

# The Four Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell

*And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. ~ Daniel 12:2*

**B**ECAUSE OF THE BUSYNESS OF OUR LIVES, and the speed with which the world around us moves, it is somehow possible for us to spend all our time caught up in our everyday joys, sorrows, concerns, and work, without ever thinking about those things which are most important in life. Why are we here? How are we to find true fulfillment in life? What happens after we die? Throughout history Christians have seen great value in remaining focused completely on Christ, and it is impossible to be focused on Christ without pondering these ultimate questions.

The Church has constantly encouraged us to prayerfully ponder the inescapable realities of death, personal judgment, and Heaven and Hell. These things are of *the greatest significance* and have traditionally been called the four last things.

## Death: An Event Shrouded in Mystery

*"Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned" (Rom 5:12).*

One thing that is certain in life is that there will be death. It is inevitable. Yet if our first parents had not sinned, death would not be our lot. God had commanded Adam to avoid only one desirable thing, *"for in the day that you eat of it you shall die"* (Gn 2:17). Yet Adam and Eve, seduced by the serpent who told them that God had lied to them (see Gn 3:4), ate the forbidden fruit and, as a result, death entered the world: *"you are dust, and to dust you shall return"* (Gn 3:19).

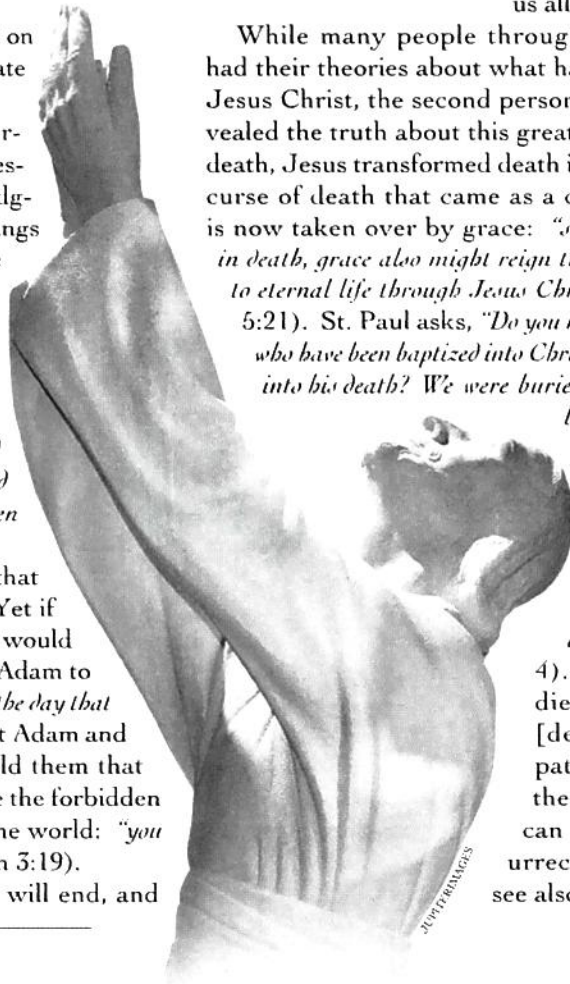
At some point in time, our lives will end, and

the world as we know it will fall away. But what happens after we die? Do we cease to exist and fall into eternal nothingness or is there something else, something greater and even more vast on the other side of death? Human beings, left to their own reason, cannot find an answer to this question. Death is perhaps the greatest of mysteries. It is the question that is perhaps closest to the human heart, because the truth about death closely concerns us all.

*"By his own death, Jesus transformed death into a blessing."*

While many people throughout history have had their theories about what happens after death, Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, revealed the truth about this great issue. By his own death, Jesus transformed death into a blessing. The curse of death that came as a consequence of sin is now taken over by grace: *"so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord"* (Rom 5:21). St. Paul asks, *"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death,*

*so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life"* (Rom 6:3-4). "For those who die in Christ's grace [death] is a participation in the death of the Lord, so that they can also share his Resurrection"<sup>1</sup> (CCC 1006; see also 1 Cor 15:21).



<sup>1</sup> Cf. Romans 6:5-9; Philippians 3:10-11



*Jesus as Judge, 12th century carved ivory panel*

Christian death, then, is a consoling positive reality; we do not have to die alone. The baptized Christian knows that his or her life belongs to Christ and that death is the physical completion of the “dying with Christ” that began at Baptism. Jesus opens up his own death to allow us to die with him; his obedience and love to God the Father can become our obedience: “*For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life*” (Rom 5:10).

It is in dying and departing from this world that the Christian becomes fully incorporated into the redeeming death of Jesus Christ and reaches out in hope towards the promised final home in Heaven: “*If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ*” (Rom 5:17).

While death will always remain shrouded in mystery, the teaching of Christ gives us firm hope and assurance in preparing for our own death and in coping

with the death of those we love. Many people today stand panicked and helpless in the face of death. It seems such loss and a great uncertainty. It is difficult enough dealing with the loss of one we love, but it is devastating to face death without a deep faith in God and some understanding of the last things. “*When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?'*” (1 Cor 15:54-55).

### **Death: What we Learn from the Funeral Vigil Liturgy**

It has been the case since the earliest days of Christianity that in order to know what Christians believe, we should pay attention to their prayers. The Church prays what she believes. What follows are some of the prayers contained in the liturgy of the funeral vigil, the prayer service the night before the funeral. The prayers shed light on the meaning of Christian death.

At the beginning of the liturgy, during the Invitation to Prayer, the celebrant prays, “My brothers and sisters, we believe that all the ties of friendship and affection which knit us as one throughout our lives do not unravel with death” (*Order of Christian Funerals* 71). The bonds of love which unite members of a family or one friend to another remain strong even after a person dies. The celebrant continues, “Confident that God always remembers the good we have done and forgives our sins, let us pray, asking God to gather N, to himself” (*Order of Christian Funerals* 72). This prayer clearly sets forth a proper Christian mindset in the face of death. While it is true that “*the wages of sin is death*”, Jesus by his death conquered death and extends to every person “*the free gift of God [which] is eternal life*” (Rom 6:25). “Lord,” the Church prays, “for your faithful people life is changed, not ended. When the body of our earthly dwelling lies in death we gain an everlasting dwelling place in Heaven”<sup>2</sup> (CCC 1012). We are pilgrims on earth because our true homeland is in Heaven. The Christian stares into the grave not only confident that the Lord is calling his loved one home but also assured that he will see these very bones resurrected into a glorified body on the last day. Jesus won the victory over death. Without the Resurrection Jesus’ death on the cross would be a sign of failure and defeat to us. But he has arisen and so we glory in the triumph of the

<sup>2</sup> *Roman Missal, Preface of Christian Death I*

cross and look with eyes of faith and hope past the tomb to the eternal life he promised.

The Church never tires in her work to bring all peoples back into the family of God and so especially at death she commends them to the Father's love and mercy with the following prayer:

Go forth, Christian soul, from this world  
in the name of God the almighty Father,  
who created you,  
in the name of Jesus Christ,  
the Son of the living God,  
who suffered for you,  
in the name of the Holy Spirit,  
who was poured out upon you....  
May you return to [your Creator]  
who formed you from the dust of the earth.  
May holy Mary, the angels, and all the saints  
come to meet you as you go forth ...  
May you see your Redeemer face to face  
(CCC 1020).<sup>5</sup>

### The Particular Judgment and The Last Judgment

*"When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food ...' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink?...' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.' Then he will*

*say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food ...' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.' And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Mt 25:31-46).*

This parable, taken from the New Testament, describes judgment in terms of the final encounter with Christ when he returns at the end of time. "He will come again to judge the living and the dead," we say in the Creed. Such a right the Father gave to him because he suffered death on the cross for our sins. On the last day, Jesus will return as this parable describes and all the dead will be raised, "those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment" (Jn 5:29). This event is called the Last Judgment and will mark the end of time and the coming of the Kingdom of God

in its fullness. All those who have died in Christ will be given back their own bodies transformed and glorified, and will enter into the fullness of God's Kingdom in Heaven.

Jesus not only speaks about the Last Judgment but also about the judgment that immediately follows death. He tells a story about the rich man who, when he died, was punished for his lack of charity toward the poor man Lazarus (see Lk 16:19-31). This story illustrates that at death our lives will be laid bare and we will be judged on our love. This immediate judgment the Church has commonly called the *particular judgment* because it is given individually to each person at death. It is not meant to scare us

***"There is no joy more complete, no  
love more rapturous,  
no life more fulfilling."***



*The Death of St. Joseph, by Jacob Walch, 1440-1516*

<sup>5</sup> *Order of Christian Funerals, Prayer of Commendation*

but to awaken in us the responsibility we have for our neighbor. And it calls to mind the need for our faith to bear fruit because faith without works is dead (see Jas 2:17).

#### Heaven: Life in Pure Love

*"In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (Jn 14:2-5).*

God created us out of his great love so that we might eventually be able to share in his very life. He wants us to share in the deep life of communion that exists between the divine persons of the Trinity. There is no joy more complete, no love more rapturous, no life more fulfilling. Entrance into Heaven will be the experience of entering into the perfect love that exists between the Persons of the Trinity. Trinitarian love is total. It holds nothing back. It is the full giving of self, out of love for the other. If we could imagine our most exhilarating moment of love and joy experienced on this earth, this moment is but a tiny taste of the infinite love and joys of Heaven and the ecstasy that participation in Trinitarian love will bring us. Jesus instituted the Church in order to shower us with sanctifying grace through the sacraments — grace which would make us holy and make us partakers of divine love and Trinitarian life. In God we will find true happiness; he is our final beatitude because our natural desire for happiness will be fulfilled. "Whoever sees God has obtained all the goods of which he can conceive"<sup>4</sup> (CCC 2548).

While it is true that every human being was created to spend eternity in Heaven, not everyone goes there. Who then goes to Heaven? Only a person who dies in God's grace, free from any mortal sin, is able to go to Heaven. A person must also have been perfectly purified from the effects of sin in order to enter Heaven (see Rv 21:27). This purification can happen here on earth or in Purgatory (see handout on Purgatory). Why must a person be free from mortal sin and also free from the stains of that sin to enter Heaven? Sin is, by its very nature, a rejection of God. If a person dies having rejected God, God will honor his or her free choice. He will not force us to love him — we must freely choose to love him and live in obedience to

