

All Souls 2008

LESSON: The Meaning of Christian Death

Today the world's billion Catholics are all thinking about the same thing: **death**.

- ? This would be morbid and pessimistic, except for **one thing: Christ's resurrection**.
- ? Jesus, with his resurrection, has **conquered** the frightening reality of death, and so as long as we are united to him we do not need to **fear** it.
- ? Besides, it is one of the **few things** we can count on in life, (besides taxes) so we **better** think about it sometimes.

In fact, Jesus himself talked about it **a lot**, shedding light on some of the awe-inspiring **mysteries** surrounding death, such as what the Church has long called "**the four last things**" [death, judgment, heaven, and hell].

- ? For instance, the New Testament teaches us that every person **only dies once** - so there is no such thing as "reincarnation" (cf. Hebrews 9:27).
- ? We also know that after dying we will **meet our Lord face to face** and receive an immediate **judgment**.
- ? And we know that if we die **in friendship with him**, we will spend eternity with him in **heaven**, though we may need to pass through **purgatory** first, to cleanse any leftover selfish tendencies that didn't get **purified** during our earthly life.
- ? And, finally, we know that if we die **outside** of God's friendship, he will not **force** us into his friendship after death, but will respect our decision. And in that case, eternal separation from God, also known as **hell**, will await us.

Jesus revealed all these things to us because he knew it would be **helpful** for us to know them.

- ? We are like Scrooge in Charles Dickens' story, *A Christmas Carol*:
- ? God has **shown us the future**, so that we will **stop** making foolish, selfish, and destructive decisions in the **present**.
- ? It is not morose or morbid to think of death; it is morose, morbid, and unwise **not** to.

ILLUSTRATION: Fools forget about death & Purgatory

We know a couple of things about death.

First, we know that in some form or another **it will come for all of us**. This is **obvious**, even though many people try to hide from it.

A few years ago in a small parish the priest was giving a **fire-and-brimstone** homily.

- ? At one point he said, "Some day **every member** of this parish will die!"
- ? Everyone in the congregation was stunned except one man who started **laughing** and then yelled back, "I don't belong to this parish!"
- ? Sometimes we can be like that - **foolishly** forgetting that humanity's mortality rate is holding steady at 100%.

I won't soon forget my own grandmother's death this past February. There are several things etched in my mind:

I remember going down to Baltimore to celebrate Mass at her bedside. After her 2-week stay in the hospital, the entire family (my grandfather and all 8 of the children – together with Mom-Mom) decided that she should be back at home. So, with the help of Hospice, a bed was set up in the living room of their small, Baltimore City row home.

On my day off, I went down to celebrate Mass with her – and we had arranged that my grandfather and all the kids were also there. It was the most touching Mass of my life. We celebrated Mass – and I knew that, when I gave her holy communion – it would be her last. She was very weak – but somehow, as it came time for Holy Communion – she had this burst of strength, sat up a bit – and received Holy Communion with the deepest reverence and love. We were all in tears as we watched her faith.

Then, after communion, I started the prayers of commendation... "Go forth, Christian soul, from this world... I commend you, my dear sister, to almighty God, and entrust you to your Creator. May holy Mary, the angels and all the saints come to meet you as you go forth from this life. May Christ acknowledge you as one of his flock. May you see your Redeemer face to face."

I'll never forget Mom-Mom's strength – and her FAITH. I often pray TO Mom-Mom – as well as FOR her – especially today, the first All Souls Day since her death. I ask her to pray for me, and to pray especially that, when my time comes, with God's mercy, I'll be able to meet her again in the house of God, our Father.

That death comes for us all is obvious to everyone – even those people most important in our lives – no matter how hard we may try to avoid it – death will come. That's one thing we know for sure!

But the **second thing** we know for sure about death was revealed only by Christ, namely, that every death is somehow **part of God's plan**; the Lord truly is our shepherd; he walks **beside** us even through the dark valley of death.

We also know that, after death, there is that initial judgment – heaven, hell or purgatory. But there are a LOT of us, even some sitting here, who have a real struggle with the idea of purgatory. Not me! I'm GRATEFUL to know that purgatory is an option.

Yesterday, All Saints' Day, we praised God for his masterpieces: **the saints**, those Christians who reached **spiritual maturity** in this life, and so entered heaven immediately after death.

