



## The Hour of Our Death

Numbers in parentheses refer to paragraphs in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

November, the Month of the Dead, sets before us an absolutely certain fact of our lives: one day we will die. How should we live toward that day? What will come after it? With an eye on *The Catechism* let's think our way into these questions about the last things.

In death body and soul are separated. The soul departs from the body, and the body is laid lifeless in the ground. Head and heart, arms and legs, hands and feet turn to dust. The curse of death seems to put an end to everything. But the grave cannot contain our memory, our imagination, our mind, and our will. As ancient pagans realized, the soul lives on. But how does it live? What does it live for?

The Resurrection of the Son of God testifies that the deathly separation of body and soul has been forever overcome. By virtue of His "power . . . to subject all things to Himself," the Firstborn of the Dead "will change our lowly body to be like His glorious body" (Phil 3: 21). He will "grant incorruptible life to our bodies by reuniting them with our souls" (997). And they will be *our own* ensouled bodies, as Jesus' risen body was unquestionably *His own*: "See my hands and my feet," He said as He showed the Apostles His wounds; "it is I myself" (Lk 24:39).

Before that day of resurrection, however, we must render an account of our life to the God Who gives it to us. "Every man receives his eternal recompense in his immortal soul from the moment of his death in a *particular judgment* by Christ, the Judge of the living and the dead" (1051). For it is impossible to "be united with God unless we freely choose to love Him. But we cannot love God if we sin gravely against Him, against our neighbor, or against ourselves" –and if we persist in these sins to the end (1033).

From his hotel room window the Las Vegas shooter murdered dozens of people and wounded hundreds more before turning his gun on himself in the last minute of his life. "By rejecting grace in this life, one already judges oneself . . . and can even condemn oneself for all eternity by rejecting the spirit of love" (679). "Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell" by their own free choice (1035). For we were created "in the image of God," and God *is* freedom. He respects our creaturely freedom; He will not compel us to obey Him. He leaves us free to choose to go to Hell—"the definitive *self-exclusion* from communion with God and the blessed" (1033) "He who does not love remains in death" (1 John 3:14).

A different destiny awaits souls who die insufficiently prepared for eternal friendship with God. These souls "undergo a purification after death so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of God" (1054). But this "final purification" of Purgatory "is entirely different from the punishment of the damned" in Hell, who have irrevocably chosen to remain in death (1031). In stark contrast, the

souls in Purgatory, *“assured of their eternal salvation,”* know they are on the way home to Heaven (1054).

In Heaven the souls of the redeemed know as they are known and love as they are loved, forever free from fear, suspicion, or selfishness. *They see God as He is* in the Beatific Vision—*“the ever-flowing well-spring of happiness, peace, and mutual communion”* (1045).

On the Last Day “all men will appear in their own bodies before Christ’s tribunal to render an account of their own deeds” (1059). “In the presence of Christ, Who is Truth itself, the truth of each man’s relationship with God will be laid bare. The Last Judgment will reveal even to its furthest consequences the good each person has done or failed to do during his earthly life” (1039).

A great lesson underlies these teachings on the last things: “The obedience of Jesus has transformed the curse of death into a blessing” (1009). This November let us resolve to “transform [our] own death into an act of obedience and love towards the Father, after the example of Christ” (1011).