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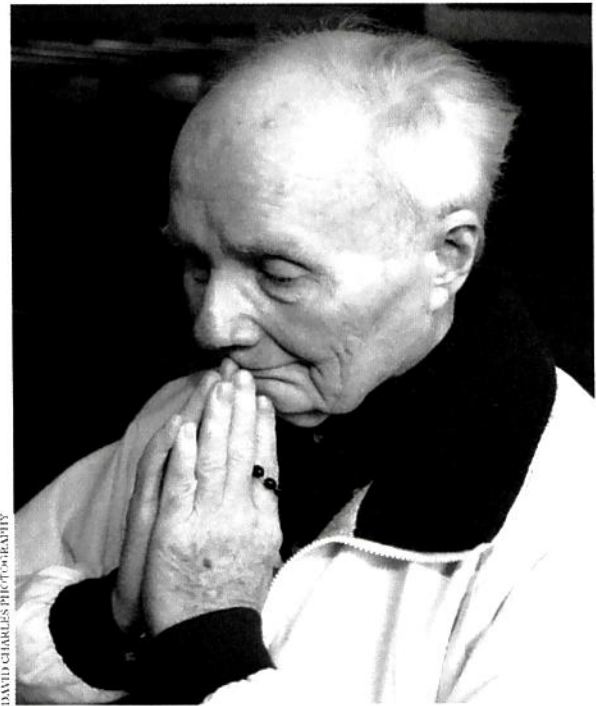
his holy will. The damage left by sin leaves us marred and incomplete; because of sin we are not wholly ourselves. In order to be united to

God in Heaven, we must be entirely ready to greet him, with our whole being, free of all stain or wrinkle. Therefore, the damage caused by sin must be atoned for and made right, and only when a person is perfectly pure of heart will he be able to see God (see Mt 5:8). Every trial, every suffering, every moment of life provides us with the opportunity to be perfected in love. If we make our lives an effort at learning sacrificial, Christ-like love, and if we stay close to the sacraments that give us the power to be truly transformed in love, we will be made perfect. We will enter Heaven and our deepest longings will be satisfied.

#### Hell: Eternal Separation from the Trinity

*"The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his Kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father" (Mt 13:41-43).*

God loves us so immeasurably and wants us to spend life everlasting with him in Heaven, but he does



DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

<sup>4</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, De beatitudinibus 6 from J.P. Migne, ed., Patrologia Graeca 44, 1265A (Paris: 1857-1866)



*The Peaceful Death of the Just, 19th century lithograph*

not force us to love him. He wants us to spend eternity with him — but the choice is ours. We have the chance to turn to Jesus while we are alive, but at the moment of death, our choice is frozen, suspended forever in time (see CCC 1021). We either die in friendship with the Lord or we die out of his grace, in persistent rejection of his love to the end. A person who dies in a state of mortal sin has made a tragic, yet free choice — and will spend eternity separated from God by his or her own choice.

Hell is a place of unimaginable pain and suffering. In the Gospels, Jesus uses a straightforward realism in describing the pain of Hell. He describes it as a place of consuming fire and eternal anguish (see Mt 15:42, 50; Mk 9:43, 48; Rv 21:8). It is the dwelling place of Satan, the fallen angels (called demons), and all those who have rebelled against God.

The greatest suffering that the souls in Hell experience is the pain of being eternally separated from God (see 2 Thes 1:9). The Church has traditionally called this punishment the “pain of loss.” While on earth, it is possible for us to numb our desire for God by acquiring worldly things and focusing on earthly pleasures. When we die, these things can no longer satisfy us. Sin will have lost its appeal and the pleasures we had thought so enticing will be seen in all their emptiness. We will be confronted with the fact that our souls were made for God — and it is God, whom through our free choices during life, we have rejected. The person in Hell, through his

or her own choice, will have lost God who is perfect peace, love, and joy — and this loss will cause everlasting torment.

#### **Jesus Christ: Our Just and Merciful Judge**

Knowing what we know about the judgment that each of us will face when we die, knowing something about the life of hatred and despair which consumes the souls in Hell, as well as the joys of Trinitarian love in Heaven, we must throw ourselves on the mercy of Jesus. It is Christ who is our Judge — and his judgment is just (see 2 Pt 2:4-7, 9). Every offense against God, every offense against our neighbor will be recalled, and an account must be given: “*Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil*” (Eccl 12:13-14). However, if we have sought his mercy and forgiveness, our sins will be cast aside. Our Lord is just, but he is also full of mercy and compassion. He forgives us our sins and offenses, if we repent. If we stray away from him, he waits for us with open arms, calling us gently back into an intimate and loving relationship. He constantly calls. He never ceases offering us his mercy. He wants to spend eternal life with us. If we wait until tomorrow to turn to him and give him our hearts, we may have waited too long. “*Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold now is the day of salvation*” (2 Cor 6:2).

(CCC 678-682, 1005-1014, 1020-1029, 1033-1041, 2548)

# *The New Heavens and the New Earth: The Real Rapture*

*Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the Heavens will be kindled and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire! But according to his promise we wait for new Heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. ~ 2 Peter 3:11-15*

**F**OR SOME CHRISTIANS IN TODAY'S CULTURE, the single most important question has to do with the "end times," when the world will experience great tribulations, according to

our Lord's prophecy (see Mt 24:3-44). Many of these Christians are caught up not only in speculation about the end times — when it will come, whether it has started, what evils of contemporary culture match the Scriptural prophecies — but also what will happen to them personally. To that end, a variety of speculations have sprung up around the concept of the "rapture," a term expressing the notion that not everyone must undergo the prophesied trials but will be exempted from them, "raptured" (taken up) from the earth to Heaven in a "secret" coming of Christ before the Second Coming. These ideas are quite new in Christianity, having arisen only in the

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last few centuries and becoming widely believed only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in English-speaking Protestant communions. Popular novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in our modern day have spread this belief even further. What does the Church teach on the subject?

