

Introduction to Eschatology by Fr. Harrison Ayre

Eschatology is the study of the *eschaton*, of the last things. It deals with God's eternity and man's final relationship with God. And so it pertains to questions concerning heaven, hell, purgatory, the particular and final judgments, the resurrection of the body, and the new heavens and the new earth.

One of the most important questions surrounding this discipline is the nature, meaning and purpose of death. While we recognize, through faith, that death occurs because of sin's reign in the world, certain questions arise. Our theological understanding of the human person tells us that man is an embodied soul. But we also know that, through death, the soul and body are separated. Eschatology considers how this works, such as what happens to the soul, or what is the dignity owed to the body as a preparation for the general resurrection.

Death also brings us to the question around the particular judgment. This is when, in death, we stand before God and our life is made transparent before God. Yet your understanding of the judgment often takes different perspectives. For example, some see the particular judgment as a time of self-awareness of one's sins and virtues in the light of the truth of God and makes the choice they made with their life: either for God or against God. Others see it more like an impugning of a judgment by God himself. While we have no direct data from revelation to come to a definitive answer, the idea around judgment must always take into account the two aspects revealed in those examples: the objective judgment of God and our subjective acknowledgment of our own sin and virtue.

Our particular judgment leads us to one of three destinations. Two permanent, one is temporary. Concerning Hell, eschatology thinks about questions that come from the depths of our heart: how could a loving God allow people to go to Hell? How populated is Hell? Can one be in Hell temporarily? While this last question is one that arises often, the deposit of faith is clear: Hell is a permanent choice. What is the nature of the punishment? How is it that a loving God upholds a creature in existence who is in Hell? These questions lead to a variety of possible and legitimate answers that help us understand the mystery of the rejection of God's love.

It is possible to be destined for heaven but still need purification. Catholics believe that sacraments such as baptism, confession and the Eucharist forgive sins to varying degrees. But that is only the forgiveness of the guilt due to sin, it is not the forgiveness of the effects of the sins. This is something we often try to atone for in life through penance, indulgences, fasting, acts of charity, etc. For those who still have not shared in Christ's sufferings to atone for the effects of those sins, purgatory serves as their place of purifying love. One of the intriguing aspects around the doctrine of purgatory is the fact that we do not have foolproof, direct facts of its existence in revelation, just hints of it, such as the prayers for the dead in the Old Testament (2 Maccabees 12:38-46) or the early practice of praying for the dead in the Christian tradition. One of the most famous examples of this comes from St. Augustine's Confessions, when Augustine's mother, St. Monica, asks her son to remember to pray for her when she dies. This makes the study of purgatory all the more important because it helps us understand those vague hints in connection to the mystery of God's love.

Those who complete their time of purgation, as well as those who do not need it, are admitted to heaven. Heaven is where we are immersed in the mystery of God's very life, where, in the Son, we worship eternally the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit. Many important questions are raised here: what is time like for the created soul? How does the soul exist apart from the body in heaven? What is the connection between heaven and earth?

Eschatology, when dealing with heaven, must also make us aware that heaven, in a manner of speaking, is not the final, total goal. Rather, and this is the most mysterious element of the discipline because it is the final end of creation, it moves us beyond everything to the coming together of the new heavens and the new earth (cf: Rev 21, 2 Pet 3:13), where man will live with God in the state of a resurrected body like Jesus had. We so often think of heaven as the final goal, and to an extent that is true. But heaven as it is right now is a sort of middle ground waiting for Christ to come again, to bring his general judgment against the whole of earth, and to establish the definitive and final kingdom where God and man dwell together.

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III. CATHOLIC ESCHATOLOGY.

