

## THE FOUR LAST THINGS I: “DEATH BE NOT PROUD”

*“Death, be not proud, though some have called thee/Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so.”* In his hauntingly beautiful meditation on death, English poet John Donne († 1631) gave voice to the stark reality that death is neither as powerful as many presume, nor ought it to be feared, as too many do. November is a most fitting month during which to consider the importance of the **Four Last Things**: death, judgment, heaven and hell. While we might prefer to avoid these realities, consider them we must. I write with trepidation because while in the seminary I considered taking an elective course entitled “Eschatology,” the Church term for the study of the end things. In the end, I shied away from it, finding it too macabre, preferring to take an alternative elective. Had I been a little more spiritually astute, I might have thought differently.

Coming from the Greek word *eschata* meaning “last things,” eschatology is a branch of theology that focuses on these four last stages of the soul in life and beyond. Of the four, death may seem the clearest cut of all, but in fact, it is not quite so simple. Medical technology has blurred the once clear distinction between life and death, as many families struggle with issues related to the keeping or the withdrawal of life support. Generally speaking, the Church accepts the neurological criteria laid down by science, consistent with her understanding that there is no contradiction between faith and science. Perhaps a century ago, people assumed that when a person’s heart stopped, they had died. We know better today; it is not that simple.

The primary criterion for determining death today centers upon the cessation of brain activity. In 2000, Pope John Paul II wrote: “the criterion...for ascertaining the fact of death, namely the complete and irreversible cessation of all brain activity, if rigorously applied, does not seem to conflict with the essential elements of a sound anthropology.” Those criteria could include “a complete lack of blood flow to the brain, the absence of any electrical activity of the brain, the absence of cranial nerve response and the ability of the patient to breathe on his/her own.” Our U.S. Catholic Bishops teach that “the determination of death should be made by the physician or competent medical authority in accordance with responsible and commonly accepted scientific criteria.” Death is the **ultimate transition** into the fullness of life. To Shirley Maclaine, and any for whom reincarnation is irresistible, our *Catechism* (CCC #1013) definitively states: “When the single course of one’s life is completed, we shall not return to other earthly lives.” Hebrews 9:27: “It is appointed that human beings die once, and after this the judgement...” We’ve got one shot at life, period.

After the seminary, I began to “re-think” my opposition to studying or discussing issues related to bodily death. And I can pinpoint the precise moment of change— it was 1996. Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago had staved off cancer once, but it came back a few years later with a vengeance— the dreaded pancreatic cancer. He died twenty years ago this coming Monday. But it is what he said in his final months that has stuck with me ever since: “I needed to be reminded that if you see death as a transition, if you see death as part of your incorporation of the Paschal mystery (the Easter mystery of Jesus’ death and resurrection), then why should you not see it as a friend?” He even added: “If you see death as a friend, you begin to talk with your friend, and little by little, some of the fears begin to dissipate.” No, not everyone can approach impending death in this manner. Certainly, I am not yet there! Nor can every person pre-plan a funeral, including choosing the music or readings, selecting a gravestone, etc. We are not all “wired” the same way, and that is perfectly okay.

As faithful Catholics, we ought to devote particular attention to those who are elderly and to those who are nearing the end of life. There is nothing sadder, nothing— than visiting someone in a nursing home only to find out that his or her own children rarely, if ever, come by for a visit. For all I know, there could be many different reasons for this; I cannot know each situation. But the loneliness that some feel towards the end of life has been a continuing source of reflection for me, for I am all too aware that I need to get out more than I do to visit the sick and the elderly. Our Catechism reminds us of our duty to provide for the spiritual care of the elderly: “The dying should be given attention and care to help them live their last moments in dignity and peace. They will be helped by the prayer of their relatives, who must see to it that the sick receive at the proper time the sacraments that prepare them to meet the living God” (CCC # 2299).

Donne’s Sonnet ends with the ultimate victory, namely the death of death itself. *“One short sleep past, we wake*

*eternally/ And Death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.*” Thus, “one short sleep past,” that is, after we are dead a fleeting moment, “we wake eternally.” We will wake up resurrected, to eternal life, never to sleep or die again. Then, death will cease to exist altogether— it will die. Here now the personified Death has been shown to be not “mighty and dreadful” but a mere mortal, or rather less than we mortals, since he will die an eternal death at the resurrection, whereas we mortals will enjoy eternal life. The final pronouncement, “Death, thou shalt die” completes the idea that Death is the one who should be afraid, not the one to be feared. (Next week: Judgment)

- Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore was our nation’s first Catholic bishop. In his prayer for the nation, penned 225 years ago this week, we read in part: “We pray Thee O God of might, wisdom, and justice! Through whom authority is rightly administered, laws are enacted, and judgment decreed, assist with Thy Holy Spirit of counsel and fortitude the President of these United States, that his administration may be conducted in righteousness, and be eminently useful to Thy people over whom he presides; by encouraging due respect for virtue and religion; by a faithful execution of the laws in justice and mercy; and by restraining vice and immorality.”
- The Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization, charged with organizing events for the Jubilee Year of Mercy, reports that the number of people who have registered to pass through the Holy Doors of the four Roman basilicas surpassed the **20,000,000** figure last week! Locally, I have been thrilled with the number who have walked through our Holy Doors on pilgrimage.
- **Deacon Russ Shupe** has been a selfless servant here at the Cathedral since.... But his twice weekly drive from Prior Lake to the Cathedral takes a toll. We had discussed some time ago that when a closer assignment opened up, he would likely accept it. I am so grateful that he held off for an additional 18 months. We’d like to honor Deacon Russ after the 10:00 a.m. Mass next Sunday, the Feast of Christ the King.
- Our Cathedral Children’s **Choristers** sang so beautifully in last week’s Blue Mass for Police and First Responders, celebrated by our Archbishop. The “buzz in the sacristy” after Mass was all about the kids—their beautiful music (repeated at last Sunday’s 10:00 a.m. Mass) literally “stole” the show, pun intended!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector