

The Four Last Things from a Pastor's Perspective

Traditionally “The Four Last Things” are Death, Judgment (both particular and general), Heaven and Hell. They’re treated under the heading of “Eschatology” and can be found in the Article 7 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. However, a pastor is not a seminary professor and during my 43 years as a priest I have come to understand four pastoral and practical concerns as also “Four Last Things.”

But first, “Getting There”

The Catholic Church requires that all ordinary means be used to sustain life because every human life is valuable and every human being is infinitely loved by God. The Church is very concerned (possible because of the importance of the Eucharistic banquet in Catholic life) that her children not starve to death or die of thirst. Apart from nutrition and hydration, the Church teaches that there is no obligation to use extraordinary means to sustain life. God, not a machine, is the author and master of life.

1) Viaticum, The Last Rites (Rights)

The final ritual (“the last rite”) the Church has for her children and the final claim (“the last right”) a believer can make on the Church is Viaticum (Latin for “Companion for the Journey”), which is receiving the Eucharist for the last time. Viaticum should be prepared for with confession, sacramental absolution and the sacrament of the anointing to have the strength to welcome the Lord, and it is followed by the final prayers and final blessing.

In practice, most Catholics die in the hospital where they are either unconscious or have tubes down their throats and so cannot receive Viaticum. In those cases they can be given conditional absolution, the anointing of the sick, the final prayers and the final blessing.

After a Catholic dies, the anointing of the sick is prohibited since it’s a sacrament for the living, but conditional absolution, the final prayers and the final blessing should be administered as soon as possible since it is not certain when the soul actually departs from the body.

In the presence of a dying loved one the family should pray and the Chaplet of Divine Mercy is especially recommended.

2. Funeral Rites

The preference of the church is that the body be present and that a Catholic have a final funeral Mass before being buried. If the body is to be cremated, the Church’s preference remains that it be present for a final funeral Mass before cremation, and if that’s not possible or practical, the cremains should be present for a final funeral Mass.

It can happen that most of the family has fallen away from the practice of Catholic faith, but the preference remains that there be a final funeral Mass for a faithful Catholic

even if only the priest is present for it. Mass is the Sacrifice of Jesus re-presented for us and is of infinite worth because its value depends on Jesus not on how many people participate in it.

A rosary before or even after the Mass is also appropriate especially because it enables many to share in its prayers.

3. Burial

The preference of the Church is that we be buried either below or above ground as Jesus was buried. Ordinarily the burial takes place immediately after the final funeral Mass.

When a body is cremated, the cremains should be buried intact because

1) A beloved deceased should be able to rest in peace, not be made to serve as jewelry to adorn someone's body or a decoration to adorn a home.

2) The remains of a beloved deceased should be available in a place that gives access to everyone who might want to come and pray for that person, to the entire family, to people unknown to the family and even to people the family would not welcome in their home.

3) Cremains have special meaning to those who lived with the beloved deceased, but if they are not buried they are passed on through inheritance and eventually will be in the possession of someone (like a great grand child) who had no contact or awareness of that person. Often these cremains end up abandoned, unidentified and even disrespected.

4. After the burial

a) Immediately after the burial it is good for the family to provide a reception for those who came to the final funeral Mass. This enable memories to be shared and the family to have the distractions from their grief that being with and serving others provide. The food at the reception is also an echo of the food from heaven that was shared at the final funeral Mass.

b) Catholics pray for their dead. To have a Mass on the anniversary of the day of death or burial is a praiseworthy and common practice. A Mass on the month or the sixth month "anniversary" is traditionally called "a Month's Mind Mass" or "a Six Month's Mind Mass" since it is not specifically an "anniversary" Mass. Other Masses are also appropriate and private prayer for the beloved dead is also part of Catholic life, especially the prayer called

"The Eternal Rest"

"Eternal rest grant unto _____ (*name or identification as "my mother"*), O Lord,

And let perpetual light shine upon *him/her/them*.

May *he/she/they* rest in peace.

Amen.

May *his/her/their soul(s)* and all the souls of the faithful departed through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

Amen."