

## THE LAST THINGS

This is an appropriate title for our last lesson of the year. We pass from philosophy to theology as we consider the ultimate issues of the human soul, *Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell*. Philosophical truth grounds theological truth.

Let us recall the principles laid out for us by Cardinal Manning late in the nineteenth century that we studied in Lesson 4 of our Third Year.

*It is a breach of reason not to believe in God; it is a breach of our moral sense (i.e., the sense of adequation of ends with means) not to believe that God has revealed Himself to man; that that revelation is Christianity; and that Christianity is Catholicism.*

The most important of the four causes is, as we know, the final cause, the end for the sake of which we perform our actions; first in intention and last in execution. *End* has two meanings: the reason for our action, and that in which our action reaches fulfilment.

In the midst of the problems currently afflicting the Catholic Church, not from outside but from within, the former Apostolic Nuncio to the United States of America, Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, has called on the bishops of the Church to embrace the burdens of their vocation and reject the attractions of compromise with the world in which consists the heresy of Modernism. He told them—

“You... are faced with a choice. You can choose to withdraw from the battle, to prop up the conspiracy of silence and avert your eyes from the spreading of corruption. You can make excuses, compromises and justifications that put off the day of reckoning. You can console yourselves with the falsehood and the delusion that it will be easier to tell the truth tomorrow, and then the following day, and so on. On the other hand, you can choose to speak. You can trust Him who told us ‘the truth will set you free’. I do not say it will be easy to decide between silence and speaking. I urge you to consider which choice—on your deathbed, and then before the just Judge—you will not regret having made.”

It is truly an extraordinary time in the history of the Church when an Archbishop should be so moved by conditions to admonish, not the faithful generally, but her bishops, the Apostles’ successors.

The Italian lay philosopher and theologian, Robert de Mattei, has written a commentary on this public act of Archbishop Viganò and praised his courage for calling attention to the issues over which each man will be judged at the moment of death. He has reminded all Catholics of the crucial importance that they should ever have before their minds these four last things. “Today,” he says,

“nobody speaks about... death, judgment, hell, heaven. This is the reason for the relativism and nihilism which is rampant in society. Man has lost the awareness of his own identity, the purpose of his life, and precipitates each day into the void of the abyss. Yet no reasonable man can ignore that earthly life is not all there is. Man is not a mass of cells, but is made up of soul and body and after death there is

another life, which cannot be the same for those who have... worked for what is good [and for those who have] worked for what is evil. Today, even inside the Church, many bishops and priests are living immersed in practical atheism, as if there were no future life..."

As I have pointed out before we never have more than a moment together of life in our earthly existence. We come to some moment, whether good or bad, and we pass immediately to the next. This is the reason we take photographs; a vain endeavour to stop time fleeing away. The English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote a work—I won't call it a poem—called *The Leaden Echo And The Golden Echo* whose central feature is this inexorable passage of time. Here is a short passage.

"How to keep—is there any, any, is there none such, no where known some, bow or brooch, braid or brace, lace, latch, or key to keep  
Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty,... from vanishing away?  
Oh, is there no frowning of these wrinkles, rankèd wrinkles deep  
Down? no waving off of these most mournful messengers, still messengers, sad and stealing messengers of grey?..."

The great English Jesuit, Fr Bernard Bassett, used say that our life continues moment by moment until its last moment when that present moment lasts forever. No more transience then. Our life reaches its fulfillment in one moment, an eternal 'now'.

It is worth exploring the details of the revelation from Almighty God exposed by the Church's Fathers and her doctors that we may understand exactly what will befall each of us at the moment of death. A holy priest I knew, a Carmelite, Fr John Venard Smith, used to quote the aphorism of St John of the Cross, "In the end we will be tested in love". He remarked: "The final examination and we already know the questions we will be asked by Almighty God—Did you love your neighbour? Did you love Me?"

