

THE FOUR LAST THINGS

The Truth of a Life

Judgment

Contents

1	The Court We Already Desire	1
2	Particular and Final	1
3	The Judge Is the One Judged by Us	1
4	Faith, Works, and Grace	1
5	What Is Disclosed, and Why Publicly?	2
6	The Unequal Histories of Freedom	2
7	Conscience Without Self-Acquittal	2
8	Mercy Is the Form of God’s Justice	2
9	Purgatory and the Refusal of Cheap Acquittal	3
10	The Revelation of the Person	3
11	Living Under the True Verdict	3
A	Scope, Method, and Qualifications	5
B	References	5

1 The Court We Already Desire

Human beings protest judgment until injustice reaches them. Then neutrality appears not merciful but monstrous. The betrayed want the betrayal named; the forgotten dead demand that history be more than the victor's account. Our recoil is selective because judgment threatens not only the oppressor's disguise but our own.

Christian judgment is not the universe's final administrative procedure. The judge is Jesus Christ, crucified and risen (Jn 5:22–29; Acts 17:31). The wounds of the Judge prevent two evasions at once: justice is not indifferent to what sin costs, and mercy is not the indulgence of one untouched by the cost. The one before whom every life is disclosed is the one who bore sin and offered reconciliation.

2 Particular and Final

Catholic teaching distinguishes the particular judgment from the last judgment. At death each person receives eternal retribution in the immortal soul as his life is referred to Christ: heaven immediately or through purification, or definitive loss (CCC 1021–1022). At Christ's return the dead rise, history reaches its consummation, and the truth of hearts and deeds is manifested in their relations and consequences (Mt 25:31–46; CCC 1038–1041).

These are not competing verdicts. The particular judgment concerns the person's definitive destiny at death; the final judgment publicly discloses the justice, mercy, and providence of God across the whole human story. A private act is never only private. Cowardice can burden descendants; mercy can bear fruit beyond the giver's knowledge. The last judgment reveals the web that no human tribunal can fully see.

3 The Judge Is the One Judged by Us

The New Testament's most destabilizing claim is not merely that a judgment will occur, but that judgment belongs to Christ. The Father has given judgment to the Son; the appointed judge is the man God raised from the dead (Jn 5:22–29; Acts 17:31). Human life is not measured against an alien standard imposed from outside creation. It is measured against the truth of humanity made visible in the obedient Son.

That judge was himself arraigned, falsely witnessed against, mocked, and condemned. This does not make the last judgment a reversal in which Jesus finally enjoys the power his enemies used. It reveals the difference between divine and fallen judgment. Pilate protects order by surrendering the innocent; Caiaphas turns political calculation into necessity; the crowd converts unanimity into truth. Christ judges without needing a victim to stabilize his authority. His wounds disclose both the world's verdict upon God and God's mercy toward the world.

Matthew 25 therefore refuses a merely interior religion. The king identifies himself with those whose hunger, estrangement, nakedness, illness, and imprisonment exposed them to neglect. The passage does not say that every policy dispute has an obvious answer, nor that works of mercy save apart from Christ. It says something more searching: relation to Christ becomes visible in relation to persons who cannot increase our prestige.

4 Faith, Works, and Grace

Scripture speaks without embarrassment of judgment "according to works" (Rom 2:6–11; 2 Cor 5:10; Rev 20:12), and equally denies that anyone saves himself by works performed apart from grace (Rom 3:23–28; Eph 2:8–10). Catholic teaching refuses to amputate either witness. Justification begins from God's grace, not human desert; the grace received makes a real human response possible; works done in Christ disclose and deepen living communion with him.

The sheep in Matthew 25 do not purchase heaven by philanthropic arithmetic. Their treatment of the hungry, stranger, sick, and imprisoned manifests whether Christ's love has taken flesh in them. James's claim that faith without works is dead (Jas 2:14–26) does not oppose faith to grace. It opposes living faith to verbal possession.

Merit is therefore filial, not commercial. God crowns his own gifts by enabling free acts of love and truly accepting them as the acts of his adopted children (CCC 2006–2011). The language of reward protects the dignity of grace-healed agency; it does not place God in debt to unaided nature.

