

## THE FOUR LAST THINGS IV: “THE CLEAR PATH WAS LOST”

“At the midpoint on the journey of life, I found myself in a dark forest, for the clear path was lost...” *Inferno*. Canto I. Thus opens Dante Alighieri’s epic work, *The Divine Comedy- Inferno*. While he was a poet, I’d say he was a pretty good theologian as well. Still, if offered a five-minute “preview” of heaven, I’d likely demur. If shown the “trailer” for hell, I’d run as quickly as possible the other way. Why? In the former case, I might not want to come back to earth, and in the latter, I’d spend the rest of my life in utter fear. To me, either way it is a “lose, lose” proposition.

When speaking about hell, we encounter the limits of our human ability to comprehend. Both in Scripture and Tradition, hell has quite rightly been described as the ultimate refusal of God’s love, the final and definitive rejection of His love in our lives. This much makes sense to anyone, save perhaps those who deny its very existence. But what can we say about hell, never having been there? First and foremost, we turn to the words of Scripture, combined with the perennial wisdom of the Church’s faith, guided by the Holy Spirit. Finally, we use our own God-given intellect to form impressions. We cannot escape the warnings of the Scriptures, including the call of Jesus to “Enter through the narrow gate.” (Matthew 7:13)

The Catechism states rather bluntly (para. # 1033) “the state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called ‘hell.’” Thus, its denial is not only counterintuitive, but quite frankly, heretical. Still, we must also answer the proverbial questions such as, “Why would a loving God banish someone for eternity,” and “how many are to be saved?” “Will we be bored in heaven?” The faithful, young and old alike, ponder all these questions and more. The human person desires to know and the lack of definitive knowledge is looked upon with increasing skepticism in today’s modern culture. Our human conceptions come up so short, that many have given up any reasonable attempt to consider these deepest of questions. Try as we might, they rarely go away. But rest assured, our age is not alone in these struggles.

In the Middle Ages, a Benedictine abbot by the name of **Joachim of Fiore** in Italy’s Calabria region (the heel of the boot) developed quite a creative theology of the Last Things. He divided salvation history into three ages: the age of the Father (Old Testament Adam to Jesus); the age of the Son (Jesus Christ unto the present and stretching into the future to 1260 A.D.) and finally the Age of the Spirit. The final age would usher in the birth of a new “spiritual Church,” which he calculated would begin in 1260 A.D. He speculated that each “age” was comprised of 42 generations of thirty years each. Problematically, he wrote that in the new age, the Church would not be necessary, because all infidels would unite with Christians. Oops, bad move! Not surprisingly, his teachings were censured at the IV Lateran Ecumenical Council in 1215, though he was revered for his personal sanctity. He died in the good graces of the Church in 1202 A.D.

**Dante Alighieri** took to poetry to describe the last things, including an entire book entitled *Inferno*, in which hell consisted of nine concentric spheres, each “reserved” for those who struggled with particular sins. For example, the lustful were in the upper level of hell, while the fraudulent and traitors were buried much deeper in the depths of hell. “*Through me you go into a city of weeping; through me you go into eternal pain; through me you go amongst the lost people.*” (Canto III) Indeed, in hell there is no room for hope, as a definitive and irrevocable choice has been made. As Dante so hauntingly wrote: “*You who enter here, abandon all hope.*” (Canto III, 9) These were all human attempts to make sense out of life’s biggest mysteries.

But it did not stop there. **St. John Paul II** made some headlines when, in a 1999 General Audience address, he rejected the reality of a *physical* hell, describing it rather as a separation from the joyful communion with God. While the media had a heyday with his words, they should not trouble any believer. Just last week, **Pope Francis**, in his daily homily, echoed many of the same sentiments remarking: “Eternal damnation is continually distancing oneself from God. It is the worst pain, an unsatisfied heart, a heart that was created to find God but which, out of arrogance and self-confidence, distances itself from God.” One final point—under no circumstances ought we to desire that anyone would “burn in hell.” Rather, we strive

to pray for the conversion of sinners. While it is easy to write from the comfort of a computer monitor, absent of life's pain (e.g. family members who suffered horrible losses at the hands of criminals), it remains the truth.

### **Our Lady of Charity of Cobre, Patroness of Cuba, Pray for us!**

Fidel Castro's death leaves much uncertainty about Cuba's future. His dictatorship spanned ten U.S. presidential administrations and caused untold pain for his people. But here is an interesting backstory. Many are unaware of Pope John Paul II's deft diplomacy leading up to his 1998 visit to the island nation. In October 1997, Vatican spokesman Joaquín Navarro-Valls held a six-hour marathon preparatory meeting with Fidel Castro, lasting until 3:00 a.m. At one point, the spokesman told Castro—"Mr. President, I envy you." "Why?" "Because the Pope prays for you every day, he prays that a man of your education may find the way of the Lord again." For once, the Cuban president was silent. At the end of that meeting Navarro-Valls added how pleased Pope John Paul II would be to thank the President in January for the gift of Christmas as a national holiday. Castro initially refused due to the sugar cane harvest, but later relented, quickly adding, "It may just be for this year." It has been a holiday ever since.

- Our annual Pre-Christmas Church cleaning is scheduled **from 9:00-11:00 a.m. on Saturday December 17**. This is just one day before the papal Nuncio's visit to bestow the pallium upon Archbishop Hebda on Sunday at 2:30 p.m. Please mark your calendars. Your help is especially needed this year, as we'd like to tackle the sacristy in addition to the church.
- Three, count 'em, three Catholic schools won state Football championships in last weekend's Prep Bowl, held at the new U.S. Bank Stadium. **Totino-Grace** defeated perennial champion Eden Prairie in Class 6A, **Benilde-St. Margaret's** edged Winona in Class 4A and **Rochester Lourdes** (located in the Winona Diocese) rallied past St. Croix Lutheran in Class 3A in the final minute with a wild finish aided by a 60 yard trick play that included two laterals in the final seconds. Congratulations!
- This coming Thursday is the **Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception**, a great feast and holy day of obligation that falls during Advent. We will offer four Masses: Wednesday **December 7 at 5:15 p.m.** (anticipatory), and on **Thursday December 8 at 7:00 a.m.** (for workers), **12:00 Noon** and finally at **5:15 p.m.**
- Did you know that in 1559, fully 48 years before the pilgrims landed in Jamestown, a Catholic Mass was held on Pensacola Beach? Even though those settlers struggled through that first winter and abandoned the settlement the following spring, Floridians are justifiably proud of their Catholic heritage.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector