

Catholic

UPDATE

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THE 'LAST THINGS' DEATH, JUDGMENT, HEAVEN, AND HELL

BY CAROL LUEBERING

My mother spoke of yearning to see my dad in heaven. A friend's response shattered her: "But you'll be so happy looking at God you won't even notice Sandy." Mother was speaking the hope of reunion to which grieving hearts cling. Her friend was echoing the Church's teaching that heaven's joy focuses on the "beatific vision," seeing God face-to-face. Who was right—Mother, her friend, or both?

We have no details of life in heaven, but we do have some informed speculation. A branch of theology called *eschatology*, a word derived from the Greek for "last," searches Scripture, tradition, and our understanding of the world for clues to the "last things": death, judgment, heaven, and hell. This Update explores Catholic belief about these issues.

The Constants of Belief

History has shaped our concepts of life after death. What we believe today about heaven, hell, and judgment has developed slowly over many centuries. It's a tapestry woven not only of our understanding of physical reality, but also of varied concepts of God, of divine wrath and divine mercy.

There are two primary constants in Christian belief. One is faith in Jesus' resurrection, the conviction that we, like him, will rise again. The other is our faith that Jesus will return to judge the world.

Even belief in the resurrection of the dead, so central to Christian faith, didn't suddenly spring into being on Easter morning. Before Jesus was born, it was developing slowly in Judaism; in Jesus' day it was still an idea new enough to argue about. Some Jews—the Pharisees—accepted it; others—the Sadducees—didn't. The Gospels tell of the Sadducees' attempt to make the idea look ridiculous by asking Jesus whose wife a woman widowed seven times would be in the next life. But Jesus affirmed the resurrection, insisting that God "is not God of the dead but of the living" (see Mark 12:18–27).

No one saw Jesus leave the tomb; we have no hint of just what happened on Easter morning. The Gospels record two things: (1) the tomb was found empty and (2) the people who had loved and followed Jesus saw him alive after his burial. That testimony inspires a conviction about Jesus' resurrection and ours: it is bodily. Like the Lord, we will rise not as disembodied souls, but as whole persons.

We *will* rise—but when and how? Scripture gives a few clues to the how. The disciples experienced the risen Lord as physically present. He ate (Luke 24:29–30, 41–43). He invited Thomas to touch the wounds he suffered on Calvary (John 20:27). Yet he moved without regard for physical limits, suddenly appearing in locked rooms (John 20:19, 26). His body wasn't the same as it had been.

Saint Paul, who never knew Jesus in his earthly life but ran smack into him on the road to Damascus, answered the how question this way: “[The body] is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body” (1 Corinthians 15:44). The resurrection we anticipate, like Jesus' own, lies beyond the physical restraints of the world we know.

When was a question for many centuries. The first Christians thought the dead simply slept, awaiting Jesus' return. Of course, they expected him to show up any day. As centuries rolled by without Jesus' return in glory, believers began to debate the fate of the dead in the meantime. Not until 1336 did Pope Benedict XII define as dogma the long-growing conviction that people faced an individual judgment and entered heaven, hell, or purgatory immediately after death. Our Christian belief that our beloved dead are with God and therefore still close to us, within the reach of our prayers, reflects that doctrine.

It's important to remember that the folks who first shaped our ideas of heaven and hell—purgatory too—had to think of them as places situated above the skies or beneath the world. Their world was the center around which the sun moved. Medieval theologians couldn't in their wildest dreams imagine anything like the far-flung universe we know, much less a reality beyond space or time.

While bodily resurrection would seem to require some kind of a place (a question we'll explore later), it's much more helpful to think of the “places” of the afterlife as *states*

of being. Two such states are already familiar to us: one is life as we now know it. The other we don't remember, but before birth we dwelled in underwater darkness, aware of little but our mother's heartbeat. In Christian belief, death is like birth: beginning a wholly new way of being and knowing at last the person who has been carrying us all along.

Facing God's Judgment

The thought of judgment strikes fear into the Christian soul. Who among us dares to stand face-to-face with God? Who among us dares to own the darkness that lurks within us? The word *judgment* becomes, in many minds, condemnation. The people who shaped our faith centuries ago, the Jewish people who were Jesus' forebears, didn't think of condemnation when they spoke of judgment. They didn't see themselves as defendants in a *criminal* court. Rather, they saw themselves as plaintiffs in a civil action, seeking redress from God for their suffering.

