THE LAST THINGS AND THE HOUR OF OUR DEATH

Bp. Michał Stobnicki

Beloved in Christ the Lord. In today's Gospel we hear the account of the raising, the healing, of the little girl. And let this be for all of us an occasion, as every year in November, for a brief reflection on the last things, which are unavoidable. And since they are unavoidable, there is nothing more salutary and more useful for our souls than to prepare ourselves for these last things as well as we can. We all know them from the catechism: death, the judgment of God, heaven or hell. Yet our thoughts turn so unwillingly to matters on which our eternity depends. The better we prepare for the hour of our death, the greater our chances of saving our souls from eternal damnation and of winning the reward of eternal life in heaven.

Dear faithful, the first of these last things is death. Death, which means the separation of the soul from the body. For us this is a state entirely unnatural, because from the beginning of our existence we know only this union of soul and body, which, moreover, is the distinguishing mark of our human nature. So death is something unnatural for man, and rightly may we fear it as something we do not know at all, something entirely foreign to us. Note that Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, was afraid of death in His human nature. He was afraid, He trembled at the thought of the painful Passion awaiting Him, of death on the Cross.

This separation of the soul from the body, my dear ones, we are accustomed to identify with the last breath, with the final exhalation. Yet it is not possible to mark a boundary precisely, to point to the moment of death, for the reason that death is rather a process. The Church allows — theologians speak here of half an hour, an hour after the last breath — that the last sacraments may still be administered conditionally, extreme unction, conditional absolution, because we have no certainty at which exact moment the separation takes place. The last breath seems to be a sign, an outward sign, that death is already present, that it has already begun. The body begins to die, but for those dozen or several dozen minutes it is still warm. It seems that the person is asleep, immersed in deep sleep.

Death, my dear ones, is the end of our earthly life, the end of the time of merit. There is nothing more that we can do for ourselves, for our soul, after death. That is the end. That is the end. In Holy Scripture we read: "Where the tree falls, to the south or to the north, there it shall lie." And these words refer to the moment of our death, the moment that decides our eternity.

THE JUDGMENT OF GOD

For when this separation of soul from body takes place, the soul stands before God's judgment, before the divine Judge, who rewards the good and punishes the evil. The individual judgment, which follows death, which awaits each one of us, at which we shall have to render an account of everything we have done on earth, and also of what we have neglected. The individual judgment, my dear ones, at which we shall be judged by the most just of judges, by a Judge who cannot be bribed and cannot be deceived.

And rightly, my dear ones, we may apply these words of Holy Scripture to the moment of death. Where the tree falls, there it shall lie. He who dies in the state of sanctifying grace, professing the Catholic faith, will save his soul. He who dies in the state of mortal sin, unrepented [?], will damn his soul for ever. Here our eternity is decided, where our soul will find itself for ever.

My dear ones, hence we must pray for the grace of a good death and always keep before our eyes that we should make every effort to remain in the state of sanctifying grace, to go to confession regularly, to receive Holy Communion, that we may always be ready for the hour of our death, for the meeting with the divine Judge. A Catholic must not, my dear ones, take lightly the state of his soul. If anyone happens to

commit a grave sin, let him go to holy confession as quickly as possible. If that is impossible, if he must wait a longer or shorter time, let him make an act of sorrow for the sin committed. For the forgiveness of sins we obtain, as a rule, through sacramental confession, but in extraordinary circumstances also through perfect contrition, sorrow out of love for the Lord God. When we have no possibility of going to confession, when one day, perhaps, you see rockets over your heads, strike your breast, make an act of sorrow, have the resolution that if there is such an opportunity, if you survive, you will go to a priest to confess these sins. Sorrow, my dear ones, can cleanse us of mortal sins, and so we shall fall on the good side, God's side.

HEAVEN, PURGATORY AND HELL

So, my dear ones, the soul at this individual judgment hears the sentence. An irrevocable sentence. A sentence from which there is no appeal. A sentence passed by the most just of judges. Heaven or hell. And, thanks be to God, there is still purgatory.

In heaven the souls that reach heaven enjoy the so-called beatific vision. That is, they draw joy from beholding God, from living with God, in God, for ever. Saint John in the Apocalypse, describing heaven, writes: "Where every tear shall be wiped away." In heaven there is no sorrow, no cares, no sickness, no fear. There is one unending, great, indescribable joy, a gladness that no one will ever take from us again.

Purgatory, my dear ones, is a work of God's mercy, a second chance, as it were. Those souls who die in the state of sanctifying grace but still have temporal punishments unfulfilled must still be cleansed. They have the chance, through the fire of purgatory, that these penances left unfinished on earth may be completed in purgatory. The souls in purgatory suffer like the souls in hell. It is a purifying fire, but they know that they will be saved, that they have reached heaven, that this fire, this suffering, is passing and will have its end. This becomes for them a source of hope. The souls in purgatory cannot help themselves. As I said, with the moment of death the time of merit ends. But we here on earth, through our prayers, fasts and almsgiving, can help the souls in purgatory, which I urge again and again with all my heart: bring them help. For if we help them, then most certainly they too will desire to repay us and help us in our needs.

And finally, my dear ones, the sentence that none of us would want to hear: hell. It is not as the modernists proclaim, that hell does not exist, or that even if it exists, it is empty. We have many testimonies in Holy Scripture, in the Tradition of the Church, in the writings of various saints, in apparitions, that hell, my dear ones, is not empty, that a whole multitude of crowds falls into the fire of hell, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. The punishment of hell is, my dear ones, an eternal punishment. It has no end.

And one of the causes, one of the sources of the suffering of souls in hell, besides the fire consuming them, is that they realise how small an effort it would have taken to attain eternal life. We know this from everyday life. If we have some good business deal to make, we prepare everything and everything goes according to plan, and suddenly it falls apart. How angry we are then with ourselves! What regret we feel toward ourselves! What did I fail to see to, what did I overlook? And imagine now a soul in hell, which realises how small an effort it would have taken here on earth to win heaven, but neglected it, and through its own foolishness, its own laziness, its own indifference condemned itself to eternal damnation in hell. What great hatred it must feel toward itself. It would wish to vanish, but this is an eternal punishment. An eternal punishment.

Dear faithful, let us keep before our eyes the last things, the unavoidable things, things that each one of us will have to go through. If we meditate on these last things, even if only from time to time, then most certainly we shall be better prepared for them. If we keep before our eyes the purpose of our life here on earth, we shall begin to live differently. To live in God's way, to live so as to win the reward of eternal life in heaven. The Father and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen. Praised be Jesus Christ.