



Preparing for Eternal Life: Hope in Catholic Truth about the Life to Come

By James C. Kruggel, Ph.D.

I. Introduction

The Archdiocese of Vancouver's Catholic Cemeteries offers you detailed help in planning for burial, estate planning, and family services. While you plan ahead these earthly matters, we also encourage you to think ahead about the most important matter of all. As Catholics, we hold that this life is only the first part of your eternal existence. Saint Augustine said over 1500 years ago that the human being is only happy if alive, and only fully happy with the hope of living forever. The Archdiocese teaches, in communion with Pope Francis and the Universal Church, the good news of eternal life.

Even if you're a regularly practicing Catholic, it's important to keep learning your faith. Many of us think that our faith formation ended with the Sacrament of Confirmation and the end of formal religious education. But that education is only the beginning. Our relationship with God in Jesus Christ is a lifelong walk of discipleship. Like anything else important in life, it involves lifelong learning, to meet our challenges with faith formed to meet them. It is important to learn and practice your faith now, in order that when the time of a loved one's or your own passage from this life approaches, you are prepared for the challenges that arise.

II. Passage and Hope: From earthly pilgrimage to eternal glory

- A. **The Catholic Vision of Reality.** It may help to recall key truths of our Faith. Scripture tells us that God made us in His image for a relationship with Him (Genesis 1:26), but that the first human beings lost that relationship of communion through original sin. Fortunately, God acted in history, first calling out Abraham and ancient Israel, and giving the Law of Moses, to show us how to walk in His ways. (Gen. 17, Ex. 20) But this was only the first part of a glorious plan to redeem us from sin, by becoming Incarnate in flesh in Jesus Christ (Mt. 1) , and atoning for our sin through His death on the Cross, rising in glory from the dead (Jn. 19-20), and establishing His Mystical Body the Church. (Eph. 5)
- B. We have the hope that our journey with Christ here, in the Church, will end with **eternal life**, what Scripture calls the eternal Wedding Feast of glory (Rev. 21). We have the hope of living eternally in glory beyond our understanding, of which our good life here is a foreshadowing. Says the apostle Paul, "I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory that is to be revealed to us." (Rom. 8:18)
- C. **Immanuel: God with us.** Matthew 1:23 tells us that Jesus Christ is "Immanuel, which means God with us." This is perhaps the most important truth to keep in mind. In all stages of our life as Catholics, from Baptism, through our Sacraments of Initiation through Confirmation, and in our adult life in the Church, our Triune God is with us. There is no sin He cannot forgive, and no situation beyond His care. Because



He dwells within us through Baptism and faith (Rom. 6), we can offer any suffering we endure to our indwelling Immanuel, and we will actually participate in His work of redeeming the world (Col. 1:23). “

- D. **“The Last Things.” Death, Judgment, Heaven, Hell.** Our Faith tells us that at the end of history, Christ will come again, will judge the living and the dead, and give us our eternal bodies, whether bodies of glory or bodies of death. These are what our Faith calls the Four Last Things, and it is vital for us to live life aware of them, and be prepared at the end. One thing we can remember is that no matter how our body appears during a final illness, we have the hope of eternal life in a body of glory, shining with God’s light in the eternal Communion of Saints. Christ’s Resurrection from the dead in the Bible is the “shape of things to come” for us—we too, have hope of being resurrected in glory at the end of time.

III. Ways God Helps Us in Time of Extremity

When you or a loved one is facing the prospect of the end of life, you want to have all of the proper resources in place, including spiritual resources. It’s something we often don’t think about, but it is extremely important to have the resources you need in place beforehand. Extremity may come upon us unexpected, and there may not be time to prepare.