**The New Heavens and the New Earth**

The Church teaches us that "God is preparing a new dwelling and a new earth in which righteousness dwells, in which happiness will fill and surpass all the desires of peace arising in the hearts of men"<sup>1</sup> (CCC 1048). From the beginning of Sacred Scripture, there is a theme of Paradise, of an Eden for which we were

created: *"And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of*

<sup>1</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* 59 § 1

life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden" (Gn 2:8-10). In this vision of loveliness and tranquility, God "walk[ed] in the garden in the cool of the day" (Gn 3:8) and spoke with Adam and Eve. This is the initial vision that God gives us, of a garden watered by a river and centered on the tree of life, in which we humans had intimate communion with God. This is what our first parents lost in their rebellion against God (see Gn 3:23), when God barred their "way to the tree of life" (Gn 3:24).

St. Paul tells us that "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9). This promise of future joy suggests that, no matter how hard we try, we cannot truly imagine the joys of Heaven. However, God in his goodness and kindness has given us ways to think about it. He promises a new creation in which the visible universe will be transformed and returned to its original state. Through the prophet Isaiah, he promised: "For behold, I create new Heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind" (Is 65:17). The prophet Ezekiel saw a vision of the temple in Jerusalem from which water flowed ever more copiously, until it became a river (see Ez 47:1-5), and God told him that "on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing" (Ez 47:12). And Zechariah prophesied: "Then the Lord your God will come, and all the holy ones with him. On that day there shall be neither cold nor frost. And there shall be continuous day (it is known to the Lord), not day and not night, for at evening time there shall be light. On that day living waters shall flow out

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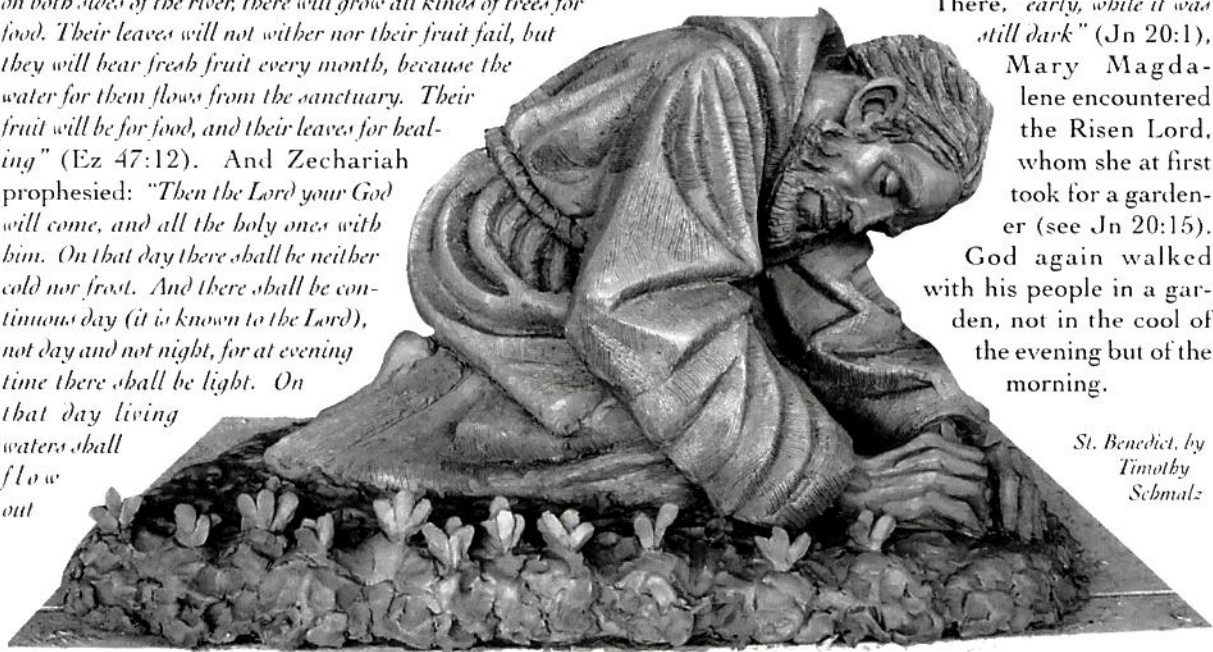
from Jerusalem... And the Lord will become king over all the earth" (Zec

14:5-9). These were the shining visions of a future life of perfection, everlasting happiness in a garden sustained by flowing water from God's own sanctuary and filled with good things, over which God reigns supreme.

The symbolic themes of water and the garden with the tree are especially evident in the Gospel of John. When Jesus encountered a woman at a well in Samaria, he told her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water... [W]hoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (Jn 4:10, 14). The "gift of God" is the Holy Spirit, as St. John tells us when Jesus proclaimed to the crowds gathered for a feast in Jerusalem: "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.' Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified" (Jn 7:37-39). Jesus himself "bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Pt 2:24), and "in the place where he was crucified there was a garden" (Jn 19:41). Jesus' tomb was in the same garden.

There, "early, while it was still dark" (Jn 20:1), Mary Magdalene encountered the Risen Lord, whom she at first took for a gardener (see Jn 20:15). God again walked with his people in a garden, not in the cool of the evening but of the morning.

St. Benedict, by  
Timothy  
Schmalz





*The ethereal Cathedral of Milan, Italy constructed from 1385 to 1485; the entire building is of pure white marble, with thousands of statues on the exterior*

*“This is the initial vision that God gives us, of a garden watered by a river and centered on the tree of life, in which we humans had intimate communion with God.”*

The hope of the new Heavens and the new earth is taught by the apostles as well. St. Paul teaches that *“the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now”* (Rom 8:19-22). All that God has made shares our destiny. St. Paul also tells us that God *“has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in Heaven and things on earth”* (Eph 1:9-10). And St. Peter reassures us that *“according to his promise we wait for new Heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells”* (2 Pt 3:13).

