



# RETREAT GUIDE

ONLINE, DO-IT-YOURSELF  
CATHOLIC RETREATS

THE TOMB AND THE PEARL  
A RETREAT GUIDE FOR EASTER

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# INTRODUCTION

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## Retreat Overview

Until the first Easter, tombs were terrible things. Tombs like the Egyptian Pyramids and the burial ground under Stonehenge dominated the imagination, and the landscape, of pre-Christian cultures, because for them, life itself had no sure, lasting meaning; death was always, somehow, the final victor.

This meaningless uncertainty comes across powerfully in a little speech made by one of the advisors to the future St. Edwin, while he was still a pagan king in early medieval England.

After listening to an explanation of the Christian faith given by a visiting missionary, King Edwin asked his councilors to give their opinions. One of them said this:



*The present life of man upon earth, O king, seems to me, in comparison with that time which is unknown to us, like to the swift flight of a sparrow through the house wherein you sit at supper in winter, with your ealdormen and thegns, while the fire blazes in the midst, and the hall is warmed, but the wintry storms of rain or snow are raging abroad. The sparrow, flying in at one door and immediately out at another, whilst he is within, is safe from the wintry tempest; but after a short space of fair weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight, passing from winter into winter again. So this life of man appears for a little while, but of what is to follow or what went before we know nothing at all. If, therefore, this new doctrine tells us something more certain, it seems justly to deserve to be followed.”<sup>A</sup>*

Easter Sunday’s empty tomb is exactly that: a new doctrine that tells us something so much more certain, something that has the power to change for the better absolutely everything in our lives — if we really give it a chance. That’s what this Easter Retreat Guide, *The Tomb and the Pearl*, is designed to do, give the glorious Easter Mystery a chance to make a fresh impact on our lives.

- In the First Meditation, we will share St. Mary Magdalene’s transforming experience of the empty tomb.
- In the Second Meditation, we will look at a short but memorable parable used by Our Lord to show how we can actively pursue that kind of personal transformation.

- And in the Conference, we will review the Four Last Things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell, just to make sure that our vision of the afterlife hasn’t been distorted by the false and dangerous ideas so prevalent in our secularized culture.

To begin, let’s take some time to turn our attention to the presence of God, who has already turned his attention to us. Let’s thank him for that, and let’s ask him for all the graces we need to keep growing spiritually, so we can be better and better followers and apostles of Jesus Christ.

## FIRST MEDITATION

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### *He Knows My Name*

St. John the Evangelist describes St. Mary Magdalene’s transforming encounter with the Risen Lord.

She was with the first group of women who came to the tomb on Easter Sunday morning, hoping to be able to finish anointing the crucified body of Our Lord.

When she saw that the rock used to seal the tomb was removed, and the body was gone, she rushed back to tell the Apostles. They went to the tomb, saw that it was empty, and returned to the Upper Room, perplexed and disturbed.

Mary Magdalene stayed at the sepulcher, unable to pull herself away from the last place she saw her Savior. The Gospel of John describes what happened next:



*But Mary stayed outside the tomb weeping. And as she wept, she bent over into the tomb and saw two angels in white sitting there, one at the head and one at the feet where the body of Jesus had been. And they said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken my Lord, and I don’t know where they laid him”*

– John 20:11-13

Two details from these verses are worth stopping to reflect on.

## FIRST MEDITATION

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### *Angelic Tears*

First, Mary Magdalene was neither frightened, nor shocked, nor awed by seeing the two angels. Angels are powerful and magnificent spirits.

A: Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of England (Kindle Locations 2196-2201)

Throughout the Bible, whenever they appear to human beings, they inspire reverential fear or cause some kind of strong reaction. This is the only exception.

Why is Mary Magdalene immune to the force of the angelic presence? The second detail helps us find an answer to that question. The Gospel explains that she is weeping. The Apostles and the other women have gone back to the Upper Room. She is alone in the garden where the tomb is located. And she is weeping — not just crying, but weeping.

By this time, almost three days since the horror of the Crucifixion, no one else was still weeping — not the Apostles, not the other women, not any of the disciples mentioned in the Gospel accounts. For them, the sadness of losing Jesus has passed into a heavy, exhausting ache. But for Mary Madgalene, it is still as sharp a sorrow as it was on Good Friday.