5 What Is Disclosed, and Why Publicly?

The last judgment is sometimes imagined as the needless public replay of information God already possesses. But revelation is not needed for God's knowledge; it is needed for the truth of creation. Evil works by concealment, euphemism, fragmentation, and isolation of victims. Goodness too may remain hidden: a fidelity whose fruits appear only generations later, an unnoticed refusal to cooperate with cruelty, a prayer whose beneficiary never knew its source.

Public disclosure restores relations to truth. It shows the consequences of acts, the solidarities by which persons helped or harmed one another, and the providence by which God brought good without making evil good. Aquinas accordingly distinguishes the sentence concerning a person from the general manifestation of divine government and the effects of human deeds (ST Supplement, q. 88). This is school theology serving a revealed boundary, not a transcript of the event.

Disclosure does not mean the triumph of humiliation. Shame as we know it often serves domination: the powerful reveal another's weakness while hiding their own. Divine judgment has no such asymmetry. Every disguise falls before the one who already knows. The forgiven sinner's sins are not stronger than forgiveness, and the vindicated victim is not eternally defined by victimhood. Truth is complete enough to include guilt, grace, repentance, reparation, unhealed consequence, and the good God drew from what he did not will.

6 The Unequal Histories of Freedom

If judgment is according to deeds, does it ignore the unequal conditions under which people act? One person receives sound formation, stable affection, and ready access to the sacraments; another inherits violence, deception, compulsion, or ignorance. Catholic moral theology does not solve this by declaring acts meaningless. It distinguishes the objective character of an act from the agent's culpability, which can be diminished by ignorance, fear, habit, duress, and other factors (CCC 1735, 1750–1756, 1860).

Only God knows these histories without simplification. This is not a loophole by which every grave act becomes inculpable, nor a warrant to suspend necessary human justice. Courts and communities must judge acts within their competence, protect victims, and seek truth by proportionate evidence. They may not pronounce the eternal measure of a person. Final judgment consoles precisely because neither privilege nor trauma is invisible to it.

Grace also prevents unequal histories from becoming fate. No one converts by unaided power, and no wound places a person outside God's possible action. Yet grace is not coercion wearing a holy name. It heals and elevates agency so that consent is genuinely the person's. The Catholic refusal of both self-salvation and deterministic theater protects the drama judgment reveals: God acts first and throughout; the creature's graced answer is real.

7 Conscience Without Self-Acquittal

Conscience is not the final court. It is a judgment of practical reason that must seek truth and may err (CCC 1776–1794). A quiet conscience can result from innocence, but also from ignorance cultivated for convenience. A tormented conscience can identify guilt, but also suffer scrupulosity. "I feel no guilt" and "I feel unforgivable" are both insufficient verdicts.

The prospect of judgment should produce examination, not obsessive self-surveillance. Repentance names concrete wrong, receives mercy, repairs what can be repaired, and resumes obedience. Scrupulosity seeks an impossible certainty by reopening what has been honestly confessed; presumption seeks immunity without conversion. Both turn the gaze away from Christ—one toward the self's endless prosecution, the other toward its easy acquittal.

8 Mercy Is the Form of God's Justice

Divine mercy does not persuade God to cease being just. Mercy confronts misery and acts to overcome it; justice gives what is due within the order God wisely creates. At the Cross, forgiveness does not pronounce evil harmless. It

condemns sin in the flesh and opens the sinner's return (Rom 8:3). Aquinas therefore treats mercy as the root of God's outward works without making justice unreal (ST I, q. 21, a. 4).

Universal salvific will and real judgment must both be confessed. God desires all to be saved (1 Tim 2:4); Christ's sacrifice is sufficient for all; grace precedes and enables every saving response. Yet Scripture's summons to repent is not theater, and freedom is not redeemed by being abolished. The Church may hope and pray for every person; she does not claim knowledge that all are saved or identify any particular human being as damned.

9 Purgatory and the Refusal of Cheap Acquittal

The logic of judgment is incomplete if every imperfect friendship with God is forced into the alternatives of spotless glory or damnation. The Church teaches a final purification for those who die in God's grace and friendship but remain imperfectly purified (CCC 1030–1032). Purgatory is not a second chance after definitive refusal, a lesser hell, or a payment supplementing the Cross. It is the victorious application of Christ's grace to persons whose salvation is secure but whose healing is unfinished.