—In this article there is no critical discussion of N.T. eschatology nor any attempt to trace the historical developments of Catholic teaching from Scriptural and traditional data; only a brief conspectus is given of the developed Catholic system. For critical and historical details and for the refutation of opposing views the reader is referred to the special articles dealing with the various doctrines. The eschatological summary which speaks of the “four last things” (death, judgment, heaven, and hell) is popular rather than scientific. For systematic treatment it is best to distinguish between (A) individual and (B) universal and cosmic eschatology, including under (A): (1) death; (2) the particular judgment; (3) heaven, or eternal happiness; (4) purgatory, or the intermediate state; (5) hell, or eternal punishment; and under (B): (6) the approach of the end of the world; (7) the resurrection of the body; (8) the general judgment; and (9) the final consummation of all things. The superiority of Catholic eschatology consists in the fact that, without professing to answer every question that idle curiosity may suggest, it gives a clear, consistent, satisfying statement of all that need at present be known, or can profitably be understood, regarding the eternal issues of life and death for each of us personally, and the final consummation of the cosmos of which we are a part.

(A) Individual Eschatology.

(1) Death, which consists in the separation of soul and body, is presented under many aspects in Catholic teaching, but chiefly (a) as being actually and historically, in the present order of supernatural Providence, the consequence and penalty of Adam's sin (Geri., ii, 17; Rom., v, 12, etc.); (b) as being the end of man's period of probation, the event which decides his eternal destiny (II Cor., v, 10; John, ix, 4; Luke, xii, 40; xvi, 19 sqq.; etc.), though it does not exclude an intermediate state of purification for the imperfect who die in God's grace; and (c) as being universal, though as to its absolute universality (for those living at the end of the world) there is some room for doubt because of I Thess., iv, 14 sqq.; I Cor., xv, 51; II Tim., iv, 1.

(2) That a particular judgment of each soul takes place at death is implied in many passages of the N. T. (Luke, xvi, 22 sqq.; xxiii, 43; Acts, i, 25; etc.), and in the teaching of the Council of Florence (Denzinger, Enchiridion, no. 588) regarding the speedy entry of each soul into heaven, purgatory, or hell. (See Particular Judgment.)

(3) Heaven is the abode of the blessed, where (after the resurrection with glorified bodies) they enjoy, in the company of Christ and the angels, the immediate vision of God face to face, being supernaturally elevated by the light of glory so as to be capable of such a vision. There are infinite degrees of glory corresponding to degrees of merit, but all are unspeakably happy in the eternal possession of God. Only the perfectly pure and holy can enter heaven; but for those who have attained that state, either at death or after a course of purification in purgatory, entry into heaven is not deferred, as has sometimes been erroneously held, till after the General Judgment.

(4) Purgatory is the intermediate state of unknown duration in which those who die imperfect, but not in unrepented mortal sin, undergo a course of penal purification, to qualify for admission into heaven. They share in the Communion of Saints (q.v.) and are benefited by our prayers and good works (see Prayers for the Dead). The denial of purgatory by the Reformers introduced a dismal blank in their eschatology and, after the manner of extremes, has led to extreme reactions. (See Purgatory.)

(5) Hell, in Catholic teaching, designates the place or state of men (and angels) who, because of sin, are excluded for ever from the Beatific Vision. In this wide sense it applies to the state of those who die with only original sin on their souls (Council of Florence, Denzinger, no. 588), although this is not a state of misery or of subjective punishment of any kind, but merely implies the objective privation of supernatural bliss, which is compatible with a condition of perfect natural happiness. But in the narrower sense in which the name is ordinarily used, hell is the state of those who are punished eternally for unrepented personal mortal sin. Beyond affirming the existence of such a state, with varying degrees of punishment corresponding to degrees of guilt and its eternal or unending duration, Catholic doctrine does not go. It is a terrible and mysterious truth, but it is clearly and emphatically taught by Christ and the Apostles. Rationalists may deny the eternity of hell in spite of the authority of Christ, and professing Christians, who are unwilling to admit it, may try to explain away Christ's words; but it remains as the Divinely revealed solution of the problem of moral evil. (See Hell.) Rival solutions have been sought for in some form of the theory of restitution or, less commonly, in the theory of annihilation or conditional immortality. The restitutionist view, which in its Origenist form was condemned at the Council of Constantinople in 543, and later at the Fifth General Council (see Apocatastasis), is the cardinal dogma of modern

Universalism (q.v.), and is favored more or less by liberal Protestants and Anglicans. Based on an exaggerated optimism for which present experience offers no guarantee, this view assumes the all-conquering efficacy of the ministry of grace in a life of probation after death, and looks forward to the ultimate conversion of all sinners and the voluntary disappearance of moral evil from the universe. Annihilationists, on the other hand, failing to find either in reason or Revelation any grounds for such optimism, and considering immortality itself to be a grace and not the natural attribute of the soul, believe that the finally impenitent will be annihilated or cease to exist—that God will thus ultimately be compelled to confess the failure of His purpose and power.