Here is Professor de Mattei:

"The first judgment, called the particular, is that at the time of death. In this instant a ray of light will penetrate the soul in depth, to reveal what 'she' is and to fix forever her happy or unhappy fate. The scenario of our existence will appear before our eyes. From the very first moment when God brought us forth from nothing to being, He has conserved us in life with infinite love, offering us day by day, second by second, the graces necessary to save ourselves. At the particular judgment we will see clearly what was asked of us in our particular vocation: that of a mother, a father or a priest. Illuminated by the Divine light the soul 'herself' will pronounce her own definitive judgment, which will coincide with the judgment of God. The sentence will be either eternal life or eternal punishment. There is no higher tribunal to appeal the sentence to, since Christ is the ultimate, the Supreme Judge..."

St Thomas teaches that the soul goes by itself to the place of its eternal destiny after the fashion of things which, if they be heavy, fall, and if they are light, ascend. It is as true to say of a person that he is dead as to say that he is judged.

In a passage whose content is very salutary for our souls, Professor de Mattei cites a private revelation to a religious from a former young friend who died and was damned:

“[I]n the instant of my passage I came out brusquely from the dark. I saw myself flooded by a blinding light precisely in the place where my dead body lay. It happened as in the theatre when the lights are switched off and the curtain is raised on an unexpected scene, tremendously bright – the scene of my life. As if in a mirror I saw my soul, I saw the graces trampled upon, starting from my youth until that last “No”. I felt like a murderer who had been shown his victim; “Repent? Never! – Be ashamed? Never!” Yet, I could not resist the gaze of that God Whom I had rejected. I was left with only one thing to do: flee. As Cain fled Abel so my soul was driven far away from the sight of that horror. It was my particular judgment. The invisible Judge said: “Be gone from me!” Then my soul, like a yellow shadow of sulphur, plunged into the eternal torment.”

It pays to meditate on the reality of eternity. Eternity—not just for a day, or a week, or a year, or even a lifetime; but forever—whether in heaven where God has always intended we should be, or in hell, separated from Him as a result of our own fixed and final choice. The teaching of Christ’s Church is that God’s will is salvific for all men. He wants all men to enjoy the bliss of union with Him in heaven. But He will not, as some maudlin modern theologians assert, overthrow the soul’s exercise of its own free will. He has given us freedom; He will not compel us to embrace the good if we are hell-bent on evil.

This exposition bears out the principle enunciated by the great philosophers that *it is matter that impedes knowledge*. What we know when we know is the *formal* in things, the immaterial part of them. Through the power of intellect we extract the forms of the things we know, their essences, their quiddities—*what* they are. What impedes our doing so perfectly is the *matter* which is part of their composition.



*A submerged airliner*

Some years ago a Malaysian Airlines airliner was lost in the southern Indian Ocean. Attempts to discover its whereabouts have been hampered by matter, the waters of the ocean and the great depth in those waters where its remains are located. Something removed from us at a distance is hidden from our knowledge because of the manifold material substances intervening.

In similar fashion the matter of our body impedes knowledge of our own self. We may persuade ourselves about the state of our soul while we are living in the body but any illusions disappear at the moment of death because in an instant the matter impeding our knowledge is removed. Then *we know even as we are known*.

Here is the great tragedy for the atheist. He gives himself excuses for refusing to acknowledge the existence of God. (For that is what Darwinian evolution is; not an explanation for man's being but an excuse for not exploring the need to seek its adequate causes.) He may kid himself, insisting there is no God, right up to the moment of death. But in that moment—when he is no longer able to prevent himself recognising the truth that he is a being composed of matter and spirit, utterly contingent and utterly dependent on God—he is compelled by it.

In that moment when he can no longer do anything about it; no longer make reparation for his folly; no longer ask forgiveness of God for his negligence in rejecting the revelation of His Son Jesus Christ to all mankind; no longer give thanks to God for the great gifts of life, of essence and existence, God has given him; he is compelled to acknowledge the truth and compelled by the truth to take himself to his proper place.

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