Speaking with the angels, she still refers to Jesus as “her Lord,” even though she knows that he has died and been buried. She keeps searching for his body, because even a corpse would be some kind of presence — a presence she would prefer even to the presence of two glorious angels.

Jesus meant so much to Mary Magdalene, that his loss, his absence, simply unravels her. Contemplating the devotion of this woman, who had experienced so deeply the grace of Christ’s love and mercy, should make us reflect on our own experience of Jesus.

How much does he really mean to us? How much do we search for his presence in our lives, activities, and relationships? How much should we?

## FIRST MEDITATION

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### *The Lord’s Smile*

But the story doesn’t end with Mary’s weeping and hopeless searching. The Gospel continues describing the scene:



*When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus there, but did not know it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” She thought it was the gardener and said to him, “Sir, if you carried him away, tell me where you laid him, and I will take him.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!”*

...

*She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni,” which means Teacher. Jesus said to her, “Stop holding on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary of Magdala went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and what he told her*

– John 20:14-18

Although some details from this encounter are puzzling, the core messages shine through brilliantly and powerfully. Jesus had been with Mary Magdalene the whole time. He was watching her and accompanying her, without her realizing it.

When the time was right, when the desire of her heart to see her Lord had been stretched and expanded almost to the breaking point, he intervened. And isn’t that so often how God works in our lives too?

Through hardship and loss, he accompanies us, even though we sometimes lose sight of him. Somehow, through those painful experiences, he shows us or teaches us something; he stretches and expands, or maybe even purifies, our needy hearts. And then, when the time is right, he intervenes more directly.

In the case of Mary Magdalene, he intervenes in two phases. First, he asks her a question: “Whom are you looking for?” This is a question that our Lord never stops asking each one of us. He asked the same question at the very beginning of the Gospel of John, at his first encounter with his future Apostles John and Andrew.

Now he asks it again, at the end of the Gospel. We may think the answer is obvious, especially for a God who knows everything, including our interior motives and desires.

But so often in life, we don’t really know ourselves. So often our surface motives are concealing deeper, hidden desires. Jesus knows that unless his grace reaches down to the depths of our hearts, we will never really grow to spiritual maturity, so he questions us; he tests us; he shines the light of his wisdom into the uncomfortable corners of our soul, where selfishness still lurks, unredeemed.

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But Jesus didn't let this encounter end with a question. He followed it up by pronouncing her name: "Mary." That's when she recognizes him; she sees him, embraces him, rejoices in him, discovers that he is not gone, that he is as faithful as she hoped he would be. Her Lord is still alive, still gazing at her with love! And now, having risen from the dead, she knows that he always will be with her, forever and ever, world without end.

Jesus calls each of us by name; he knows us; he loves us; he pays attention to us — in fact, he fully reveals himself to us only in the context of a personal relationship, just as he did with Mary Magdalene.

What expression do you think Jesus had on his face when he pronounced her name that Easter morning? The Gospel doesn't tell us, but isn't it clear?

It's impossible to picture Jesus gazing down on her without breaking into a radiant, gentle, infinitely loving smile. And when he gazes down at us, pronouncing our name so as to share with us the everlasting victory of his Resurrection, it's with a smile too.

## FIRST MEDITATION

### *Conclusion: The Symphony of Salvation*

For St. Mary Magdalene, and for every Christian, the empty tomb has become the wellspring of eternal life, the whisper of silent anticipation before the first note of an unending symphony called salvation.

Let's take some time now to read back over the sacred words of this encounter, and listen to what they have to say to us personally. The following questions and Bible passages may help your meditation.

### *Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion*

- 1 When did I first hear Jesus pronounce my name? Remember that experience, savor it, thank God for it.
- 2 Reflect on my day-to-day living — my activities, my attitudes, my decisions, my dominant thoughts. If an outside observer were to examine those things for a typical week of my life, what would they say "I am looking for"?

- 3 Jesus wouldn't let St. Mary Magdalene cling to him for very long, because he had a mission for her to accomplish — he sent her to give a message to his Apostles. What mission has Jesus given me in my life? How faithfully and lovingly am I fulfilling it? Talk to Jesus about that mission.

### *Biblical Passages to Help Your Meditation*



*But Mary stayed outside the tomb weeping. And as she wept, she bent over into the tomb and saw two angels in white sitting there, one at the head and one at the feet where the body of Jesus had been. And they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken my Lord, and I don't know where they laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus there, but did not know it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" She thought it was the gardener and said to him, "Sir, if you carried him away, tell me where you laid him, and I will take him." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni," which means Teacher. Jesus said to her, "Stop holding on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them, 'I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary of Magdala went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and what he told her.*

— John 20:11-18, NABRE



*The next day John [the Baptist] was there again with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God." The two disciples heard what he said and followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following him and said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come, and you will see." So they went and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day. It was about four in the afternoon.*

— John 1:35-39, NABRE



O God, thou art my God; how eager my quest for thee, body athirst and soul longing for thee, like some parched wilderness, where stream is none! So in the holy place, I contemplate thee, ready for the revelation of thy greatness, thy glory. To win thy favour is dearer to me than life itself; my songs of praise can no more be withheld. So, all my life long, I will bless thee, holding up my hands in honour of thy name; my heart filled, as with some rich feast, my mouth, in joyful accents, singing thy praise. My thoughts shall go out to thee at dawn, as I lie awake remembering thee, and the protection thou hast given me. Gladly I take shelter under thy wings, cling close to thee, borne up by thy protecting hand. In vain do my enemies plot against my life, soon to be swallowed up in the depths of earth, a prey to the sword, carrion for jackals! The king shall triumph in God's protection, blessed as they are ever blessed who take their vows in his name; silence shall fall on the lips that muttered treason.

– Psalm 63, Knox translation

## SECOND MEDITATION

### *Loss and Gain*

St. Mary Magdalene had given up everything for Jesus. In response to his saving grace and mercy, she had left behind her old life, her old relationships, and her worldly hopes and habits in order to become his follower.

She had rebuilt her existence around her relationship with him: that was the new center of her life, its meaning, its everything. And then, on Good Friday, it seemed that everything she had given up had been given up in vain; Jesus was taken away from her; Jesus had left her, so it seemed. She had burnt all the bridges to her past, and now she had no future. Meaninglessness and misery descended upon her like a dark, poisonous fog.

## SECOND MEDITATION

### *Total Loss Becomes Eternal Gain*

And then she encounters the Risen Lord. She discovers, definitively, that accepting the loss of everything in order to gain Christ was the right decision.

By rising from the dead, Jesus conquered evil and death once and for all. He showed that his Lordship, and his Kingdom, his redeeming and life-giving relationship with her, would last forever.

As this truth penetrates her mind and heart, she joyfully realizes, with unprecedented clarity, that the fulfillment she has found in becoming a follower of Jesus is not limited to her life on earth; it will last and grow forever; it can never diminish or be taken away.

This is one of the most fundamental messages of Easter: in Jesus, we achieve an everlasting victory over sin, sorrow, and meaninglessness, an everlasting happiness.

St. Paul learned this lesson well, and savored it with gusto. Here's how he described it to the Christians in Rome:



I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us... No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord

– Romans 8:18, 37-39

## SECOND MEDITATION

### *Beyond All Doubt*

St. Mary Magdalene experienced this more intensely than any of the other Apostles on Easter morning.

In fact, the Gospels tell us that even after the forty days between the Resurrection and the Ascension, even after multiple appearances of the Risen Lord, the other disciples, “when they saw him, they worshipped, but they doubted” (Matthew 28:17).

Jesus gave St. Mary Magdalene an Easter experience that cast away all doubt, all hesitation, all sorrow. Why was her experience so different, so definitive, so complete? She gained more than the others from Christ, because she had given more to Christ — as her reaction to the empty tomb revealed. Jesus himself had said that it would be so:



Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you

– Luke 6:38

## SECOND MEDITATION

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### *Selling All That We Have*

Most of us are less like St. Mary Magdalene and more like the other disciples: we worship, but we doubt; we have given ourselves to Jesus, but we still kind of hold back a little; our trust is not yet total.

By contemplating one of our Lord's shortest but most memorable parables, we may find an extra surge of Easter strength to help us be more generous with him, to help us give him whatever he's asking, or accept whatever he's giving. The parable goes like this:



*Jesus said: "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls. When he finds a pearl of great price, he goes and sells all that he has and buys it."*

– Matthew 13:44-46

First let's look at the variation in these two comparisons, the difference between the two images. It has to do with how the two people made their priceless discovery.

The farmer found his treasure by accident, in the midst of his daily grind. Sometimes God sends us his graces and invitations like that, and when he does, we simply need to accept them.

The merchant, on the other hand, spent long years desiring and searching for a pearl that he believed existed somewhere — the perfect pearl. This too is how God sometimes acts in our lives: giving us a deep desire, and sending us on a long quest to fulfill that desire, a quest that gives him glory and leads us, eventually, deeper into the heart of his Kingdom.

Both the fortuitous gift and the intentional search are part of God's playbook, and we need to be ready for each.

Now let's look at the two characteristics held in common by these images. The most obvious characteristic is the value of the treasure and the pearl. In both cases, the value is immense, worth selling everything to attain — truly, the treasure and the pearl are both priceless.

The next characteristic shared by the images is a logical consequence of the first: in both cases, the person who made the priceless discovery sold absolutely everything they owned in order to be able to possess it.

This is what St. Mary Magdalene had discovered. We don't know all the details of her life, but we do know that she had tried to squeeze every last drop of happiness out of this world, and had failed. She was a public sinner, and Jesus had to cast seven devils out of her. She had bought a lot of pearls and worked a lot of fields, yet was still unsatisfied.

But when she found Jesus — his message, his grace, his person — she left everything else behind. In him, she recognized the fullness of everything she had longed to find elsewhere.

## SECOND MEDITATION

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### *Conclusion: Finding Our Pearl in the Empty Tomb*

Jesus himself, our relationship with him, is the only source of the eternal happiness that we were made for and that we simply cannot find anywhere else. But the full value of that relationship can be experienced only when we pour ourselves fully into it, holding nothing back.

Growing toward Christian maturity requires much more than just having a God-sector on our list of life priorities. It requires making our relationship with God the sole and central organizing principle of everything else we do, the sector around which all other sectors fall into place.

The message of Easter — Christ's everlasting victory over sin, death, and meaninglessness — should encourage us to do that: to root out whatever may be holding back our friendship with Christ; to sell off everything that can't be integrated into our friendship with him; to say, more sincerely and definitively than ever before: *Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done* in my life, completely and wholeheartedly, today and every day, forever and ever, Amen.

Let's take some time now to gaze prayerfully at the priceless treasure we have received through our faith in Christ's Resurrection, and to thank him for it.

The following questions and Bible quotations may help your meditation.

## Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

- 1 Up to this point in my life, what have I given up for Jesus? What have I gained from him?
- 2 Why does Jesus require us to “sell everything we own” in order to take possession of the treasure? Why doesn’t he just give it to us for “free”?
- 3 In times of trouble, sorrow, and suffering, how spontaneously does my mind go to the hope-filled message of Easter? Why isn’t it easier for me to allow that message to give me real hope?

## Biblical Passages to Help Your Meditation



*The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom should I fear? The LORD is my life’s refuge; of whom should I be afraid? When evildoers come at me to devour my flesh, these my enemies and foes themselves stumble and fall. Though an army encamp against me, my heart does not fear; Though war be waged against me, even then do I trust. One thing I ask of the LORD; this I seek: to dwell in the LORD’s house all the days of my life, to gaze on the LORD’s beauty, to visit his temple. For God will hide me in his shelter in time of trouble, he will conceal me in the cover of his tent; and set me high upon a rock. Even now my head is held high above my enemies on every side! I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and chant praise to the LORD.*

– Psalm 27:1-7, NABRE



*The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls. When he finds a pearl of great price, he goes and sells all that he has and buys it.*

– Psalm 22:2-12 NABRE



*Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you.*

– Luke 6:38 NABRE



*I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us... No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

– Romans 8:18, 27-29 NABRE

## CONFERENCE

### *The Four Last Things*

So far, only one person has experienced the full, absolutely complete transforming power of Christ’s Resurrection — his mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary. When her earthly mission was complete, she was assumed, body and soul, into heaven. The rest of Christ’s followers have to wait until his Second Coming to enter body and soul into God’s glory.

But that doesn’t mean we can’t yet experience at all the transforming power of Christ’s Resurrection. We can, and one of the ways we can is through contemplating the eternal truths, among which are the Four Last Things.

In his preaching, Jesus taught us the true answers to mankind’s most burning questions about life and death, and life after death. By rising from the dead, Jesus backed up those answers with an unprecedented proof of his credibility. In a sense, he showed us, tangibly and visibly, those answers.

In the past, popular culture accepted and reiterated what Jesus taught us about life and death — but not anymore. Now our post-Christian culture tirelessly portrays images and stories that may seem innocent enough on the surface – they are just fiction, after all — but that subtly bombard us with a distinctly non-Christian point of view regarding the eternal truths.



And those false ideas, because they are repeated so frequently and wrapped up in such entertaining packages, can easily seep into our consciousness, inadvertently weakening or even undermining our Christian convictions.

That's why it's a good idea every once in a while to polish up our knowledge, our understanding of what Jesus has revealed to us about death, judgment, heaven, and hell. And that's what we will do in this conference.

## CONFERENCE

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### *Death: The Unavoidable Door to Eternity*

The first of the Four Last Things is death. The Bible tells us that death comes for everyone, and that it only comes once. This directly contradicts two ideas circulating through post-modern culture — ideas that are not, by the way, new in the history of humanity.

The first is the concept of reincarnation, that instead of dying once, each human soul is somehow recycled, and after dying it enters back into the world wrapped up in a new body. Reincarnation appears, on the surface, to be a comforting doctrine. It seems to give people a second chance — if they had everything against them in their previous life and simply couldn't climb out of moral misery, they will be given another shot at living a worthwhile life.

But that's a superficial interpretation of this pagan and philosophically untenable position. If reincarnation were true, then human freedom would be false. Instead of truly being responsible for our own actions, reactions, and decisions, as Jesus teaches that we are, we would just be raw material for some kind of universal force, a force that recycles us however many times is necessary to reabsorb us into the impersonal ground of being.

The idea of reincarnation contradicts human dignity — besides being untrue, it degrades our vision of the human person.

But another false idea is out there as well. This is the idea that continued technical progress would eventually enable us to overcome death and live forever. Whether through quantum physics, or genetic engineering, or nano-chemical medical practices, outlying prophets of humanity's self-idolization hold up this seductive promise of earthly life without limits.

It's a new expression of the most ancient temptation, when the serpent in the Garden of Eden promised Adam and Eve that by eating the forbidden fruit they would "certainly not die" and would "be like gods".

But such is not the case. In the fallen world, death comes for everyone, sooner or later, and it only comes once. As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it:



*Just as it is appointed that human beings die once, and after this the judgment, so also Christ, offered once to take away the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to take away sin but to bring salvation to those who eagerly await him.*

– Hebrews 9:27-28

## CONFERENCE

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### *How to Die Well*

Instead of resisting what God has revealed to us about death, we simply need to accept it, and let it shape our lives. Death is one of the few things we can count on in life. It is the definitive end of our earthly journey, the conclusion of our life mission, the beginning of eternity, the last word of the introduction and the first word of Chapter I.

The fact that each of us will die gives weight to how we live — all the more so since we do not know when we will die. Each moment of our life is a chance, then, an opportunity to fulfill (or not to fulfill) the great commandments of loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Death is the period at the end of the sentence we have been writing our whole life long; the finish line of the race of life; it is the finale, the conclusion, the completion.

The post-modern tendency to avoid thinking about death is unchristian. The Church purposely keeps the crucifix ever before our eyes. One of the most common Catholic prayers, the Hail Mary, reminds us of death every time we pray it: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

Although death entered the world because of sin, Christ has redeemed it, bathing it in his grace. The surest way to die well is to live well, and one sure way to live well is to keep in mind that we will die.

This doesn't need to be morbid — rather, to ignore death would be morbid; it would be tragic. To keep death in mind in a healthy way, it is enough to visit the cemetery and put flowers on the graves of our relatives, to pray for them. It is enough to live closely the rhythm of the Church's liturgy, which reminds us gently but firmly that this brief life on earth is not all there is.

It is enough to minister to the sick and be attentive to the needs and wisdom of our older family members — then this fundamental reality will duly season our attitudes, relationships, and personal decisions with compassion and with truth.

And then, when we find our own death knocking at the door, we will have no regrets, only smiles, both for the beauty we have left behind, and for the Beauty still in store.

## CONFERENCE

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### *Life After Death*

The remaining three Last Things all have to do with what happens after death. This too has been revealed by God — he wants us to know!

After death comes judgment. Judgment is simply the moment when we appear face-to-face with God, and he reveals to us the truth about how we have chosen to live our lives, and what kind of person we have thus become.

Nothing is left out of God's judgment, because he is perfectly fair and loving — he will take account of every factor that influenced how we lived. And yet, because he has given us the gift of freedom, of responsibility, there will be consequences for the decisions we have made.

We go before the Lord individually after we die, and then, at the end of history, the Last Judgment will take place, when the whole human story will be revealed and all evil will be repaired. Here's how the Bible explains it:



*I saw the dead, the great and the lowly, standing before the throne, and scrolls were opened. Then another scroll was opened, the book of life. The dead were judged according to their deeds, by what was written in the scrolls.*

– Revelation 20:12

And here's how the Catechism explains it:



*Each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven — through a purification or immediately — or immediate and everlasting damnation.*

– CCC 1022

## CONFERENCE

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### *Our Eternal Destiny*

And that brings us to the last of the Four Last Things — heaven and hell. These are perhaps the most misunderstood of all in our secularized culture. Often their existence is simply denied.

Sometimes heaven is presented as boring and lackluster — no one would ever really want to go to the heaven depicted by Hollywood. Sometimes hell is presented as the harsh and unfair revenge of a vindictive god — proof that Christianity simply can't be true, because how could a loving God send people into everlasting torment?

These and other distortions of the truths that God has revealed to us come from projecting our own limitations onto God.

Just because our imagination is too paltry to imagine how the absolute happiness of heaven could completely satisfy us unless it looked just like our best days here on earth doesn't mean that God's imagination is that paltry.

And just because it's hard for us to imagine how some people would freely, repeatedly, and definitively choose to adore themselves rather than live in a loving relationship with God, in spite of God's abundant efforts to convince them otherwise, doesn't mean that God will overrule those people's freedom and force them into heaven.

Here's how the Catechism explains it:



*God predestines no one to go to hell; for this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end...*

– CCC 1037

# CONFERENCE

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## *Conclusion: A Brief Stop in Purgatory*

People who die in friendship with God but who still have habits of selfishness and sin need to be purified of them before they can enjoy the fullness of heavenly glory — and this is the origin of the doctrine about purgatory. How that purification happens has long been a topic of debate, but the fact that it does happen is not only logical, but a revealed truth of our faith.

The more we learn about the Four Last Things — and there is plenty to learn: the fruits of more than two thousand years of theological reflection and spiritual experience — the more our understanding of life and death, and life after death, will be in harmony with the way things really are.

And the more our minds are in sync with the truth, the easier it will be for us to live our lives as God intends for us to live them. And that's the sure path to experiencing not only the hope-filled joy of Christmas, but also the powerfully-transformative joy of Easter.

Take some time now to prayerfully reflect on the ten questions in the personal questionnaire — they are designed to help you apply these truths to your daily life.

## *Personal Questionnaire*

- 1 Who in my experience has given me a good example of how to die well, i.e., in a state of friendship with God? What did I learn from their example?
- 2 Describe in my own words the difference between the idea of death present in today's popular culture (film, video games, etc.) and the idea of death as presented in Catholic doctrine.
- 3 How often have I reflected on the reality of death and what it means from Christ's perspective?
- 4 If I knew that I had exactly (and only) two more years of life, what would I do differently?

- 5 Christ has revealed the Judgment to us: we know for sure that it will happen, and we also know for sure what the criteria will be (love for God and love for neighbor). Express in my own words why Jesus decided to reveal this.
- 6 What kind of reaction does the thought of Judgment elicit in my heart and mind? Why? What kind of reaction should it elicit? Why?
- 7 What would I like to be remembered for in time and in eternity?
- 8 Imagine my life as a book that my actions and decisions write day by day. What has the main story line been so far? Who have the main characters been? How would I like the story to unfold tomorrow?
- 9 Some people downplay the idea of hell because they cannot reconcile it with a loving, merciful God. How would I explain to someone that the reality of hell does not make God any less merciful?
- 10 What is my idea of heaven? Is it strong enough to motivate me in my Christian journey, or does it seem distant and irrelevant, or even childish?

## NOTES

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*Record Your Thoughts Here*

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