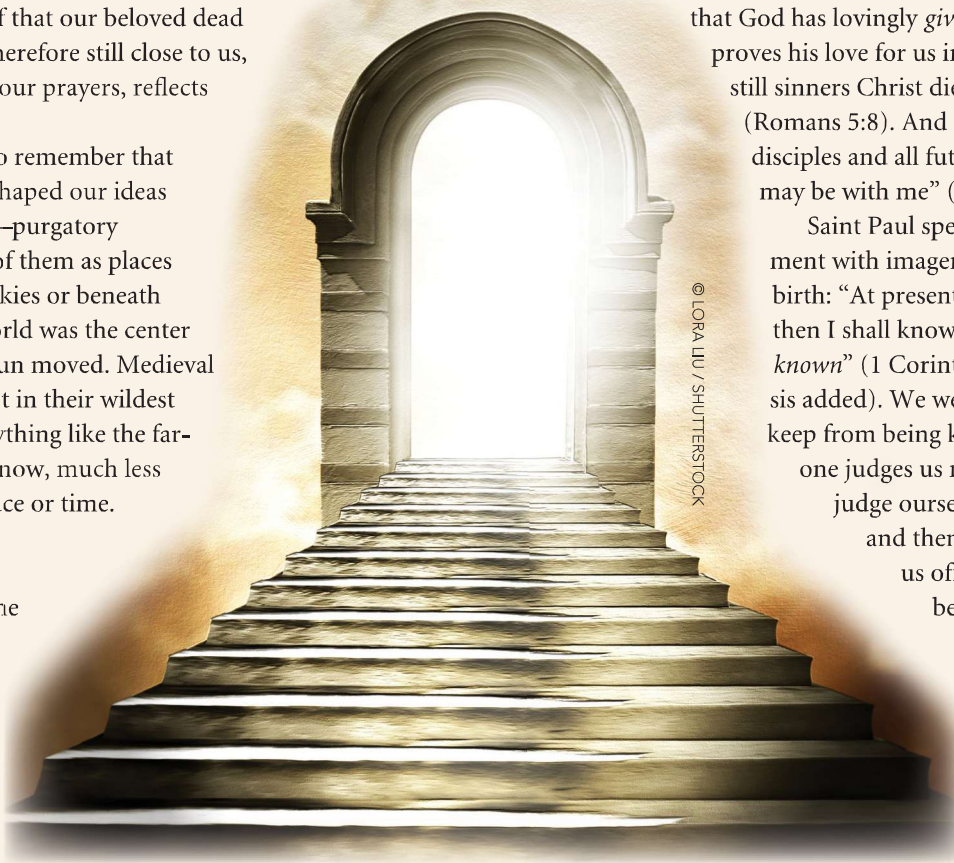
Like our Jewish ancestors, Christians await vindication. Speaking of the signs that announce his imminent return on the last day, Jesus told his followers to “stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand” (Luke 21:28). We fear condemnation because we too easily focus on our weaknesses and failures rather than on God's goodness. In truth, were the scales of justice truly balanced, we would surely stand condemned. Nothing we do, nothing we are comes

within light-years of God's holiness. The bottom line isn't that we must earn eternal life but, rather, that God has lovingly *given* it to us. “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us,” wrote Paul (Romans 5:8). And Jesus prayed that his disciples and all future believers “also may be with me” (John 17:24).

Saint Paul speaks of facing judgment with imagery that again recalls birth: “At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, *as I am fully known*” (1 Corinthians 13:12, emphasis added). We wear a lot of masks to keep from being known. Perhaps no

one judges us more harshly than we judge ourselves. But every now and then, someone catches us off guard by peeking behind our masks and loving us as we are.

Truly, no one knows us so well and yet loves us with such enduring passion as God does.



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The Last Judgment

Centuries of Christian art reflect many changes in our understanding of Christ's triumphant return. That event was eagerly awaited by the first believers. Into the early Middle Ages, works of art suggest joy rather than terror. Typical is a carving on the tomb of a bishop buried in 608: the elect, wakening from death's sleep, lift their arms to acclaim the returning Lord. Some 500 years later, another detail appears: the separation of the damned, the scene Jesus describes in Matthew 25:31–46. Their misery becomes more dominant and more horribly detailed as the centuries roll by.

Christianity took a rather gloomy turn after its first millennium ended without Jesus' return on clouds of glory. *The Dies Irae*, a hymn describing the terrors of Judgment Day, became part of the funeral liturgy and remained until the post-Vatican II liturgical reform.

Modern Scripture scholarship warns against taking biblical descriptions of judgment and punishment too literally. Jesus used this imagery, says theologian Richard McBrien, "to dramatize the urgency of his proclamation of the Kingdom and the seriousness of our decisions for or against the Kingdom."

Today, we're returning to the positive aspects of Christ's return as judge. This is the hour when we should indeed "raise our heads." Then our troubled world will become a new creation—the "new heaven and a new earth" of Revelation 21:1 in which our risen bodies will dwell. God's creation is too precious to be wasted; the Creator wants to save it all.

Heaven: A World Made New

The material of that new creation's construction is beyond our knowing. Our bodies will not likely be all our molecules reconstructed. (Which molecules? Every cell in our bodies is replaced many times in a lifetime!) Neither is the physical construction of the new earth what really matters. What counts is its transformation into a world without suffering and death.