(B) Universal and Cosmic Eschatology.

—(6) Notwithstanding Christ's express refusal to specify the time of the end (Mark, xiii, 32; Acts, i, 6 sq.), it was a common belief among early Christians that the end of the world was near. This seemed to have some support in certain sayings of Christ in reference to the destruction of Jerusalem, which are set down in the Gospels side by side with prophecies relating to the end (Matt., xxiv; Luke, xxi), and in certain passages of the Apostolic writings, which might, not unnaturally, have been so understood (but see II Thess., ii, 2 sqq., where St. Paul corrects this impression). On the other hand, Christ had clearly stated that the Gospel was to be preached to all nations before the end (Matt., xxiv, 14), and St. Paul looked forward to the ultimate conversion of the Jewish people as a remote event to be preceded by the conversion of the Gentiles (Rom., xi, 25 sqq.). Various other signs are spoken of as preceding or ushering in the end, as a great apostasy (II Thess., ii, 3 sqq.), or falling away from faith or charity (Luke, xviii, 8; xvii, 26; Matt., xxiv, 12), the reign of Antichrist (q.v.), and great social calamities and terrifying physical convulsions. Yet the end will come unexpectedly and take the living by surprise.

(7) The visible coming (parousia) of Christ in power and glory will be the signal for the rising of the dead (see Resurrection). It is Catholic teaching that all the dead who are to be judged will rise, the wicked as well as the just, and that they will rise with the bodies they had in this life. But nothing is defined as to what is required to constitute this identity of the risen and transformed with the present body. Though not formally defined, it is sufficiently certain that there is to be only one general resurrection, simultaneous for the good and the bad. (See Millennium and Millenarianism.) Regarding the qualities of the risen bodies in the case of the just we have St. Paul's description in I Cor., xv (cf. Matt., xiii, 43; Phil., iii, 21) as a basis for theological speculation; but in the case of the damned we can only affirm that their bodies will be incorruptible.

(8) Regarding the general judgment there is nothing of importance to be added here to the graphic description of the event given by Christ Himself, who is to be Judge (Matt., xxv; etc.). (See Judgment, General.)

(9) There is mention also of the physical universe sharing in the general consummation (II Pet., iii, 13; Rom., viii, 19 sqq.; Apoc., xxi, 1 sqq.). The present heaven and earth will be destroyed, and a new heaven and earth take their place. But what, precisely, this process will involve, or what purpose the renovated world will serve is not revealed. It may possibly be part of the glorious Kingdom of Christ of which "there shall be no end". Christ's militant reign is to cease with the accomplishment of His office as Judge (I Cor., v, 24 sqq.), but as King of the elect whom He has saved He will reign with them in glory for ever.

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Chronology of the End Times by Colin B. Donoavn, STL

Endtimes

The term "end times" applies both to the era of Christ's first coming (Heb. 1:2, 1 Cor. 10:11, Heb. 9:26) and to the events immediately before his return and the end of the ages (Mt 24:13, 2 Tim 2:1, 2 Peter 3:3). The definitive Catholic teaching on this is contained in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* under the discussion of the article of the Creed, "From thence He will come again to judge the living and the dead." [CCC 668-682]

As the Creed infallibly teaches, the Second Coming is associated with the end of the world and the Last Judgment. The Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches agree on this teaching. Therefore, The Second Coming is NOT associated with any earlier time - such as to establish a "Millennium." The Catholic Church specifically condemns "millenarianism," according to which Jesus will establish a throne in this world and reign here for a thousand years, and in that condemnation condemns any secular utopianism [CCC 676]. This true order is especially clear in Mt 25:31ff, when He describes His return in glory to judge the nations and to definitively reward the just and condemn the unjust, giving their charity, manifested by their acts/works of charity, as the grounds of judgment.