The culmination of these Scriptural promises is found in the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, much of which is focused on the end times and this dazzling vision of Heaven: *“Then I saw a new Heaven and a new earth; for the first Heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of Heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.’ And he*

*who sat upon the throne said, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’ ... And he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the fountain of the water of life without payment’”* (Rv 21:1-6). In this passage, we hear again the promise of a new creation, where God will be always with us, and we will be able to drink unceasingly of the water of life, the Holy Spirit, the very expression of the love between the Father and the Son.

As the vision continues, God *“showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations”* (Rv 22:1-2). The garden is now within the holy city, which is the Bride of Christ, the Church (see Rv 21:9-10). *“[T]he Lamb in the midst of the throne”* — our Lord Jesus Christ — *“will be [our] shepherd, and he will guide [us] to springs of living water”* (Rv 7:17). And to *“him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God”* (Rv 2:7) — that is, those who are glorified with God will be given the Food of Life himself, our Lord Jesus Christ. Those who have been saved will experience the unity of humanity that God had willed from the beginning of creation, and the vision of God will be *“the ever-flowing well-spring of happiness, peace, and mutual communion”* (CCC 1045). The universe itself will be renewed, *“perfectly re-established in Christ”* (CCC 1042).

<sup>1</sup> *Lumen Gentium* 48; cf. Acts 5:21; Ephesians 1:10; Colossians 1:20; 2 Peter 3:10-15



## What, Then, of the Tribulation and the Earthly "Rapture"?

Rather than focus our hopes on God's promises of glory to those who have placed their hope in him and have followed his commandments, some current theories of the end times focus on fear and a hope of escape from suffering.

We know that the end times will be violent and horrifying. Jesus described them in great detail to his apostles, when *"the Heavens and earth that now exist have been stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men"* (2 Pt 3:7). Jesus describes warfare, famines, and natural calamities. Evil will be far greater and therefore *"most men's love will grow cold"* (Mt 24:12). He prophesies that there will be a terrible persecution of the Church, with the loss of faith on the part of many believers and internal betrayals and hatreds, and the rise of false prophets and false Messiahs that will lead people astray (see Mt 24:9-11, 23-24). This will be the time of the final effort of Satan to tear apart the Kingdom of God on earth. It will truly be a battle to the death.

And Jesus' coming will be obvious, as St. Paul tells us: *"For the Lord himself will descend from Heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God"* (1 Thes 4:16). Those who will be saved will be *"a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues"* (Rv 7:9) *"who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb"* (Rv 7:14). We will not be exempt from the suffering of this time, but keeping the faith will be rewarded by God.

Many people have put together a number of verses from the book of Revelation to attempt to identify exactly when the "end times" will begin, how long they will last, and how many people will be saved. But Jesus tells us that we do not know when the end of the world will come (see Mk 13:32-35). For this reason, the Church discourages speculation on this question, because it focuses on the wrong things and seeks to know the unknowable.

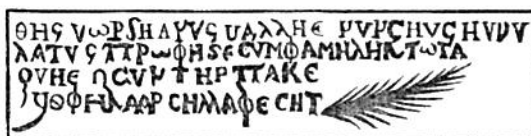
But what of those expectations of being "raptured"? These seem to be derived from a verse in St. Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, where he tells them that, following the Resurrection of the dead, those who are left alive *"shall be caught up together with [the dead in Christ] in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord"* (1 Thes 4:17). Being "caught up to meet the Lord in the air" has been labeled the "rapture" from the Latin word *rapiemur* which we translate into English as "we shall be caught up." Yet the previous verse in the same letter shows that this is no secret coming of the Lord: *"For the Lord himself will descend from Heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God"* (1 Thes 4:16). Instead of a "secret rapture," the just will meet the Lord at his Second Coming.

Believers in the rapture often pair this idea with a verse from the book of Revelation, where Jesus tells the members of one of the local churches: *"Because*

*you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell upon the earth"* (Rv 5:10). To believers in "rapture," this suggests that the righteous will be spared the sufferings of the end times — the "tribulation."

Yet there is nothing in Revelation that links protection from "the hour of trial" with a general dispensation from the suffering of the end times; the theme instead is that of receiving God's grace so as to *"hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown"* (Rv 3:11). Later in Revelation, we are given a vision of *"a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes"* (Rv 7:9), and we learn that they are those *"who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb"* (Rv 7:14). They have experienced, not avoided, the tribulation. Jesus never promised to spare us suffering, but instead prayed to his Father for protection from

loss of eternal life: *"I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one"* (Jn



He Gordianus Gallie nuncius, jugulatus pro fide, cum familiâ totâ; quiescunt in pace; Theophila ancilla fecit.

Here lies Gordianus, deputy of Gaul, who was murdered, with all his family, for the faith; they rest in peace. Theophila, his handmaid, set up this.

