

CHANGED, NOT ENDED

A Catholic Guide to
Planning for Death



REV. BENJAMIN P. BRADSHAW, STL

Indeed for your faithful, Lord,
life is changed not ended,
and, when this earthly dwelling turns to dust,
an eternal dwelling is made ready for them in heaven.

- Preface for the Dead, Roman Missal

Forward

Death is scary. It is my experience that most people don't fear death. Most people know that their time is limited and that one day they will depart from this world. While they may not necessarily fear death itself, they often do fear what accompanies it: fear of the unknown after dying, pain involved with the dying process, letting go of everything and everyone they have ever known thus far, and a final judgment before God. This reality is humbling and, to some extent, scary for most. Death is the great equalizer for all of humanity, rich and poor, and is one hundred percent out of our control. While it is true that people can take their own lives, and I have buried many who have, no one can avoid confronting postmortem realities.

As Catholic Christians, we believe that while we usually can't control how and when we will die, we can control where we will be after we die. God has given to each of us free will, to choose eternal life or eternal separation from him. He gives us only what we have chosen in this life, usually a hundred times each day. A humble suggestion: choose well. We got one shot at this thing called life, so let's get it right.

Likewise, Christians believe there are three stages to human existence: body and soul together in this present life, body and soul separated after death, and body and soul reunited at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ (eschaton), which we profess every Sunday in the Nicene Creed: "I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life in the world to come. Amen." It stands to reason, then, that as Catholic Christians we should take practical steps to prepare for this coming reality as much as we can.

One of the greatest leaders of the American Catholic Church was Cardinal Francis George from Chicago (d.2015). He was truly a humble and brilliant man, with two doctorate degrees and a deep prayer life. It was reported that on his deathbed he mentioned to his secretary, "The only thing we take with us when we die is what we have given away." Or as George Weigel has noted, "We have a life given in order to be given away." We were made for gift. This is, in essence, the crux of Pope St. John Paul II's Theology of the Body. Think about it, 7 of the 10 Commandments involve how we are to treat other people. In the Our Father we hear no less than 8 references to the plural form (us, we, our), underscoring the need to treat others with love and respect. If we want to get to

heaven, we have to treat others the way God has asked us to, with love.

In over 20 years as a parish priest, I have buried many hundreds of people, some of whom died in violent ways. The first funeral I had at my current assignment was for four people at once, one of whom was a 6-year-old girl. They were all killed in an apparent gang hit. Years ago, I buried two 14-year-old girls the same week, both of whom died from cancer. I have buried many newborns and teenagers who died in accidents or suicide. For priests, we usually never forget the faces of the young, but if I'm honest, the others tend to fade over time. I have come to the realization that I am on borrowed time. Every moment is a gift, and we are called, in turn, to become a gift given to others with the time that we have remaining.

My love for this country notwithstanding, Americans as a whole have an allergy to discussing death. It is depressing for many of them and uncomfortable to discuss. Therefore it should come as no surprise that when death meets their families or loved ones, they have no idea how to address it or, nor do they have even a base vocabulary for discussing it when it is clearly imminent. Furthermore, their children and grandchildren are then taught that death is to be avoided at all costs, rather than being a natural, and often beautiful end, to our earthly lives. In failing to discuss this with their children, they are denying their child a right that is due them; namely, a right to know about one's own mortality and the faith that accompanies an afterlife. We often see the same phenomenon in families surrounding the topic of sex. They often just have no vocabulary to even begin the discussion.

Here's the deal - when you die your family will likely be in a state of emotional shock and sorrow. They will have to emerge from their sorrow literally within minutes of your passing to make some hard decisions: answering questions from doctors or hospice nurses, settling payment with the hospital, deciding who needs to be immediately informed of your passing and then making those painful phone calls, calling the local parish to schedule a funeral with the Church and the priest, meeting with the funeral home to arrange a date and then making sure that date lines up with the Church, trying to go through your belongings to decide what stays and what gets thrown out or given away, deciding what to do with your pet, deciding what to do about your mortgage payments and bills, cancelling your phone account, deciding what to do about your car, contacting your insurance company regarding a life insurance policy, and somewhere in all that trying to get immediate access to some cash to cover funeral costs. Considering the average cost of a funeral in the United States is about \$10,000.00, this can be a huge stressor. Add to this, of course, your loved one will still need to juggle her own family stresses, bills, and schedules as well. This brief text aims to help with planning some of these inevitable decisions.

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I. PRACTICAL PLANNING

Passwords & Probate

If you don't have a legal last will and testament (i.e. not something you hastily scribbled down on paper), your estate will likely go to probate court, which can take up to two years in some cases, adding stress and costs to your family. While some people are prescient enough to get their last will and testament together, few ever think to document their passwords for those left behind. Make sure your loved ones have access to these. I promise it will make their lives much easier when they are trying to gain access to your bank accounts, phone accounts, financial records, social media accounts, and your life insurance policy.

