

THE  
FOUR LAST THINGS  
DEATH—JUDGMENT—HELL—HEAVEN

*It is appointed unto men once to die,  
and after this the judgment.*

—Hebrews 9:27

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BY FATHER VON COCHEM

Explanation of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass  
Illustrated Life of Christ

THE  
FOUR LAST THINGS  
DEATH—JUDGMENT—HELL—HEAVEN

Father Martin von Cochem, O.S.F.C.

*“In all thy works remember thy last end,  
and thou shalt never sin.”*

—Sirach 7:40

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PART 1  
ON DEATH

CHAPTER 1

On the Terrors of Death

IT appears to me unnecessary to say much about the terrors of death. The subject has been sufficiently enlarged upon by various writers; besides, every one knows and feels for himself that life is sweet and death is bitter. However old a man may be, however broken in health, however miserable his circumstances, the thought of death is an unwelcome one. There are three principal reasons why all sensible people fear death so much:

First, because the love of life, the dread of death is inherent in human nature. Secondly, because every rational being is well aware that death is bitter, and the separation of soul and body cannot take place without inexpressible suffering. Thirdly, because no one knows whither he will go after death, or how he will stand in the Day of Judgment.

It will be well to explain the second and third of these reasons rather more fully, in order on the one hand that those who lead a careless life may perhaps be awakened thereby to a fear of death, and learn to avoid sin, and on the other that each one

of us may be warned to prepare for death, lest we be overtaken by it unawares. Every one shrinks instinctively from death, because it is bitter, and painful beyond description to human nature. The soul of man is subject to many anxieties, apprehensions, and sorrows, and the body is subject to pain and sickness of all kinds, yet none of these pains can be compared to the agony of death. A man who loses his good name and his property feels acute grief, but he does not die of it. All suffering and sickness, all grief and anguish, however terrible, is less bitter than death. Hence we see death to be a mighty monarch, the most cruel, the most relentless, the most formidable enemy of mankind. Look at a man wrestling with death, and you will see how the tyrant overpowers, disfigures, and prostrates his victim.

Now why is death so hard, so terrible a thing? It is because the soul has to separate itself from the body. Body and soul were created for each other, and so intimate is their union that a parting between them seems almost impossible. They would endure almost anything rather than be torn asunder. The soul is fearful of the future, and of the unknown land to which she is going. The body is conscious that as soon as the soul departs from it, it will become the prey of worms. Consequently, the soul cannot bear to leave the body, nor the body to part from the soul. Body and soul desire their union to remain unbroken, and together to enjoy the sweets of life.

In one of his epistles to St. Augustine, St. Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem, relates what was told him by a man who had been raised from the dead. Amongst



other things, he said: "The moment when my soul left my body was one of such awful pain and distress that no one can imagine the anguish I then endured. If all conceivable suffering and pain were put together they would be as nothing in comparison with the torture I underwent at the separation of soul and body." And to emphasize his words, he added, addressing St. Cyril: "Thou knowest that thou hast a soul, but thou knowest not what it is. Thou knowest that beings exist called angels, but thou are ignorant of their nature. Thou knowest also that there is a God, but thou canst not comprehend His being. So it is with everything that has not corporeal shape; our understanding cannot grasp these things. In like manner it is impossible for thee to understand how I could suffer such intense agony in one short moment."

And if some people apparently pass away most peacefully, this is because nature, exhausted by suffering, has no longer the force to struggle with death. We know from the testimony of our Redeemer Himself that no agony is like the agony of death. Although throughout the whole course of His sorrowful passion, He was tortured in a terrible manner, yet all the martyrdom He endured was not to be compared with what He suffered at the moment of His death. This we gather from the Gospels. Nowhere do we find that at any period of His life the greatness of the pains He bore extorted from Our Lord a cry of anguish. But when the moment came for Him to expire, and the ruthless hand of death rent His Heart asunder, we read that He cried out with a loud voice, and gave up the ghost. Hence it is evident that at no period of the Passion did

Christ suffer so acutely as at the most painful separation of His sacred soul from His blessed body.

In order that mankind might at least in some measure understand how terrible was the death Christ died for us, He ordained that we, at our dissolution, should taste something of the bitterness of His death, and experience the truth of the following words of Pope St. Gregory: "Christ's conflict with death represented our last conflict, teaching us that the agony of death is the keenest agony that man has ever felt or will ever feel. It is the will of God that man should suffer so intensely at the close of his life, in order that we may recognize and appreciate the magnitude of Christ's love for us, the inestimable benefit He has conferred on us by enduring death for our sakes. For it would have been impossible for man fully to know the infinite love of God, unless he too had drunk to some extent of the bitter chalice which Christ drank."

In this passage from the writings of the holy Pope Gregory we are taught that Christ ordained that all men in the hour of their dissolution should suffer the like pains which Christ suffered for us in His last agony, in order that they may gain some knowledge, by their own experience, of the terrible nature of the death He endured for us, and the great price He paid for our ransom. How painful, how terrible, how awful death will be for us, if our death is in any degree to resemble Christ's most agonizing death!

How severe a conflict is before us poor mortals! What torments await us at our last hour! One is almost inclined to think it would have been preferable never to have been born, than to be born to

suffer such anguish. But it is thus that heaven is to be won, and through this narrow gate alone can we enter into paradise. Wherefore, O Christian, accept your destiny cheerfully, and form a steadfast resolution to bear unmurmuringly the bitterness of death. For it is a great merit to yield up one's life—the life every man loves so well—and submit with a ready and willing mind to the pangs of death. And for the purpose of encouraging you to gain merit in your last moments, let me counsel you to make the following determination to suffer death bravely.

#### RESOLUTION.

O God of all justice, who hast ordained that since the fall of our first parents all men should die, and also that it should be the lot of many amongst us to taste in their death something of the pains Thy Son endured at the hour of His death, I submit most willingly to this Thy stern decree. Although life is sweet to me, and death appears most bitter, yet out of obedience to Thee I voluntarily accept death with all its pains, and am ready to yield up my soul whenever, wherever, in what way or manner soever it may please Thy Divine Providence to appoint. And since Thou hast made death so bitter to man, in order that we may feel to a certain extent by our own experience how painful a death Thy beloved Son underwent for our sakes, I willingly accept the penalty of death, that I may at least at my latter end know something of the pains my blessed Lord suffered on my account. In honor, therefore, of His bitter passion and death, I now cheerfully subject

myself to whatever sufferings I may be called upon to pass through at the moment of my departure, and declare my determination to bear them with all the constancy of which I am capable. I pray that this resolution on my part may be pleasing in Thy sight, and that Thou wilt give me grace to bear my last agony with patience. Amen.