*A 2nd century inscription on a grave in one of the catacombs near Rome, evidencing the willingness to love one's life for the sake of the next life*

***"Jesus will not come secretly to 'rapture' a few deserving folks before he comes publicly."***

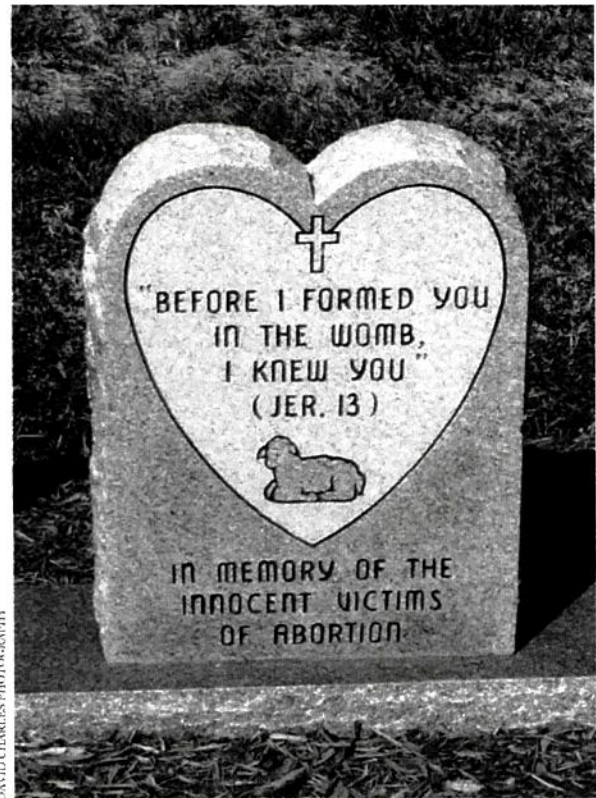
17:15). Jesus will *not* come secretly to “rapture” a few deserving folks before he comes publicly. Jesus himself tells us that “*as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man*” (Mt 24:27). Jesus will come a second time, not a third, and we will know that he has come!

Other speculation centers on a “thousand-year reign of Christ” on earth before the Last Judgment during which some of the righteous will be resurrected to reign with him (see Rv 20:4-6). This passage is difficult to interpret but does not necessarily suggest a literal period of time, since most of the numbers in the book of Revelation are symbolic, as indeed are the images of the garden, the river, and the tree of life. The Church does not offer an official interpretation of this passage, but we do know that Christ is already reigning since he began proclaiming the Kingdom of God. It is possible that the symbolic language of the book of Revelation is referring to the present age, between Jesus’ first and Second Coming, with the “*souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God ... [who] came to life, and reigned with Christ*” (Rv 20:4) being a description of the current state of the Church, with the saints in glory in Heaven reigning with him, as St. Paul assures us will happen: “[I]f we endure, we shall also reign with him” (2 Tm 2:12).

It is far more important to focus on the struggle the Church will have with Satan as the end times approach (see Rv 20:7-10) and not to assume that a “Heaven on earth” will exist before Jesus comes again to judge the world (see CCC 676). The Church specifically rejects pseudo-messianism “by which man glorifies himself in place of God and of his Messiah come in the flesh”<sup>5</sup> (CCC 675). This is the deception of the Antichrist — a claim that we can accomplish on earth what can be realized only following the Last Judgment (see CCC 676).

As we look toward the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God, we live in the here and now, striving daily to build up the Kingdom. And, when “we have spread on earth the fruits of our nature and our enterprise ... according to the command of the Lord and in his Spirit, we will find them once again, cleansed this time from the stain of sin, illuminated and transfigured, when Christ presents to his Father an eternal and universal Kingdom”<sup>4</sup> (CCC 1050). Then God will be “*all in all*” (Eph 1:23), and we will experience a *true* rapture, “caught up” in the joy of God.

(CCC 675-677, 1042-1050)



<sup>3</sup> Cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:4-12; 1 Thessalonians 5:2-5; 2 John 7; 1 John 2:18, 22

<sup>4</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* 39 § 3

# Purgatory

*But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the Lord. ~ Malachi 3:2-5*

**E**VERY HUMAN being has been created with a calling so profound and a destiny so beautiful that human words cannot even begin to describe it. Indeed, when St. Paul writes about the glories of life in Heaven, he says, "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9; see Is 64:4). The joy of Heaven is a life of such deep and perfect love that we must be transformed completely by love before we can feel "at home." In Heaven, we will be in the presence of God. We know from the Scriptures that the presence of God is so pure and so holy that "nothing unclean shall enter it" (Rv 21:27). And so, before it is possible to enter into Heaven, each person must be perfect in purity and holiness. Jesus told us as much when he said, "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48).

Later Jesus went further. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15:12). Jesus loved us to the cross, by laying down his very life for us. It is absolutely necessary that we learn to selflessly love in the same way. This is our great task, for it will not be possible for us to enter Heaven unless our love has been puri-

*"The Lord's desire to save us is so strong that it extends even past the grave."*



*The Sacred Heart of Jesus, full of endless mercy*

fied of selfishness and reaches the level of divine perfection. We experience much of this purification in our suffering while in this earthly life. Some people leave this life with the kind of love for God and neighbor that is totally selfless and pure. It is the saints that have reached perfect holiness during their life on earth who will be immediately admitted into eternal glory at the moment of death. However, many others die without grave sin and in relationship with God, though not having reached this necessary condition of perfection. Some sins, though forgiven, may still have grave consequences as yet unsatisfied. It is the person in this condition who will enter Purgatory at the moment of death. A beautiful and poetic description of the situation of those in Purgatory is found in Scripture: "But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be an affliction, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace. For though in the sight of men they were punished, their hope is full of immortality. Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself; like gold in the furnace

he tried them, and like a sacrificial burnt offering he accepted them" (Wis 3:1-6). This description tells us of the utter peace experienced by the souls in Purgatory despite their need to be, for a time, a "sacrificial burnt offering."