Today, Catholics throughout the world are joining together to pray for the eternal repose of our many brothers and sisters who **died** in friendship with Christ, but who **hadn't yet reached** spiritual maturity.

- ? Instead of entering heaven immediately, these souls were taken by God to the **spiritual hospital** called **purgatory**.
- ? Purgatory is just inside heaven's gate, where God **lovingly purifies** and **heals** his children from the damage their sins inflicted on their souls while they were still on earth.
- ? Through today's prayers, we are **speeding up** that painful process and hastening our departed brothers' and sisters' full entrance into heaven.

Some Catholics **don't like to** pray for our departed loved ones. It can be **painful** to think of them, either because we **feel their loss** so sharply, or because it reminds us of the **uncomfortable reality** of our own death, which isn't too far away.

But the Church is a **good mother**, and she knows that it is a **good thing** to think of and pray for the dead, so she gives us All Souls' Day.

- ? It helps us cut through life's **superficial distractions** and reminds us of the **big picture**, which includes life, of course, but which **also** includes death, judgment, heaven, and hell [the four last things].
- ? **All** Christians believe in those four realities, which Christ **himself** taught us about.
- ? But **not** all Christians believe in **purgatory** and the **value** of praying for the dead.
- ? They say, among other things, that since the word purgatory **doesn't appear in the Bible**, it must have been **invented** by popes and bishops as a way to **frighten and manipulate** ignorant Christians during the Middle Ages.

That is **totally untrue**. The **Bible** also supports this ancient Christian teaching.

- ? First of all, nowhere in Scripture does it say that **there is no purgatory**.
- ? And in fact, although **the word itself doesn't appear** in Scripture, there are various passages that have always been interpreted as referring to it.
- ? For example, in **Matthew 12:32** Jesus points out that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the only sin that will not be forgiven, "either in this world or in the next," implying that some purification from sin does take place **after death**.
- ? He also speaks more than once about sinners being kept in prison until they have "**paid the last penny**" (Matthew 5:26, Luke 12:59), referring to a period of purification between earthly life and heaven.
- ? One of the most **explicit** passages is when St Paul says that some people will be saved, but only "as through fire" (1 Corinthians 3:15), in other words, by being **passively purified** after death.

? Finally, the Second Book of Maccabees (12:41-45) praises offering prayers for the dead.

The Church has the virtuous custom and practice of praying for the dead – to aid them in their purification – to hasten them toward their goal (and ours): heaven.

? We can **alleviate** the suffering of our brothers and sisters who have died and are now in purgatory by praying for them, offering Masses for them, obtaining indulgences for them... God has generously **connected our lives to theirs**.

APPLICATION: Keeping Death in Mind.

The Church **often** reminds us of this big picture, because she doesn't want us to give in to the natural, **unchristian tendency** to avoid thinking about death.

? The ever present **crucifix** is one of these reminders.

? One of the most common Catholic **prayers**, the Hail Mary, reminds us of death every time we pray it: "...Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and **at the hour of our death**. Amen."

? In every Mass we **pray for the deceased** - another reminder.

God doesn't want us to get to our deathbeds and **panic** - he wants us to **die well**.

? And dying well **doesn't mean** giving in to the evil hopelessness and emptiness of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide.

? No, dying well means dying **in Christ's arms**.

? And the surest way to die well is to **live well**.

One sure way to **live well** is to **keep in mind** that we will die - not in an **obsessive** way, but in a Christian way:

? by visiting the **cemetery**, putting flowers on the graves of our relatives, and praying for them;

? by living closely the **rhythm of the Church's liturgy**, which reminds us gently but firmly that this brief life on earth is not all there is;

? by ministering to the **sick** and being attentive to the needs and wisdom of the **elderly**.

These simple, ancient Catholic traditions **enrich** our life-attitudes, relationships, and personal decisions with **compassion** and **truth**.

If we live them well, then when we find **our own death** knocking at the door, we will have **no regrets**, only **smiles**, both for the **beauty** we leave behind, and for the **Beauty** still in store.

In this Mass, as Christ fills us again with his **life** through the sacrament of his passion and resurrection, let's **thank** him for taking the sting out of **death**.