Power of Attorney

You need to officially appoint someone as your POA (Power of Attorney) to make decisions on your behalf if you are unable to do so, including legal or medical choices. Obviously, this should be someone you trust. This should be updated every 5 to 10 years, since our family and friends occasionally themselves die, or may no longer be as active in our lives as they once were. Over time, relationships can experience "rifts or drifts," - either a "falling out" argument or simply drifting apart over time. The POA needs to be officially recognized by legal documentation, not simply by word of mouth, as families not infrequently argue over "who did dad assign that role to?"

Advanced Directives

Do you want a feeding tube if the hospital recommends it? Do you want to be on life support if needed? Do you want to be resuscitated if your heart stops or would you prefer a DNR (Do Not Resuscitate) order? We need to ponder some of these questions and discuss them with our loved ones ahead of time, so they know what to do when the time comes. Keep in mind that sometimes these critical decisions must be made on the fly, when family members are stressed and grieving. As Catholics, we are always required to supply what is termed "ordinary means" to the ill and dying. With "ordinary means" (morally obligatory) we always must provide food, hydration, and clean linens to the sick and dying. "Ordinary" treatments offer a "reasonable hope" of assisting the patient's condition. In rare instances food and hydration can do more harm to the person if it is obvious that the person's body is clearly shutting down and near death. As Pope St. John Paul II noted, if a person is in a persistent vegetative state (PVS), we are still required to provide food and hydration to

them.^[1] To refuse these critical components would be akin to euthanasia. To this point, John Paul II underscores that there is a clear difference between euthanasia and the decision to forgo further care when death is clearly imminent. In this latter case, we entrust the person to God's mercy and allow the Lord to take our loved one when he is ready. Conversely, euthanasia is deliberately causing the death of another by advocating for their termination or withdrawing assistance when it should be offered (omission).^[2] Forgoing care, on the other hand, can be morally permissible when it becomes apparent that the patient's death is rapidly approaching, usually via a domino effect of many issues.^[3] In such an instance one is not morally required to keep the patient on life support.

"Extraordinary means" are optional. We are not obligated to provide these means for the patient, though we are permitted should we choose to do so. Such extraordinary treatments could include taking part in medical studies, experimental treatments offered outside the normal medical profession, chemotherapy, invasive procedures which could cause further problems for the patient, or excessive pain reduction treatments. Other practical issues usually factor in here as well: what is the family's financial status (i.e. what can they actually afford), what is the age of the patient, is the procedure covered by their medical plan, and does the procedure offer a "reasonable hope" of improvement or is improvement unlikely?

We need to courageously have these discussions with our spouse and family now. While often not easy to discuss, it is far easier now than it will be then.

Funeral Planning: Cremation versus Whole Body

There are three parts to a funeral in the Catholic Church: vigil (sometimes the night before and sometimes just prior to the funeral), the funeral itself (with or without the Eucharist), and the committal at the cemetery following. As with a wedding, if many of those in attendance are not likely to be Catholic, families can opt for a funeral without Holy Communion. Either is still permitted. The vigil can be held in the Church itself or at the funeral home, while the committal is almost always held at the cemetery.

Not infrequently, people ask: "Which is better, cremation or having my body at the funeral?" While the Church now permits both, preference is given to having the body present, largely because of the reverence that we give to the sacredness of the human body. What we do with our body matters, which is one of the reasons Catholics pray with their bodies at each mass (sit, stand,

kneel) and one of the reasons bodies are blessed with holy water and incense at funerals. The body is sacred, to be protected and respected. Thus, while cremation is permitted in the Catholic Church, we do ask that the cremains (ashes) not simply be kept in the home of the family or scattered somewhere. Rather, it is spiritually apropos that they be kept in a sacred place (columbarium), blessed by the local bishop. On a practical note, this just makes more sense given that when people move over the years, the ashes are far less likely to get lost, dropped, or disrespected by one's progeny.

When a funeral with cremains takes place in a Catholic Church, quite often the container with the ashes (urn) is displayed in the front of the Church, occasionally with an image of the deceased. The cremains are usually blessed at some point in the liturgy and are later transferred to the columbarium at the cemetery, at which point the Rite of Committal takes place.

In planning one's funeral, a few questions should be asked ahead of time: which parish do I attend? If I am not a registered parishioner, should I now become one? What music and songs do I want? Who do I want to do the readings at the funeral (old and new testaments)? Do I want certain people to bring up the gifts (bread and wine) at the funeral mass? What priest do I want to celebrate the mass, sometimes referred to as a "requiem mass?" Do I want to invite other priests to attend? Who in my family could meet with the church and the funeral home to address some of these details? (St. Michael parishioners can contact Gwen Coffey in the church office to complete our *Funeral Planning Sheet* so loved ones will have a written record of these decisions. Even young and healthy people can go ahead and make these choices to assist those who will survive them.)