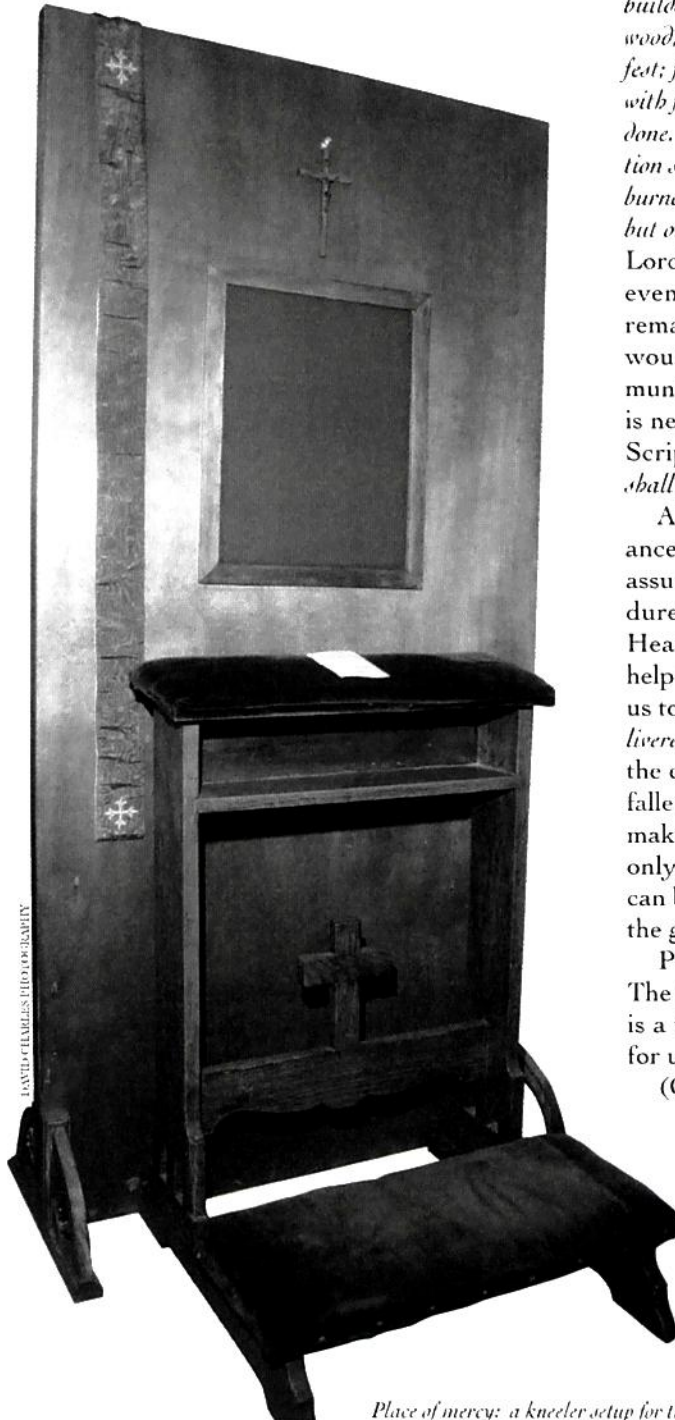
What is Purgatory? It is a temporary state of existence in which the soul is purified and brought to Christian perfection. Just as God purified the unclean lips of Isaiah with a burning coal (see Is 6:5-7), so he graciously purifies his children before bringing them to eternal glory in Heaven: "Now if any one builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw — each man's work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire" (1 Cor 3:12-15). Indeed, the Lord's desire to save us is so strong that it extends even past the grave. He is intent on purging any remaining selfishness or residual effects of sin that would prevent us from entering into the full communion of the saints in Heaven. This purity of heart is necessary for full participation in Trinitarian life. Scripture says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Mt 5:8).

All who enter Purgatory have the blessed assurance that they will spend eternity in Heaven. This assurance brings them great consolation as they endure their final purification. Both the Church in Heaven (the saints) and the Church on earth can help those suffering in Purgatory. The Bible exhorts us to "make atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin" (2 Mc 12:45). Christians from the earliest times offered prayers for those who had fallen asleep in death. As well, the saints in Heaven make intercession to God the Father for them. Not only prayer but also fasting and works of penance can be offered for the dead and help bring them into the glory of Heaven.

Purgatory is one of the Lord's greatest mercies. The fact that such a place of purification even exists is a testimony to God's deep and providential love for us.

(CCC 1030-1032, 1472)

***"Purgatory is one of the Lord's greatest mercies."***



*Place of mercy: a kneeler setup for the Sacrament of Reconciliation*

# Resurrection of the Body

*Thy dead shall live, their bodies shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!*  
~ Isaiah 26:19

**I**N THE APOSTLES' CREED, we profess: "I believe ... in the resurrection of the body." We say that we believe our physical body will be reunited with our soul in eternity.

We are well aware of the Resurrection of Jesus on Easter morn (see handout on Resurrection). But from its earliest years, the Church has taught that our mortal bodies, which grow stiff and cold in death and become corrupt in the grave or ashes in the furnace, will, like Jesus' body, be brought again to life.

Even before Jesus' coming, there was a growing understanding that, because we are both body and soul, our bodies must eventually share eternity with the soul: "God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his own eternity" (Wis 2:23). The Pharisees who were Jesus' contemporaries believed in the resurrection of the body (see Acts 23:8). Jesus often spoke of his own Resurrection (see Mt 12:39-40; Mk 8:31; Mk 9:31) and promised resurrection for us as well. "I am the resurrection and the life" (Jn 11:25), Jesus tells us, "for this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should

have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day" (Jn 6:40).