Benedict XVI proposes encounter with Christ as the decisive image: before his gaze falsehood melts away, and this pain of transformation is itself salvation (*Spe salvi* 47). The encyclical offers a theological account, not a new definition of duration or mechanism. Its value is to prevent two caricatures. Judgment is not external bookkeeping that leaves the person unchanged; mercy is not God's agreement to call an untruth true.

Prayer for the dead follows. It makes no sense if persons are isolated moral atoms whose histories close every relation. The Church's intercession confesses that communion in Christ reaches beyond death and that love may still serve the departed, while leaving their judgment entirely to God.

10 The Revelation of the Person

Judgment reveals more than a list of actions. It reveals what freedom has loved. A single act can be forgiven; a long habit can be broken; an outwardly impressive life can conceal a refusal of love. Only God knows the person's full history, freedom, knowledge, wounds, helps received, and final response. Human moral judgment may be necessary, but it cannot occupy Christ's throne.

The last judgment also vindicates victims. Hidden suffering will not disappear into statistical loss. Lies that shaped nations and households will be named; secret fidelity will not remain unknown. This is terrible because no disguise survives. It is consoling for the same reason.

10.1 Augustine and Aquinas on the whole made visible

Augustine's account in *City of God* XX makes the last judgment the public rectification of a history in which appearances deceive. Aquinas distinguishes the judgment concerning each soul from the general judgment in which the effects of human acts and the divine government of history are manifested (ST Supplement, q. 88). Neither account licenses curiosity about hidden consciences. Both deny that history's unresolved wrongs simply vanish.

11 Living Under the True Verdict

The Christian prepares for judgment by refusing both theatrical terror and practical forgetfulness. The decisive habits are plain: remain in grace, confess grave sin, forgive, restore what injustice took, feed the person in reach, pray, keep promises, and ask for the grace of perseverance. Such acts do not manipulate the Judge. They conform life to him.

The final word is not our self-description. It is Christ's truthful judgment. That fact wounds pride and frees the conscience from endless self-invention. The question is not whether we can construct an acquittal. It is whether we will come into the light while mercy is offered (Jn 3:19–21).

The liturgy makes this future judgment present without pretending to stage it. The Creed confesses that Christ will

come to judge the living and the dead; the Eucharistic liturgy remembers his death, proclaims his Resurrection, and awaits his coming. Worship trains judgment's proper posture: confession before self-defense, mercy received before mercy given, and hope fixed on the returning Christ.

A Scope, Method, and Qualifications

This independent theological article distinguishes particular and final judgment and treats judgment according to works, grace, merit, conscience, mercy, and the disclosure of history. It does not decide any person's eternal state, calculate culpability, or replace sacramental and pastoral care for scrupulosity. Dogmatic and authoritative teaching governs; Thomistic language explains one received synthesis; pastoral applications and rhetorical framing are project synthesis. The relation of grace, freedom, and predestination has legitimate Catholic schools not adjudicated here. No independent dogmatic, Thomistic, pastoral, psychological, or ecclesiastical review is recorded.

B References

- Sacred Scripture: Matthew 25; Luke 16 and 23; John 3 and 5; Acts 17; Romans 2, 3, and 8; 2 Corinthians 5; Ephesians 2; 1 Timothy 2; James 2; Hebrews 9; Revelation 20.
- Second Council of Lyons, *Profession of Faith of Michael Palaeologus* (1274), DS 857–859; Council of Trent, Decree on Justification, chs. 5–16 and canons 4, 9, 16, 30–32.
- *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 678–679, 1021–1022, 1030–1041, 1058, 1735, 1750–1756, 1776–1794, 1860, 2006–2011.
- Second Vatican Council, pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* 16, 22, and 39; Benedict XVI, encyclical *Spe salvi* 44–48.
- St. Augustine, *City of God* XX; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 21, aa. 3–4; I–II, qq. 109–114; Supplement, q. 88.
- Roman Rite: the Creed and Eucharistic liturgy's expectation of Christ's coming. No territorial vernacular is reproduced.

Last revised (UTC): 2026-07-24T20:52:18Z

Reuse and rights. To the extent Triptych holds the rights, project-created content and design are licensed under CC BY 4.0. Scripture, liturgical or official texts, received prayers or hymns, quotations, fonts, and other third-party material retain their own status; public-domain material remains public domain. Identify changes. Attribution implies neither Triptych nor ecclesiastical approval. See LICENSE and THIRD_PARTY.md in the source.