When a family fails to make some of these decisions ahead of time, the task of making these decisions usually falls to one's spouse or the child who has been the primary care giver to the deceased. In some instances, this can cause unanticipated tension within a family as someone may feel slighted or hurt if he or she is not invited to participate in the liturgy. Please save your family this stress by being proactive about these points now.

Lasi Will & Testament

Everyone over the age of 18 should have a last will and testament. Not infrequently priests bury young people who die far too early. Most people pass away without having completed their will, even though they intended to at some point. This is unfortunate because this usually means that one's loved ones are left to deal with even more stress, time constraints, and financial burdens after one's passing. Add to this mix no shortage of horror stories of sibling infighting over inheritance or estate funds, and it can get very messy indeed. I have witnessed plenty of families whose siblings, formerly amicable, become bitter towards each other over something as small as a watch, a pillow, or coffee cup.

Preparing one's last will and testament ensures that your preferences are protected and, to the extent that it is possible, everyone is on the same page after you die. Having a last will and testament likewise protects the beneficiaries and dependents from unscrupulous people who may claim a "right" to something that was never your intention, again creating more unneeded stress for your family when you're gone.

The following are the points that should be addressed in your will:

- **Official Declaration*: Your full name, that you are of sound mind and under no duress in writing this, and your clear intention in writing the will.
 - **Beneficiaries*: The full name of those (people or institutions) whom you wish to receive part or all of your estate.
 - **Executor*: Which person do you trust to be the executor of your estate after you pass? The person's full name should be clearly noted.
 - **Signature*: You will need to sign the document in the presence of two witnesses, ideally two people who will not be beneficiaries upon your death.
 - **Witnesses*: The full names of two people who have witnessed the signing of the document and can testify that you were of sound mind when you did so.
- Note: In the state of Tennessee a last will and testament does not need to be notarized to be valid, though it is recommended.*

After completing the last will and testament, other tasks to address are:

- 1.) Full review of your assets and possessions, ensuring nothing was forgotten.
- 2.) Copies made - one staying with your attorney, one for the executor and one for your family.
- 3.) A copy kept in a fire-proof safe.
- 4.) The document should occasionally be reviewed and updated in accordance with life changes. My suggestion would be at minimum every 5 years.

Unfortunately, most people procrastinate completing their last will and testament, too often assuming they have plenty of time before they die or concluding, “My family will take care of it after I’m gone.” It does not occur to them that when they don’t take the time and effort to get it done now, far more stress, on multiple levels, is created for their loved ones down the road.

When to get Last Rites (Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick)

A few basic points regarding Last Rites (Anointing of the Sick):^[4]

- *We don’t need to wait until one is near death to receive the sacrament.
- *The Church recommends it for those who are ill (physically or emotionally), the elderly, and those who are preparing for a medical procedure (e.g. surgery).
- *Only a Catholic priest can administer the sacrament to a member of the faithful.
- *Through this sacrament, the person receives greater peace of mind and forgiveness of sins.
- *The sacrament involves anointing the person’s forehead and hands with holy oil, blessed by the local bishop during Holy Week.
- *The Rite of Anointing of the Sick may or may not include viaticum, literally “provisions for the journey.” This includes bringing Holy Communion (Eucharist) to a critically ill person prior to death.

Some will ask, “When is the best time to ask my priest to receive this sacrament?” Answer: whenever you think you need it. Most parish priests are more than willing to visit a parishioner at home, in the hospital, or meet with them before or after mass to assist with anointing of the sick.

Organ & Body Donation

The Catholic Church supports organ donation as a “noble, meritorious act and an expression of generous solidarity” with those in need.^[1] The Catechism of the Catholic Church, however, further notes the following caveats: the donor must formally decide to do so (cannot be taken against their will), and, if it is a vital organ, the donor must first be verifiably deceased. Unfortunately, the trafficking of human organs around the world is a reprehensible crime, often removed from the victim while he or she is still alive. While this horrible practice is less common in western countries, it is not uncommon the third world.

It is well documented that about 20% of those waiting for a liver transplant die while waiting for a viable donor and liver. Likewise, the needs far outweigh

the available livers which can be used for transplant.^[2] The Catholic Church therefore, not only supports organ donation, under the aforementioned prescriptions, but likewise encourages the faithful to consider offering one's vital organs for possible donation after one has passed.

Likewise, as a Catholic, it is morally permissible to donate one's body to science for research. In such instances, the parish can offer a memorial mass on behalf of the deceased person without a body if it has already been donated. If the body is present and is yet to be donated, the vigil and funeral mass can be celebrated, though the cemetery committal is omitted.

II. EMOTIONAL PLANNING

Now is the Time to Talk.

The Bible talks a lot about prudence or wisdom, especially in the Old Testament (e.g. Proverbs, Sirach). It notes that the wise man or woman is one who knows his weaknesses, depends on the Lord to help him, is humble, and plans ahead. Likewise, wisdom is still one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:9), which St. Paul often highlights in his epistles.

Some discussions in life are easy, and some can be uncomfortable and even awkward, especially given one's natural disposition and family dynamics. Now is the time to sit down and discuss with one's spouse and children some hard-hitting questions regarding our mortality. As we mentioned earlier, most people know they will one day pass away, but they usually assume they have plenty of time. The days then turn into weeks, and the weeks months, and the months then years. In other words, the mortality can is perpetually kicked down the road, eventually dropping in the lap of one's loved ones to deal with after death finally arrives. It is a great act of love to be proactive in addressing these issues ahead of time, so others don't have to.

Who do I need to forgive?

We are all broken and usually wounded to some degree. Jesus speaks many times about the requirement (not merely a suggestion) to forgive others. One of the most overlooked passages on this point is Matthew 5:26: "Truly, I say to you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny." His point here is that we need to "settle with your opponent" prior to death, or at least try to, before kneeling before God after we leave this world. In some instances, forgiving others can be a very long process. Some wounds go very deep. For this reason, it is often said that forgiveness is less of a decision and more of a process. Likewise, forgiveness does not actually mean that we need to talk to the person or see them again to do so, which could trigger even more problems. We can, therefore, forgive them from a safe distance. Jesus Christ obviously knows the extent to which we have tried and the extent to which some have become ipso facto "addicted" to resentment against the person who wounded them. Unfortunately for some, they have come to define much of their life in terms of the person they resent the most (e.g. ex-spouse, alcoholic father, etc.).

For many the person they need to forgive the most may well be God or our own self. We have all said and done things we are not proud of and we need to understand that God wants us to forgive ourselves and have genuine peace. We are usually a very different person now than we were when we did what we did years ago. It is time to give it to God and be at peace with the wisdom we have gained from the experience.

It is not uncommon for some people to harbor bitterness or resentment towards God or the Church for any number of reasons, usually as the result of the loss of a child, infertility, their particular circumstances in life, negative experiences from people in the Church, or physical suffering. Sometimes anger towards God can not only be natural, it can be good, leading to heartfelt prayer. It may be helpful here to underscore the difference between anger that can become the capital sin of hatred, never a good thing, and anger which is altogether justifiable. Remember, Jesus got angry many times but never sinned (John 2:13-16). For his part, St. Paul highlights the difference between just and unjust anger in his letters to the Church in Ephesus: "If you are angry then let it be without sin. Do not let the sun go down on your wrath" (4:26). In other words, as an emotion, anger can be used to protect what and who needs protection (e.g. our faith, our country, our family, ourselves). The trick is to work through the anger so that it does not morph into bitterness, malice, and resentment. This usually takes time, occasionally via counseling, prayer, and perseverance. God will help us, but we need to do our part to heal, forgive, and move on.

Yes, we will die.

Of the roughly 150,000 people who die every day worldwide (about 60 million annually), most pass away because of heart disease, cancer, strokes, and unforeseen accidents.^[7] Sometimes death is foreseen by the patient and family, and sometimes not. As Jesus informs us, “We know neither the day nor the hour” (Mt 24:36, Mk 13:32) of the end of time, and we could say something similar about our own death. Each of us needs to be ready every day to meet the Lord. One day we will brush our teeth, and it will be the last time we brush our teeth. One day we will kiss our spouse, and it will be the last time we kiss our spouse. One day we will get dressed and it will be the last time we dress ourselves. And one day we will come to mass, and it will be the last time we come to mass, at least in this life. We need to be ready to the extent that we can be.

The saints in the Catholic Church have referred to this spiritual readiness as *ars moriendi*, or the “art of dying,” whereby one has a healthy realization of one’s mortality. This “art” involves a gradual realization that every day is a day closer to our last. Likewise, it involves a “holy restlessness” to be proactive in our preparation and a “holy surrender” in accepting the inevitable, trusting in God’s mercy. When approached with the eyes of faith in life eternal, the dread often associated with death gradually gives way to a joyful anticipation about which St. Paul says, “Eye has not seen, and ear has not heard... what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9). As Bl. Fulton J. Sheen noted, death is a horrible thing for one who lives only for himself, but it is a beautiful thing for one who has learned, over the years, to die to himself every day. The suffering that we sometimes experience in this life teaches us about death long before our physical death occurs, assuming one is wise enough to learn from it. Furthermore, on the other side of physical death all the suffering we experienced in this life will finally have meaning to us. We will understand at that point why things happened the way they did and what perseverance in suffering taught us in preparation for heaven.

