

ESCATOLOGY

Mankind needs to hear about all four 'Last Things'.

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**John M.
Grondelski**



Traditional Catholic eschatology spoke about “Four Last Things.” They were: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. Catholic “prayer books” in America as late as the 1960s usually had a section entitled “The Four Last Things Always to Be Remembered,” with

texts from Scripture about each of them.

It seems some cardinals need a refresher course on those “Last Things,”

because what has been on display – not just with Francis’s funeral but in recent years – is an atrophied eschatology.

The “Four Last Things to Be Remembered” have shrunk to two: death and heaven. Judgment is oh so “judgmental” and, anyway, God’s “universal will for salvation” clearly seems to make judgment – if mentioned at all – a formality. Hell has been rendered by Von Balthasar’s “hope” a vacant apartment whose landlord clearly sullies our common home with his excessive heating.

Because sin has also gone into eclipse and “nobody’s perfect” (despite the Lord’s injunction to pursue the same—Mt 5:48), Purgatory has also been lost from the eschatological vocabulary. The professional ecumenical class is probably silently glad because it encumbered their search for doctrinal commonalities.

Critics may fault me, but the practical eschatology Catholics hear today in the Church is a kind of Disney caricature: “all dogs, popes, and people go to heaven.” Indeed, the path to “the Father’s house” seems to be more efficient than U.S. Global Entry.

Consider two examples. Cardinal Re already at Francis’s funeral had the Pope blessing us “from heaven” while, the next day, Cardinal Parolin assured us of Francis’s “embrace from heaven.” There wasn’t even a need for the crowd to call out “santo subito!” Proto-canonization was already underway.

Paradoxically, the American Catholic writer J.F. Powers captured these tendencies half a century ago, when he put these words in “Prince of Darkness” on the lips of the Archbishop: “‘Today there are few saints, fewer sinners, and everybody is already saved.’” While some may think remarks like Re’s and Parolin’s to be “pastorally consoling,” they come at the cost of abetting the thing multiple Popes have regularly warned against: the ongoing erosion of the sense of sin.

Catholic teaching and spirituality, honed over centuries, recognizes nothing imperfect can enter the presence of God. That’s a high bar. And even the most cursory survey by anybody with even 20/20 vision reading the “signs of the times” must admit that the modern world is far from being or even fostering such perfection.

Moses fell down before the sight of God. Isaiah thought himself “dead” after seeing the Lord. Even Peter asked Jesus to depart “for I am a sinful man” (Lk 5:8). Should our manner of speaking pretend we are better, or have better insights, than them?

If salvation is so universal, if clergy never talk about judgment or Purgatory or the

need for suffrages for the dead, how is that message to be evangelized? Because that message is not just a question of “communication” but of sharing the Gospel *intact*. And such intact evangelization seems particularly necessary for the increasing number of fallen away Catholics for whom their ecclesial contact is familial baptisms, weddings, and funerals. We do them a disservice if our “accompaniment” is some form of watered down universalism. Jesus began with announcing “the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand” (Mk 1:15). He followed it with the command to “convert,” not the cry, “c’mon in, it’s all taken care of!”

One of the last Curial documents issued in the Francis pontificate was a reminder that Mass intentions should be singular: one intention for one Mass. But, given the way we talk, should we expect young Catholics to understand even *why* we request Mass to be offered for the dead? Priests often begin Mass with something like “this Mass is offered for the repose of the soul of X.” Does that phraseology make sense to the average Catholic in the light of our shriveled eschatology?

Maccabees (II Mac 12:46) tells us “it is a holy and wholesome thought to pray *for* the dead.” But Cardinal Re instead asked Francesco “to pray *for us*.”

Yes, the intercourse of prayer between the Churches Militant, Triumphant, and even Suffering is a critical part of the “communion of saints” but – as the Cardinal rightly observed (before switching the focus) – Francesco always asked us to pray *for* him. And, as the *Ave* reminds us, the two critical moments for such prayer are “now *and the hour of our death*.”

Do we do the faithful departed a favor or serve Catholic truth when funerals blur the priority of the need for suffrages for the dead ... including a dead Pope?

I have elsewhere suggested that there was great wisdom in the Church’s earlier practice of deferring canonization until at least fifty years after death. Yes, we want to showcase contemporary holiness but there is a difference between present popularity and the sustained piety of cult. Collapsing that distinction further obscures an integral eschatology and undermines the Lord’s own cautions that “small is the gate and narrow the way that leads to life” (Mt 7:14). That caveat is not cancelled by cardinalatial commands to “grow higher, ancient doors” (Ps 24:9), not to admit the “King of Glory” but mortal men.

Prayer, suffrages, and purgation are *not* “bad news” compared to the “Good News” of practical universal salvation. They do not betray a lack of “hope” in “mercy.” Indeed, they are the most genuine expressions of that hope and mercy, grounded in a realistic existential awareness of the truth of man, fallen but redeemed, offered grace but still

imperfect, invited by but still unworthy of the Living God. Recovering a *holistic eschatology* – a balanced eschatology that does not omit or ignore any of the four “Last Things” – would go a long way to recovering the truth of man, sustained by the merciful works required by *authentic* hope “that all men be saved.”

Recovering those truths by rebalancing our imbalanced eschatological discourse should be a priority for the new Pope.