- A. **The Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick** While this Sacrament may be applied shortly before passing, it may also be applied simply when someone is ill, and it may be applied more than once. This healing sacrament can also be applied to the healthy person preparing for surgery.
- B. **The Sacrament of Reconciliation.** By being familiar with one’s parish, and knowing the priest, it may be easier to help arrange this sacrament on short notice. In this sacrament the faithful obtain divine mercy for the sins committed against God and neighbor and are reconciled with the community of the Church.
- C. **The Apostolic Blessing** To be applied shortly before passing, this prayer, what the Church calls a sacramental, remits temporal punishment for sins, that is, purgation. It is part of what our Faith calls the treasury of merits—the mystical totality of holiness that Christ accrues in the Church through the good actions of believers.
- D. **End-of-Life Decision-Making: Fidelity to Christ, and Hope of Heaven.** One of the most vital parts of our Christian life is knowing Christian moral teaching. Tradition holds that all of our moral teaching “unpacks” the Ten Commandments, which are the Law of Moses, God’s Word shown to Moses before the Word becomes Incarnate in Christ. Our eternal salvation requires that we keep the Mosaic Law by grace.

Part of our Catholic belief that God is with us, is that *He will strengthen us to be faithful, and stay on the path to Heaven, in times of extremity.* It is important to be practicing our Faith today in good health. We thus cooperate with the Lord in strengthening us for times of testing, which often happen, perhaps without warning, near the end of our earthly life.

Here are some principles vital to the end of life.



1. ***One may never will evil in order to do good.*** The Church teaches that it is mortally sinful to directly hasten death by specific actions, such as assisted suicide. But what are called double effects of good actions, are not sinful. But if, for instance, saving one's life requires removing a cancerous body part, it is moral to do so. Even if, for instance, infertility is a result.
 2. ***The Church does not require that we receive extraordinary treatments.*** Our Faith requires that we pursue all *ordinary* means to preserve life, such as food and water as long as one's system can process them. But our Faith does not require that we pursue *extraordinary* means, though we are free to pursue them. Your priest and doctor together can help you determine what is ordinary and extraordinary.
 3. ***Your priest and your doctor together can help you make determinations.*** Most of us are not experts on medicine. Your priest and doctor can together help you answer questions about what is, for instance, an ordinary versus extraordinary treatment.
- E. **Christian Funerals: Celebration of Life, Profession of Eternal Hope.** For a Catholic, a funeral serves several purposes. Some are somewhat different from what is commonly thought. A funeral of course offers a shared occasion to celebrate the life of our loved one, and to bear our loss together. But several features are less well-known.

The funeral homily is part of the proclamation of the Gospel, like at any Mass. It is thus to be given by an ordained priest or deacon, someone ordained to Christ's office of sanctifier. It is not the time for a eulogy. The homily reminds us of our hope of eternal life, but also that we should pray for the repose of our loved one and that all of us will one day face our Lord and the Four Last Things.

Later in the Mass, after Communion, a loved one may give an appropriate **eulogy** with the priest's approval. You may want to ask your priest to review the eulogy beforehand and offer suggestions.

IV. **Communion with the Faithful Departed: Prayer for the Faithful Departed**

The Catholic faith tells us that we are still in communion with our loved ones after they have gone, and may still be of help to them—and them to us. The Second Vatican Council tells us that the Church has three groups:

- A. the **Pilgrim Church** or Church Militant—that is us on earth;
- B. the **Church Suffering**—the departed who are still undergoing purification, and who have not yet entered Heaven;
- C. the **Church in Glory** or Church Triumphant—those who are in communion with God, awaiting their own bodily resurrection in glory at the end of time.

Our hope of Heaven tells us that we can only enter Heaven in a state of perfection, which we may or may not reach in this life. Thus, the Church encourages us to pray for our departed loved ones, to help speed their entry



in to glory should such be needed. Only God knows the state of a soul at death, so we do well to always pray for our loved ones, as we want the Church in Glory to pray for us.

As a means of serving our loved ones, and offering consolation to loved ones, one can enroll departed loved ones in religious orders that pray for the deceased, and send the Mass card to the family. This salutary practice is a way we can continue supporting our departed loved ones, offer consolation, and strengthen our own hope of eternal life.

V. Conclusion: Christ our Hope, in This Life and in the Next

Our Catholic Faith is the comprehensive portrait or vision that informs our life and hope. By learning our Faith and resources now, in time of health, we can be well prepared when the challenges of transition from this life arise. The Archdiocese of Vancouver offers you many resources to help you learn our Faith, share our Faith with your loved ones, and practice your faith in a local parish community. As Scripture tells us, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.” (John 3:16-17)

About Dr. Kruggel

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