While it is true that no shortage of people experience thanatophobia, or a crippling fear of death, it is also true that some of this debilitating fear would likely dissipate if such persons knew more of what to expect with their own passing from this life. Let’s be honest, theorizing about death is easy to do when we are not facing imminent death ourselves. However, talk to anyone who has narrowly escaped death and they will usually inform us that in the face of death one is both humbled, and realizes very quickly what and who is most important in life. One’s mortality gets raw and real. Part of this realization includes the surrender to the unknown of one’s post-mortem existence, but

for many the fear is found more in the lack of control they feel. This latter issue tends to be more distressing for Type A personalities who spend their life in the driver's seat and are accustomed to being in charge.

On the other side of escaping death, such "drivers" are usually changed forever, to the extent that those close to them often don't know how to relate to them anymore. Such phenomenon is not uncommon for soldiers returning home from battle or some who have survived highly dangerous experiences, like 9/11.

Spiritual maturation in the *ars moriendi*, therefore, requires day-to-day surrender and a resilience in the face of human suffering, especially if that suffering currently makes no sense to us.

Nixing Family Drama

It is not uncommon for formerly amicable siblings to nearly come to blows over the most mundane of possessions or the funds of the deceased person. Likewise, it usually falls to the most "church going" sibling to make the decisions regarding the funeral arrangements since he or she is often most familiar with the parish or the priest. If the sibling chooses someone to do the reading whom the other siblings disagree with, inter-familial resentment is often the result. Gossip about the sibling can easily foment and the person is left to deal with sibling drama in addition to juggling the practical details of the funeral planning as well as managing his or her own emotional stress. Please don't put this person in that horrible situation. Have the courage to address these issues now, while everyone is thinking reasonably clearly.

III. SPIRITUAL PLANNING

Soul versus Spirit

At the moment of our conception in our mothers' wombs, we each received 3 things which are immortal: an immortal soul, an immortal guardian angel to help bring that soul back to God, and a vocational calling unique to each of us. As Jesus notes in John's gospel: "You did not choose me, I chose you and appointed you that you may go and bear fruit that will remain" (Jn 15:16). For Catholic Christians, we define a human being as corpore et anima unus (union of body and soul). This anthropological reality means that when we die, we do not become angels, as is argued by some, perhaps well-meaning, Christians. Rather, we are disembodied souls, which await the Second Coming of Jesus Christ (eschaton), that we may then be reunited with our bodies in an eternally glorified state. This is really the miracle of Easter Sunday, that the redemption of Christ has won this eternal reality for us. Furthermore, the theological virtue of hope is the compass in our heart which eventually leads us home, a home that we all long for more than anything. Human beings, therefore, were created by God to have bodies united with souls. While the soul is the essence of who we are, it was always meant to have a human body. Thus, while the human soul is itself spiritual, it is not a pure spirit.^[8]

This reality is in contrast with our guardian angels who are pure spirit and were never meant to have a human body. In heaven, we will see the angels and know them well, though we will not know them in our own bodies until the end of time (Second Coming) when everyone's bodies will be reunited with their souls once again. Our guardian angels will never have bodies, though we will know and see them at that point in our bodies. This is why St. Paul refers to Jesus as the "firstborn from the dead" (Col 1:18). We will be in heaven within our bodies in the same way that Jesus is now there in his own body. Add to this that Jesus assures us that when we receive the Eucharist at mass, we receive the promise of life eternal, what the saints have termed the "food of immortality" (St. Ignatius of Antioch).^[9]

“What happens when I die?”

When we die, our heart stops beating and our brain ceases to function. For most states, clinical death is judged via brain death. For Catholic Christians, however, we understand the mind as being immortal (attached to the soul) and the brain as being mortal. In other words, as St. Thomas Aquinas noted, the mind is attached to the soul, and as such, survives bodily death.^[10] Thus, while the two are connected, there is a clear difference.

Over the years I have read thousands of case studies of what are termed near death experiences, or NDEs. By NDE, we are referring to those who have experienced brain death for some time and were later resuscitated. Catholics are certainly free to believe or not believe in them, though given my own interviews with some who have experienced NDEs, at this point I have come to accept many of them as more than medically verifiable. Some of those who have experienced NDEs are themselves well-heeled in the scientific and medical communities. It is worth pointing out that some of those who have experienced NDEs were blind from birth and, after having been resuscitated, describe in vivid detail the visual scene in the operating room, deceased family members now in heaven, or the surroundings.

Assuming one does believe the now well-documented phenomenon of what some have testified to experiencing after having died, it is perhaps worth asking what were some of the common experiences they had as their souls left their human bodies? While there are many varied post-mortem experiences that people have, the following are some of the most common phenomena that I have witnessed in the testimony of these survivors:

- **Music*: Many describe the music in heaven like nothing one has ever heard in this life.
- **Colors*: Many describe the colors in heaven like nothing they have ever seen in this life.
- **Recognition of others*: Many describe the phenomenon whereby they recognize both people they knew in their earthly life and many who died long before they were ever born.
- **Fearlessness of death*: Most describe not only a newly found lack of fear of dying but also speak of a genuine disappointment that they were resuscitated after they died. After returning to their bodies, nearly all of them now claim a near total lack of fear of dying whenever their death time again approaches.