The favorite image of biblical authors is a banquet, a gigantic party replete with rich foods and choice wines (see Isaiah 25:6). That image sheds some light on the argument between my mother and her friend about what faces we'll see in heaven: our loved ones' or only God's. You can't enter fully into the spirit of a party if you ignore all the other guests. Indeed, when Jesus depicted the judgment scene that inspired later Christian artists, he spoke of attention to others: "I was hungry and you gave me food..." (Matthew 25:35).

Ever since God gave Moses commandments that held a people responsible to God for harming a neighbor, our relationship with God has been tied up with our relationships to other people. Father Leonard Foley, OFM, speculated that in heaven we will, like God, be able to love perfectly.

Jesus rose with the scars of his crucifixion still apparent on his body. We will rise as individuals with a history, people scarred by our sinfulness and that of others, but also as people who, like Jesus, bear the marks of sacrifices made in greatest

* LIMBO *

Anxious grandparents have been known to baptize babies in the kitchen sink when the child's parents put off baptism. Their concern has ancient roots. In the fifth century, St. Augustine, struggling with the seriousness of original sin, thought that the unbaptized must be condemned to hell. Seven hundred years later, St. Anselm of Canterbury proposed they were excluded from heaven, from being with God, but were allowed a place of "natural" happiness. Later theologians called that place limbo, "the border."

The theory of limbo was never officially taught by the Church. The Catholic Encyclopedia reports a new trend in theological thought: Parents' intention to bring an infant to the font may be a form of the "baptism of desire" accorded those who died before they could complete their preparation for reception into the Church.

While parents are still urged to present their children for baptism at an early age, the Rite of Christian Funerals offers this prayer to God for parents of an unbaptized child: "May they find comfort in knowing that he (she) is entrusted to your loving care."

love (see 1 Corinthians 13:13). The love we give now will endure forever.

In this life, the best parties end. In thinking of the life to come, it's hard for us to imagine that we wouldn't tire of anything that goes on forever. Perhaps the closest we've ever come are those moments when "time stood still," when we were caught up in love, so absorbed in something outside ourselves that we didn't hear the clock tick. Such moments are a foretaste of heaven.

Hell: The Demands of Justice

But what about punishment? We would be uneasy to find ourselves seated at the heavenly banquet beside Hitler or Ivan the Terrible. It's hard to see how even God's mercy could run that deep! What about God's justice?

The best of us must admit we deserve some punishment, a taste of purgatory. Our concept of justice includes punishment. Human beings like the idea of hell—perhaps better than God does.

Jesus insisted that God's justice is very different from human justice. It has no edge of vindictiveness. He constantly rebuked those who chided him for keeping company with sinners. See, for example, the call of Matthew (Matthew 9:9–13) or Jesus' meeting with Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10).

That said, we have to leave room for human refusal. We become who we are by the choices we make over a lifetime. Each decision turns us toward God and neighbor or away from them. One day, our life ends and with it the ability to make further choices. We die who we have become over the course of a lifetime: loving or unloving.

We can reject God's mercy and love, God's invitation to share in divine life. It's probably more accurate to say that we damn ourselves than to say that God condemns us to hell.

A well-worn story from Korea illustrates this truth. In this tale, heaven is a huge dinner party, but the guests are given chopsticks six feet long. They cannot feed themselves; they can only put choice tidbits into one another's mouths. Hell is just the same, but the guests, too caught up in selfishness, refuse to feed one another and forever wail their hunger.

Purgatory: Between Heaven and Hell

What about the rest of us, whose lives are a mix of selfishness and generous love? We sin-plagued individuals cannot face God without shame. Catholic belief includes a concept of purgatory—some means of purification.

It's a truism that drowning people see their whole lives unfolding before their eyes. Studies of near-death experiences—the recollections of those code-blue survivors—report just such an occurrence. They speak of being enveloped in the warmth and love of a “being of light,” whom they identify in terms of their religious belief as Christ, God, or an angel. This being presents them with a review of their whole life.

Add that evidence to our understanding that we're talking about states of being, about an experience that exists beyond space and time, and we can say that perhaps purgatory is just a moment of transition. As theologian Karl Rahner put

it, it's “an element of the encounter with God; that is, the encounter of the unfinished person, still immature in his love, with the holy, infinite, loving God; an encounter which is profoundly humiliating, painful and therefore purifying.”

Catholics pray for the dead and believe our prayers can ease the process of purification. Prayer transcends time and space. The prayer we breathe today for a loved one powerfully places us with that person. Lifted beyond the reach of time, who's to say it can't affect any moment in that person's history—even the long-ago moment of death when he or she came face-to-face with God?



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A Future in God's Hands

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin described prayer as “relaxing in the hand of God.” In the long run, the “last things” are, like us, in God's loving hands. Why waste time and energy fretting over details no one can determine? We need only trust St. Paul's assurance that “eye has not seen, and ear has not heard... what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9). To quote Rahner again, “Let us for the present simply have a little patience with history as it runs its course, with ourselves, and with God.”

Carol Luebering was the author of many articles and books, including Your Child's Confirmation, Your Child's First Communion, Your Child's Baptism, and Your Child's First Penance (Liguori Publications).

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