying with Dignity

Gift of Life Summit with
Dr. Vincent Dat Nguyen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LWV5b2A3VPQ>



GATHERING

Suggested praise and worship songs

- ① *My Life*
- ② *Let the Saints Be Joyful*
- ③ *All My Days*

INTRODUCTION

Every year in the month of November, we pray for our loved ones who died. We remember the saints, the ones who went before us who we believe are now in heaven, and we ask for

their intercession. This past two and a half years, we may have experienced more people we know who died or whose family member died. We are reminded that life is short, and we never know when our time is up.

It is natural for us to think about our own mortality once confronted with the death of another.

For some of us, it is very hard to think about death and dying. We enjoy life, and of course here in Couples for Christ and especially in the Gift of Life ministry, we emphasize the importance of the sanctity of Life, our gift from God. But when we talk about death, there may be fear and anxiety. Some of us may just not want to think or talk about death thinking that we may attract it. We need to remind ourselves that death is part of life. In fact, death is certain, and we will all go through it. However, death is not the very last event of our life because we have an eternal life to look forward to after our physical death. We prepare for big events of our lives -- our wedding, our job, the birth of our child, our parenting, our kid's college, our retirement. We should also know how to prepare well for our end of life, our death.

On October 22, 2022, Dr. Vincent Dat Nguyen was our speaker in the Gift of Life Summit, and he talked about ***Living and Dying with Dignity: What We believe as Catholics***. Dr. Nguyen is a hospice and palliative care specialist who serves as the Medical Director of the Palliative Care Program in Hoag Hospitals in Orange County, CA. He is a published author in journals and books and serves in leadership positions to advance excellence in palliative care. He was featured in an EWTN series called *Whole Person Care, Living and Dying in the State of Grace*.



Dr. Nguyen spoke of important end-of-life issues. When we face imminent death, there are other values and priorities that we think of rather than just extending our life here on earth. Are we ready to die? Are our affairs in order? Did we forgive or are we forgiven by our loved ones? Can we still have the last rites? Did we accomplish what we were created to do? We should ensure that our values are included in our decisions regarding end-of-life. There are many societal and cultural barriers in advance care planning, but we should choose to educate ourselves, understand, ponder, and make our decisions known. Those who choose to discuss end-of-life issues have better quality of life with better caregiver outcomes.¹

Dr. Nguyen discussed the difference between palliative care and hospice. He talked about choosing a person who has the intestinal fortitude to follow your directives as your health care power of attorney. There's a lot to think about with the decisions in Five Wishes and Physician Orders for Life Sustaining Treatment or POLST. Do I want CPR? Do I want to be hooked to a ventilator? Do I want artificial nutrition? Dr. Nguyen went over some instances when you want to receive or withhold medical treatments. He discussed how euthanasia and assisted suicide are not acceptable, how to accompany someone near death, the use of opioids and sedatives, and proportionate vs disproportionate medical treatments, among many other important considerations.

Pope Francis says that if a patient is competent and able, he or she "has the right, obviously in dialogue with medical professionals, to evaluate a proposed treatment and to judge its actual proportionality



in his or her concrete case” and to refuse the treatment “if such proportionality is judged lacking.”

We believe as Catholics that human life is a gift from God, a sacred gift that no one may dispose of at will. All persons, regardless of their medical condition, possess inherent dignity and are worthy of respect, protection, and care. Respect for human dignity and human life demands that we will take reasonable care of our lives. Such respect, however, does NOT mean that we must do everything possible to prolong physical life, especially when death is inevitable or when treatments would be too burdensome for the patient.²

DEATH



There is an appointed time for everything ... a time to be born, and a time to die.—Ecclesiastes 3: 1-2

For a theologically sound synopsis about human death, one needs to look no further than the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Death is the end of earthly life. Remembering our mortality helps us realize that we have only a limited time in which to bring our lives to fulfillment. 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 and entered the world as a consequence of sin. Death is transformed by Christ. Jesus himself suffered the death that is part of the human condition. He accepted it in an act of complete and free submission to his Father’s will. The obedience of Jesus has thus transformed the curse of death into a blessing.³



The Catechism makes it even clearer to us that in death, God calls the human person to Himself. In death, God calls man to himself. Therefore, the Christian can experience desire for death like St. Paul's: "My desire is to depart and be with Christ" (Phil 1:23). He can transform his own death into an act of obedience and love towards the Father, after the example of Christ.⁴

The time will come when you wish that you had one more day – even one hour – to put your life in order but there is no assurance that you will get it.⁵

The Church encourages us to prepare ourselves for the hour of our death. In the ancient litany of the saints, for instance, she has us pray: "From a sudden and unforeseen death, deliver us, O Lord"; to ask the Mother of God to intercede for us "at the hour of our death" in the Hail Mary; and to entrust ourselves to St. Joseph, the patron of a happy death.⁶