Until the Final Judgment, the Church teaches that Jesus reigns in eternity (1 Cor. 15:24-27, Rev. 4 & 5) and that in this world His reign, established as a seed, is found in the Church [CCC 668-669]. This is the 1000 years, a Hebrew way of indicating an indefinitely long time—in this case, the time between the first and second comings, a time whose length is not given to us to know. This period is the era of the Church, in which the Holy Spirit operating through the Mystical Body, Head and members, continues Christ's earthly mission of redemption. The Book of Revelation situates this era between the persecutions of the Roman antichrists of the first century and the final unleashing of evil at the end.

Naturally, if a Christian cannot accept that the Catholic Church exercises Christ's authority in the world, it is necessary to look for a time when Christ will reign personally in the world. Thus, at the beginning of the 19th century, some Protestants began to teach a return of Christ to rapture the just, living and dead, taking them to heaven. This would spare them the Tribulation of those days and the persecution of the Antichrist. When the seven year Tribulation ends, Christ will come to judge the nations, chain Satan and rule on the earth for 1000 years. At the end of this time the nations will rebel against their King leading to the final judgment.

While the notion of a rapture out of suffering, even death, for belief in Christ is appealing, flight from the Cross is nowhere taught in Scripture. Rather, the Savior said, "take up your cross and follow me." It is in one's conformity to Christ Crucified that has marked the martyred and un-martyred saints of all eras from the time of Peter and Paul to our own.

As for the Rapture, the meaning of 1 Thes. 4:15-17 is that at the return of Christ (v.15) and the General Resurrection of the Dead (v.16), those who survive the persecution of the Antichrist will have no advantage in being resurrected over those who died before His Coming [CCC 1001]. All will go to meet Him and be with Him forever (v.17; cf. Rev 20:17-21:27), while the unjust are cast into the lake of fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

The General Chronology of the End

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, following the teaching of Scripture and Tradition, as understood by the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, provides us with a general order of the events leading up to the End [CCC 673-677]. These are preceded in history by Chronologically they are,

1. the full number of the Gentiles come into the Church
2. the "full inclusion of the Jews in the Messiah's salvation, in the wake of the full number of the Gentiles" (#2 will follow quickly on, in the wake of, #1)
3. a final trial of the Church "in the form of a religious deception offering men an apparent solution to their problems at the price of apostasy from the truth." The supreme deception is that of the Antichrist.
4. Christ's victory over this final unleashing of evil through a cosmic upheaval of this passing world and the Last Judgment.

As Cardinal Ratzinger recently pointed out (in the context of the message of Fátima), we are not at the end of the world. In fact, the Second Coming (understood as the physical return of Christ) cannot occur until the full number of the Gentiles are converted, followed by "all Israel."

Approved Catholic mystics (Venerables, Blessed and Saints, approved apparitions) throw considerable light on this order, by prophesying a minor apostasy and tribulation toward the end of the world, after which will occur the reunion of Christians. Only later will the entire world fall away from Christ (the great apostasy) and the personal Antichrist arise and the Tribulation of the End occur.

Although this is not Catholic doctrine, arising as it does from private revelation, it conforms to what is occurring in our time, especially in light of Our Lady of Fátima's promise of an "Era of Peace." This "Triumph of the Immaculate Heart" (other saints have spoken of a social reign of Jesus Christ when Jesus will reign in the hearts of men) would seem to occur prior to the rise of the Antichrist. The optimism of the Pope for the "New Evangelization" and a "Civilization of Love" in the Third Millennium of Christianity fits here, as well. This would place us, therefore, in the period just before the events spoken of in the *Catechism*, that is, on the verge of the evangelization of the entire world. Other interpretations are possible, but none seem to fit the facts as well, especially when approved mystics are studied, instead of merely alleged ones.