**Accounting for their lives:* Many describe a “life review” of sorts wherein they experience firsthand their own life choices (good and bad) and then experience the impact of both on other people. Almost never was this done in a way of making the person feel guilt, but simply to educate the person on the deep impact our actions and words in this life have on others.

Assuming one ascribes some validity to these accounts (for my part, I do), it begs an obvious question: How do they experience any of these things without a human body? In order to hear music, see colors, and recognize others, we need our bodily senses. In other words, if their bodies are not with them in heaven (since it is in the morgue, at the hospital, or at the scene of the accident), how do they experience these things? The answer, it would seem, harkens us back to what St. Thomas Aquinas highlighted regarding the immortality of the soul in surviving bodily death. There must be something recognizable about the human soul post-mortem if others can immediately know who we are and themselves can see without human eyes. One is reminded of the words of Jesus in Matthew’s gospel: “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light.”^[11]

While much of this remains a mystery to us, two things are certain: the human soul is immortal and there is a world beyond this one. This is a reality Catholics profess every Sunday in the Nicene Creed: “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.”

Fear of the Unknown

As any neuroscientist will attest, the human brain picks up on patterns and quickly learns from them. This can work to our advantage, as in the case of academic learning or physical survival, or to our disadvantage, as in the case of a dopamine hit with addictions. Since most of us have never actually experienced brain death, there is no “death pattern” for our brains to follow. In other words, it is completely new and uncertain territory. This is alarming for many since most of us want to prepare for the unknown. Fortunately, Jesus gives us clear instructions on this point: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Mt 7:12). While there is much that we simply cannot prepare for since it will be a completely new reality, it is more important to remember that the best way to prepare for this unknown reality is by doing something we actually already do know as Christians. We prepare best for death by loving others now.

There are some experiences in life that we experience as a community, such as major life events, holidays, and celebrations. Likewise, there are a few experiences in life that we must go through alone, and this is when we see the moral character of the man or woman revealed. The person he or she truly is immediately comes to the surface. This is often seen for instance in crisis moments, when one is under great stress or in danger. Death is a phenomenon we must each experience alone, even if one is surrounded by his family at the moment of death. Eventually all the other faces will disappear and there will only be two people in the room: you and Jesus Christ. This is called the Particular Judgement.

Particular & Final Judgments

In the last line of the Hail Mary prayer, Catholics say *Nunc et in hora mortis nostrae*. (“Pray for us now and at the hour of our death.”). In this prayer, we are asking for the eternal help of the Blessed Virgin Mary at the moment of our death when we kneel before her Son. In what is known as the Particular Judgement, immediately upon death, every human being will stand before Jesus Christ to offer an account of his or her life: choices made and words said. This judgement will be private (between us and Him), whereas the Final Judgment (End of Time) will be public, when all are resurrected from the dead. Several times in the gospels Jesus refers to this reality, especially with the separation of the sheep and the goats (Mt 25). Likewise, he notes: “There is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, nor whispered in secret that will not be made known” (Lk 12:2). It is at this point that each of us will see the impact of our life choices (direct actions and omissions) on others, for good and bad. Both St. James (2:13) and St. Paul the Apostles testify to the reality of this Particular Judgement before Christ (2 Cor 5:10).

Heaven, Hell & Purgatory

Catholic doctrine attests to what we refer to as the Four Last Things: death, judgement, heaven, and hell. Purgatory is generally not listed among the four last things because of its temporary nature, as those in purgatory will one day be in heaven. After experiencing our Particular Judgement with Jesus Christ, we will find ourselves in either heaven, hell, or in temporary state of purification (purgatory).

Pope St. John Paul II taught that heaven, hell, and purgatory are not physical places in the universe, but rather “states of being,” whereby one finds himself in a state of eternal joy with God, eternal misery, or of being purified prior to entering heaven. With heaven, one experiences the fullness of joy which she seeks in the depths of her heart. It is a state of eternal happiness in the presence of the Holy Trinity, the source from which we came and the source to which we long to return. Our souls were originally created for this eternal state of joy with God, as St. Augustine fondly noted in his *Confessions*, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you, oh God.”^[12] In heaven, therefore, our souls will ultimately eventually find the eternal joy that we have hoped for every day in this life and we will experience this in a total absence of human suffering.

With purgatory, one is in a “transitional condition” whereby he or she dies in a state of grace but still possesses characteristics which must be purified prior to entering into God’s presence. Pope Benedict XVI referred to purgatory as a state of “purification and healing which mature the soul for communion with God.”^[13] We are not told how long purgatory will last or what specifically it will entail. What we do know is that some people do their spiritual purgation in this life and some in the next. For all of us, there must be a purifying of the ego and any residual arrogance prior to entering heaven. This purification brings us down to the brass tacks and studs of our relationship with God. We come to understand what and who really matters, usually via suffering and greater humility.