St. Robert Bellarmine, in his book *The Art of Dying Well*, proposed that the way to die well is to live well. He had 16 precepts including learning to die to the world, persevering in faith, hope and charity, being ever ready to meet Christ, remaining detached to worldly possessions, being sober, just, and pious, praying fervently and practicing fasting. He advised to give generously, be faithful to your baptismal promises, use the gifts you received in Confirmation, receive the Eucharist worthily and confess your sins with true contrition. He urged us to revere the sacred, love and honor your spouse and children, guard your senses against sin and resolve to die well.⁷

JUDGMENT



When the Church lists Judgment as the second of the Four Last Things, it refers to both the Particular and General Judgments. The Particular Judgment is “the eternal retribution received by each soul at the moment of death, in accordance with that person’s faith and works.” The General Judgment on the other hand, refers to the end of time, at Christ’s Second Coming, when all will be revealed and our Particular Judgment will be ratified for all to see and to understand.⁸

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in that body.—2 Cor. 5:10

One can enter Heaven either immediately at death or following a period of purification of temporal punishment in Purgatory. Purgatory is only about one thing: the need for temporal punishment for already forgiven mortal and venial sin that has not yet been atoned for at the time of death. We must be purified either during our earthly life through prayer and a conversion which comes from fervent charity, or after death in purgatory. Temporal punishment can be fulfilled either on earth or in Purgatory. Eternal punishment is “the penalty for unrepented immortal sin, separating the sinner from communion with God for all eternity. Eternal punishment can be only fulfilled in Hell.⁹

Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. —Acts 14:22

Brothers and sisters, one’s private Particular Judgment and one’s public General Judgment are real events that are going to happen. Let us not be caught off guard.



HEAVEN



The 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. By his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ has “opened” heaven to us. Heaven is the blessed community of all who are perfectly incorporated into Christ.¹⁰

God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. — 1 Thessalonians 5:9

Heaven is our goal. The culmination of our faith is that God has created us to share eternal communion with Him. He desires our salvation. Heaven is indeed our ultimate home, so it is important that we direct ourselves to this end.

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.¹¹ The 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, not the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.”¹²

One of the fundamental beliefs expressed in the Apostle’s Creed, “I believe in the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting” tells us that the body that was dead would live in a risen, glorified, transfigured human body in heaven.¹³ Whatever imperfections or deformities the body had on earth will be taken away and will not be present in heaven. We must never lose sight of the fact that these

beautiful truths of our resurrection are made possible only by and through Christ's own Resurrection.⁸



HELL

Then he will say to those on his left, **“Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”** —Matthew 25:41

Hell is real. And it is possible to go there – for all eternity. Here are some descriptions of hell from both the old and new testament: a lake of fire (Rev 20: 15); a place of fiery coals, burning sulfur, and scorching wind (Ps 11:6); a place of devouring fire (Isa 33: 14); a furnace of fire (Matt 13:42); a place of torment (Luke 16:23); a place where men will weep and gnash their teeth (Matt 13:42); a place where they curse God (Rev 16: 11); a place where they never repent (Matt 12:32); a place of filthiness (Rev 22: 11); a place of weeping (Matt 8: 12); a place where men gnaw their tongues in anguish (Rev 16: 10); a place where they do not want their loved ones to go (Luke 16:28).⁸

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” (1 John 3: 14-15). 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 (cf. Matt. 25:31-46). 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."¹⁴

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" (Matt 7:13-14).¹⁵

THE FOUR LAST THINGS

Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell are the four last things also known as Eschatology, which comes from the Greek word "eschaton" meaning "last." Eschatology is an important doctrine of the Holy Mother Church rooted deeply in Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, and the Magisterium and refers to the study of the end of our earthly lives and the end of the whole world. Although it is difficult to digest, it is our hope that this discussion will stir us into action, in whatever next small step we are stirred by the Holy Spirit to do. Let us not be afraid, but instead be hopeful, as the God of love and mercy desires for us to be with Him in eternal life and will give us all the help and grace we need.



DISCUSSION

① How does contemplating on the four last things affect my relationship with God, others, and myself? What are the things I need to change? What are my next steps?

② What are the things I can do in my family and my local community that can help spread awareness of the four last things?

SUGGESTED LECTIO

²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?” —John 11:25-26

PRAYER

Act of Contrition: O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended You, and I detest all my sins because I dread the loss of Heaven and the pains of Hell, but most of all, because they have offended You, my God, who are all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Your grace, to confess my sins, to do penance, and to amend my life. Amen.

¹ Wright, AA et al, “Association between End-of-life discussions, patient mental health, medical care near death, and caregiver adjustment, JAMA 2008; 300(14): 1665-1673

²Resources for Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church 1007-1009

⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church 1011

⁵ Thomas a Kempis, The Imitation of Christ, ed. Bk 1 chap 23

⁶ Catechism of the Catholic Church 1014

⁷ The Art of Dying Well, by Sr. Robert Bellarmine

⁸ The Four Last Things: A Catechetical Guide to Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell, by Fr. Wade L.J. Menezes, CPM

⁹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, glossary

¹⁰ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1024-1026

¹¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1023

¹² Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1027

¹³ Hope to Die: The Christian Meaning of Death and the Resurrection of the Body, by Scott Hahn

¹⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1033

¹⁵ Catechism of the Catholic Church 1036

