

HEAVENBOUND: The Church and the Last Things

Intro

- I. The Church on Earth**
- II. The Church in Purgatory and in Heaven**
- III. The End of the World**

Intro

- It makes sense that at the end of the year, we should finish up by talking about the final conclusion of God's saving plan, and of the human story
 1. We've looked at the past; now we look to the *present* and the *future*

- With regard to the *present*, we'll look at the 3-fold structure of the Church
 1. What is the Church on Earth like?
 2. What is the Church in Purgatory like?
 3. What is the Church in Heaven like?
(and yes, as we'll see, those in Heaven and in Purgatory are still members of the Church!)

- With regard to the *future*, we'll look at the consummation of God's plan – the end of this life, and the eternal beginning of the next life.

I. The Church on Earth

- a. The Church on Earth is sometimes called the “Church Militant,” because we’re still fighting the good fight for Christ – still engaged in the struggle against sin and evil.
 - i. But here’s an important question: How do we know which Church is the real Church that Jesus founded? After all, there are a *lot* of denominations to choose from!
 - ii. Well, the Nicene Creed gives us **Four Marks**, four characteristics, by which we can know Christ’s true Church. These marks are **One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic**
 - iii. Also, you can see all these characteristics at the very beginning of the Church’s life, at Pentecost.

- b. So let’s look at these four Marks¹
 - i. **One**: This means that the Church must be unified. At Pentecost we read that “They were all together and had all things in common” (Acts 2:44).
 - So which denomination has the greatest power to unify? What’s the largest denomination of the largest religion in the world? What’s the greatest single international organization on the planet? *The Catholic Church.*

 - ii. **Holy**: At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit made the Church Holy through the sacraments of Baptism (Acts 2:41) and the Eucharist (“breaking the bread” in Acts 2:42,46).
 - So where do you see the most emphasis on the Sacraments? Who has baptized more people, and celebrated more masses, than any other group? *The Catholic Church.*

 - iii. **Catholic** (=universal): At Pentecost, there are “men from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5), and the Church preaches to each in their own language.
 - So in which denomination do you see the most races, ethnicities, languages? Where do you see the greatest cultural diversity and enthusiasm for evangelization? Which denomination actually has “Catholic” in its name? *The Catholic Church.*

 - iv. **Apostolic**: At Pentecost, Peter speaks authoritatively, with the other apostles surrounding him (Acts 2:14-14).
 - So where do you most clearly see one man speaking authoritatively for the Church, with the successors of the apostles surrounding him? Where do you see the Pope and Bishops – the heirs of the original apostles – leading God’s people? *The Catholic Church*

So what does Christ’s Church look like on Earth? It looks like, it is, the Catholic Church.

¹ The textual support for this material is found in Lesson 12

II. The Church in Purgatory and Heaven²

- a. On the Cross, Jesus conquered death itself – which means that death no longer has the power to divide those who remain connected to Him
 - i. That’s why we talk about the “Communion of Saints” – the community of all those who love and follow Christ – whether in this life or the next.
 - ii. How are we still connected to Christians who have gone before? Well, most importantly, we can still help them with our prayers, and they can still help us with their prayers.

- b. **The Souls in Heaven (“The Church Triumphant”)**
 - i. If we die in a state of grace – in a state of friendship with God – we will ultimately reach Heaven.
 - ii. This is the fulfillment of all desire – seeing God face-to-face (1 Corinthians 13:12), as He is, and realizing that He is the source of all perfection and all happiness.
 - iii. We will also enjoy the eternal, glorious company of Our Lady and all the angels and the saints.
 - iv. Here’s an exercise: think of the five happiest moments of your life so far – then imagine that feeling being even more intense, and lasting forever. That’ll make you want to go to Heaven.

- c. **The Souls in Purgatory (“The Church Suffering”)**
 - i. If we die in a state of grace and friendship with God, but we still have vices and sins that we need to be purified from, then we must spend some time in Purgatory.
 - ii. Purgatory is basically God’s detox center.
 - We need to let go of our vanities and lusts and resentments (and just like detoxing from drugs or alcohol, it’s going to be *painful*).
 - But our sin and vice is what makes us most miserable on earth – so if we went to heaven with our sins and vices, we wouldn’t even be able to enjoy Heaven!
 - iii. So Purgatory is a mercy – when you’re in Purgatory, you *know* you’re going to Heaven, and you’re glad God has given you an opportunity to become well, so that you can really appreciate Heaven when you get there.
 - But it is hard and painful to get over your issues, whether in this life or the next – and so the souls in Purgatory appreciate all the prayers they can get!

So that’s the Church, in this life and the next. But how will the Church’s story end?

III. The End of the World³

² The textual support for this material is found in Lesson 12, “**The Communion of Saints**” and Lesson 13 “**Life Everlasting**”

³ The textual support for this material is found throughout Lesson 13.

a. **Hell**

- i. We can't forget to mention that not necessarily everyone will choose to go to Heaven
- ii. Jesus has offered us forgiveness from every sin – especially in the sacraments of Baptism and Reconciliation – and there is no evil from which He can't heal us
- iii. But love must be free, and if we wish we can choose – through our evil decisions and our refusal to repent – to spend our eternity separated from God.
- iv. This infinite loneliness, selfishness, and isolation from God and the blessed is Hell.
 - It is terrifying to see what selfishness does in this life, and it's even more terrifying to think of what it could do to us in eternity. So we pray to God for the grace to be open to His love and healing.

b. **The Resurrection of the Body**

- i. When Christ comes again in glory on the last day, all who have died will get their bodies back.
- ii. For those who have chosen Heaven, this means we will be able to delight in God and praise Him with our bodies as well as our souls.
- iii. It means we will experience the joy of Heaven with our full humanity, as God originally intended.

c. How can we *imagine* this final fulfillment of all God's designs?

- i. Here, it's probably best to let Scripture have the last word:
 - [READ OUT LOUD Revelation 21:1-5, found in Lesson 13, "**Amen**"]
- ii. How incredible does that sound?
 - Is that not worth waiting for?
 - Is that not worth working towards?
- iii. Let's end the year with a prayer praising God for the magnificent of His story.
 - Let's remember, every time we say "Thy Kingdom Come," what an astonishingly beautiful end of the story we're looking forward to.
 - And let's ask God for the grace to prepare ourselves to for that fearful, glorious day.