Hell, conversely, is the state of eternal separation from God by unrepentant sin and pride. This includes those who have definitively neglected helping others either out of ego or omission (e.g. parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus - Lk 16:19-31). The Catechism of the Catholic Church, under the section of hell, specifically notes the following: “Our Lord warns us that we shall be separated from him [hell] if we fail to meet the serious needs of the poor...”^[14] Many times Jesus refers to the existence of hell (Gehenna) and the eternal condition of those who are there. When one dies in a state of unrepentant mortal sin, he or she is faced with the real prospect of eternal separation from God for all eternity, and “this state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called ‘hell.’”^[15] Again, Pope Benedict XVI highlights the reality of hell for those who have freely chosen to reject the truth of God in their lives: “There can be people who have totally destroyed their desire for truth and readiness to love, people for whom everything has become a lie, people who have lived for hatred and have suppressed all love within themselves. This is a terrifying thought, but alarming profiles of this type can be seen in certain figures of

our own history. In such people all would be beyond remedy and the destruction of good would be irrevocable: this is what we mean by the word Hell.”^[16] Eternal separation from God in hell, therefore, will be the full realization that we were meant for eternal joy with Him in heaven and the full realization that we will never know it. It is the state that Jesus refers to as “wailing and grinding of teeth” when one fully realizes that he will be forever excluded from heaven as a result of his own negative life choices.^[17]

To be clear, “God predestines no one to go to hell,” and it is his great desire that all will be forever with him in heaven.^[18] St. Paul likewise attests to this reality in his epistles (Eph 1:5). Thus, in the same way that God created the angels in his image and likeness (invisible world), he also created man in his image and likeness (visible world), with both angels and man given free will to accept or reject him.^[19] Many times Jesus highlights the reality of the demons, or those spirits who freely chose to reject his love and follow Satan instead.^[20] Our Lord notes that hell was originally created for “Satan and his angels,” but one can freely choose this path as well by rejecting the love of God and failing to love others. Thus, God gives us only what we have chosen. He will see it all and so will we. It will be fully and completely transparent on all sides, making our eventual destination after this judgement quite clear.

Making a Good Confession

Exorcists in the Catholic Church will often note that a good confession is far more powerful than an exorcism, and they are right. An exorcism is a sacramental, whereas confession (or reconciliation) is a sacrament. While a formal exorcism is a “somatic deliverance” involving bodily purification from a demonic entity, confession is a full purification of the person’s soul from sin. The human soul is completely cleansed of all sin, even those one may have forgotten.

A full analysis of the sacrament of reconciliation will not happen here, but suffice it to say that, for most, it is very humbling. In John’s gospel, Jesus gives power to the apostles (Apostolic Succession) to forgive sins, which the Church still applies and supplies for the faithful.^[21] When some approach the end of their lives, the issue of confession tends to take greater importance and frankly, it should. This harkens back to our earlier discussion of the *ars moriendi*, or the “art of dying,” whereby we gradually gain a greater awareness of our mortality, our weaknesses, and our eventual accountability before God for our actions. To this point, however, we do not

need to wait until the moment of death to make a good confession. It can be done at any time. There is a difference between our memory and the memory of God. After confessing, we will still remember what we have done, but in God's eyes it never happened. He allows us to remember what we have done, even if it is painful, with the hope that we will learn from this and grow. We call this conversion. One of the greatest mistakes people make, then, is assuming, "If I remember it then God has not forgiven me for it." This is not true.

God's Mercy & God's Justice: Keeping a Balance

The first Sunday after Easter we celebrate the feast of Divine Mercy Sunday, which highlights the magnanimous love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ. This celebration should give us plenty of hope and confidence in God's desire for us to be with him in heaven forever. This hope, it should be pointed out, is not just a hope for eternal salvation for us but likewise for others, as any parent will readily attest. They want their kids in heaven too. Pope Benedict XVI highlights this point in his encyclical on Christian hope: "Our hope is always essentially also hope for others; only thus is it truly hope for me too. As Christians, we should never limit ourselves to asking: how can I save myself? We should also ask: what can I do in order that others may be saved and that for them too the star of hope may rise? Then I will have done my utmost for my own personal salvation as well."^[22]

As we mentioned earlier, our Catholic faith teaches us that, "With death, our life-choice becomes definitive—our life stands before the judge [Jesus Christ]."^[23] In other words, there are no do-overs regarding our life choices. After death it is forever sealed, just as with the angels and demons there are no do-overs either. Some Christians have ascribed to the mistaken notion of what is sometimes termed "universalism," or the notion that all people will inevitably be saved, regardless of their actions in this life. While it is true that God desires that all will be saved, he likewise respects our free will in determining our ultimate eternal destination.^[24] Universalist teaching, therefore, whitewashes over all ideas of hell and eternal accountability before God after this life. This runs contrary to what Jesus himself teaches in the Gospels. This is a common fallacy in American thought today. It usually goes something like: "As long as I am basically a good person, I'll go to heaven." The problem with this logic is that any and all reprehensible behavior can be permitted under the notion that "I am basically a good person." While the Catholic Church fully rejects universalism, she still prays for the eternal salvation of all people.

