

The Four Last Things and the Communion of Saints

What are the Four Last Things? The traditional definition is: death, judgement, Heaven and hell.



Many of us are struck with fear when we consider the end of life and the life thereafter. Death, judgment, heaven, and hell — these are indeed sobering topics. And, while a certain element of trepidation in the face of the “last things” is natural and good, as Christians we also face these moments with courage and hope because of Jesus Christ and what He has done for us.

What is death? Death is the separation of the soul from the body and the end of our life on earth. It is the effect of

original sin (cf. Rom 5:12; 1 Cor 15:22) and fundamental to the human experience (cf. Eccles 9:5; 2 Sam 14:14; Job 14:5; Ps 90:10).

Blessedly for us, God became man and conquered death (cf. Rom 5:17; 2 Tim 1:10; Heb 2:14–15). To those who love God and their neighbor, and accept God’s free gift of grace Jesus offers eternal life (cf. Mt 19:17–21; 25:45–46; Lk 10:25–28; Jn 6:40; 8:51; etc). In Christ, death does not have the final say. “If we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him” (Rom 6:8;

What Happens at Death?

When someone dies, they face their “particular judgement.” The result of this judgement will lead to three places: immediate entrance to heaven, purgatory previous to entering heaven, or hell. Let’s look a little closer at each one.

Heaven – Heaven is a place of joy and communion with God. Scripture describes it with many images including “a heavenly city, (Rev. 21:2)” “an eternal dwelling place, (2 Cor. 5:1)” and a “glorious wedding banquet. (Mt. 22:2)” These images point toward supreme happiness that is beyond human understanding.

Hell – Hell is defined as eternal separation from God. God doesn’t send anyone to hell – that choice is made by each person alone. God gives us free will and will not force us to be with Him forever if we choose not to. Each person can choose God or against Him – but the eternal separation from Him is the very definition of hell.

Purgatory – those who die in friendship with God, but who are not yet perfectly purified will enter purgatory. Purgatory is not hell, and it is not halfway between heaven and hell. It is a state where our souls are purified to perfection in order to enter Heaven (Rv 21:26-27). Everyone in purgatory will go to heaven.

Scripture teaches us to pray for the dead (2 Maccabees 12:44) and this is something the Church still does to this day. We offer Masses for the deceased and every Catholic is encouraged to pray for the souls in Purgatory, who can no longer pray for themselves, but can and do pray for us. In this way we can speed up their journey to the Father’s house.

What is the Second Coming of Christ?

We believe that Christ will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and usher in a new heaven and a new earth. This will be the time of the Final judgement – everyone living will receive their particular judgement, and the particular judgement of those that have already died will be made known as well.

The Resurrection of the Body

When Christ comes again in glory, He will raise the dead and their souls will be reunited to their bodies. We will be restored for eternal life, and will live forever with God with no aging, suffering or pain. The Transfiguration of Christ (Luke 9:28-36), along with His post-resurrection appearances, give us a glimpse of what this resurrected body will be like. Mary's assumption, body and soul into heaven, also serves a promise of our future.

The Communion of Saints

A saint, simply, is someone who has been perfected and is in heaven in perfect communion with God. We are all called to be saints. Anyone who is in heaven is a saint. The Church recognizes some "capital S" Saints, who are people who have been recognized by the Church as having led lives of heroic virtue, and whose presence in heaven has been verified by documented miracles contributed to their intercession (prayer).

When you study the Saints canonized by the Church, you find that they come from all walks of life. They were married, divorced, single, clergy and religious; some had large families, some were childless and everything in between; some were scholars, some struggled with studying, and even reading. In this section we will look at some common questions about Catholics and the Communion of Saints.

Praying to the Saints – Catholics do not pray to Saints in the same way we pray to God. The word pray simply means to "ask." We ask the Saints in heaven to pray for us the same way we ask people on earth to pray for us, and this is what is often referred to as "praying to the saints." Prayer in itself is not an act of worship. As we learned in previous lessons, worship always involves sacrifice. We offer sacrifice to God alone, be it the sacrifice of the Mass or a "sacrifice of praise and adoration."

Statues and Images of Saints – Idolatry?

We use images and statues of the Saints to remind us of the holy people who have gone before us, of their love and prayers for us, and that we are to follow their example. Consider the pictures you likely have in your home of loved ones who have gone before us – keeping their photo as a memory likely doesn't strike you as idolatry, and it isn't. We also have statues around our towns of public/war hero's and those are not a form of idolatry. Neither are the images in our churches that depict our brothers and sisters in heaven.

The Process of Canonization

Like we discussed before, everyone in heaven is a saint, but some people are officially recognized by the Church as Canonized Saints. The process of "canonization" is overseen by the pope and bishops. When someone is declared a Saint, the Church is telling us that "the person lived a holy life (although they sinned like everyone else) they are in heaven, and are honored by the Universal Church." Throughout the process the life of the person is examined for heroic virtue or martyrdom (someone who died for the