It is good to keep a few things in proper balance since one can go off the road on the right or onto the left, and Church history has witnessed plenty of errors on both sides. On the one hand, God always honors our free will in choosing to love Him and others in this life or not, and on the other hand he is the embodiment of mercy and forgiveness. That said, in order for us to receive the mercy and forgiveness of God we need to forgive others first: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."^[25] Put simply, the "measure with which we measure will, in turn, be measured out [to us]."^[26] Some people live their lives utterly apathetic to attending mass or going to confession, and yet they love greatly and are very forgiving. Still others attend mass every Sunday and stubbornly hold on to bitterness, resentment, and are unforgiving. To be clear, there is a greater responsibility to be borne by those of us who know better than for those who do not: "From whom much has been given, much will be expected."^[27] Once we have been exposed to the truth of Jesus Christ, therefore, we have a definitive responsibility to live in that truth and no one can claim a willful ignorance or remain neutral before God.

There are some who suffer from immense scrupulosity, whereby they can never relax and trust in God's mercy. Such people usually live by a theology of fear, dotting the i's and crossing the t's to avoid eternal damnation. Several of the Catholic saints experienced this at some point during their lives (e.g. St. Therese of Lisieux, St. Maximilian Kolbe). On the other end of the spectrum, there are some who again fall under the mistaken notion that God is a 'good God' and "will inevitably forgive me for all sin, so it doesn't really matter what I do." This is referred to as the sin of presumption, closely akin to universalist thinking. While it is true that God forgives us our sins when we seek repentance, he likewise expects us to take practical steps to change our lives for the better. Given that we have a fallen nature (concupiscence), to some extent we will always struggle in this life to grow and get better, but God also sees our efforts and will meet us half-way with his grace. This mix of Divine Justice with Divine Mercy is important if we are to accurately understand the perspective of Jesus Christ when we meet him in the next life.

IV. A FINAL NOTE ON DEATH

One day we will leave this life. Everyone and everything we have ever known we will leave behind. While this is humbling and intimidating, we must trust in what Jesus tells us regarding heaven: “In my father’s house there are many mansions, if there were not, I would not have told you. I go to prepare a place for you, so that where I am you also may be.”^[28] Since Christians believe that Jesus Christ is God, we have to assume that he is not lying when he says this, especially given that he mentions heaven many times in the Gospels. We have great hope that heaven awaits us. In the meantime, we live our lives the best we can, loving God and others with the time that we have been given. We do well, then, to prepare ourselves practically, emotionally, and spiritually for this new reality which awaits us.

- [1] Pope John Paul II, *Locution on Caring for Persons in a Persistent Vegetative State* (March 20, 2004).
- [2] Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2277.
- [3] CCC, no.2278.
- [3] CCC, no.2278.
- [4] CCC, no.1527.
- [5] CCC, no. 2296
- [6] American Association for the Study of Liver Disease (Nov. 12, 2021).
- [7] Census Data (2017).
- [8] CCC, nos. 363-366.
- [9] John 6:58: "Whoever eats this bread will live forever."
- [10] *Summa Theologiae* (Part 1, Question 75).
- [11] Jn 6:22.
- [12] St. Augustine, *Confessions*. 1,1.5.
- [13] Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*. no. 45.
- [14] CCC, nos.1033-1037.
- [15] CCC, no. 1033.
- [16] Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* (2007), no. 45.
- [17] Mt 8:12, 13:42, 13:50, 22:13, Lk 13:28.
- [18] CCC, no.1037.
- [19] Pope John Paul II, *Wednesday Catechesis on Angels and Demons* (July-August, 1986).
- [20] Mt 25:41.
- [21] Jn 20:21-23.
- [22] *Spe Salvi*, no.48.
- [23] *Spe Salvi*, no.45.
- [24] 1 Tim 2:4.
- [25] Mt 6:9-13.
- [26] Mt 7:2, Lk 6:38.
- [27] Lk 12:48.
- [28] Jn 14:2.

Fr. Ben Bradshaw is the pastor of St. Michael Catholic Church, the largest church in the Diocese of Memphis. Before his priestly ordination in 2006, he worked as a chef and completed professional training at several prestigious culinary schools. His culinary background informs his current ministry, where he bakes hundreds of King Cakes for an annual fundraiser, prepares gourmet dinners for charity, and hosts a popular podcast/YouTube channel, Soul Food Priest.

Additionally, Fr. Ben holds a Licentiate Degree in Sacred Theology from the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Washington, D.C.