As in the Eucharist, when bread and wine by the words of Christ spoken by the priest are made into his Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity, so we who partake of the Eucharist, by the word of our Risen Savior, will some day receive back our bodies, glorified and made fit to dwell forever in Heaven: "[H]e who

***"Because we are both body and soul, our bodies must eventually share eternity with the soul."***

*eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (Jn 6:54). Nourished with Jesus' precious body and blood in*

the Holy Eucharist, on the last day we "will appear with him in glory" (Col 3:4). If we have lived and died in righteousness, we will in soul and body be resplendent, as our Risen Lord is resplendent in Heaven (see Rv 1:13-16), a foreshadowing of which the apostles saw on Mount Tabor, where they were dazzled by the splendor of Jesus' body when "he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light" (see Mt 17:2).

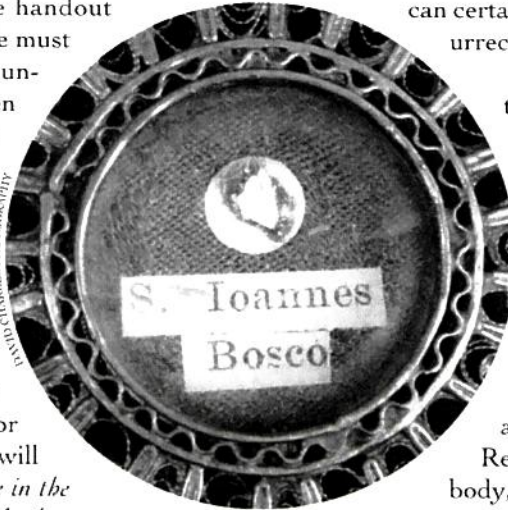
Our souls, at the moment of death, are taken into eternity at



DAVID CLINE PHOTOGRAPHY

the Particular Judgment (see handout on The Four Last Things). We must await our bodily resurrection until Jesus' Second Coming, when *"the Lord himself will descend from Heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise"* (1 Thes 4:16). Then our bodies will be glorified, no longer corruptible; Christ *"will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body"* (Phil 3:21; see also 1 Cor 15:44). Yet not only the just will be resurrected; for *"all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment"* (Jn 5:28-29). Our bodies will rise and be made incorruptible, and be reunited to our souls forever, in splendor if we have been good or to judgment and Hell if we have done evil and spurned God (see also Mt 16:27; Rom 2:6-8).

Throughout history, there have been those who question this amazing truth, asking, "How can a body so obviously mortal and so readily corruptible be raised to life again in everlasting life?" Faith in him who is "the Resurrection and the Life" is needed, and as St. Paul emphatically teaches us, faith in Jesus' Resurrection necessarily requires faith that we, too, will be raised: *"Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep"* (1 Cor 15:12-20). If Christ himself could rise from the dead, he



*A small fragment of bone of St. John Bosco, patron of youth: the Church holds in great respect the mortal remains of people of remarkable holiness*

can certainly, by his almighty power, resurrect us as well.

And just as Jesus gave the apostles a glimpse into eternity even before his Resurrection by his Transfiguration, we too gain a bodily participation in Heaven when we *"were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life"* (Rom 6:4). We already share in Jesus' glorious Resurrection as members of his body, as St. Paul tells us: *"Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?... Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit? You are not your own; ... so glorify God in your body"* (1 Cor 6:15, 19-20).

Aware of this ennobling fact, we must respect our own bodies as vessels of our souls and of the very body and blood of Christ Jesus our Risen God. We must, as well, give respect to and treat with dignity the bodies of our neighbors, for we are all part of Christ and we are all one in him.

Jesus said that *"apart from me you can do nothing"* (Jn 15:5) but *"with God nothing will be impossible"* (Lk 1:37). By her Assumption into Heaven, the Mother of God has already been glorified in body and soul (see Rv 12:1). This is indeed for us a sign of hope that we, too, can look forward

***"If Christ himself could rise from the dead, he can certainly, by his almighty power, resurrect us as well."***

to our own bodily resurrection, to enjoy forever the sight and company of God as the complete human beings he created us to be. St. Paul sums up the time and manner of our resurrection and glorification: *"Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality"* (1 Cor 15:51-55). Death has been conquered, *"swallowed up in [Christ's] victory"* (1 Cor 15:54). In a rapture of love and joy, we will join with the angels and saints in a grand *"Hovannah in the biggest!"* (Mk 11:9).

(CCC 556, 966, 988-1004)

# The Second Coming of Christ

... then will appear the sign of the Son of man in Heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of Heaven with power and great glory; and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of Heaven to the other. ~ Matthew 24:30-31

**C**HRIST WAS SENT into the world by the Father to usher in the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. He announced the coming of God's reign that had been promised by the prophets of old and before ascending into Heaven he established a visible order and structure to it: the Church. The reality of the Kingdom continues in the Church, which has been given the same authority and power of Christ. While the Church is truly the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, it is only the beginning, the seed. The powers of sin and death were conquered by Christ on Calvary, definitively, but his Lordship has not yet been recognized by all, nor has his Kingdom come in its fullness. That is why we still pray "*thy Kingdom come*" (Mt 6:10) and "*Come, Lord Jesus*" (Rv 22:20).

Christ is coming back to subject all things to himself: "*[E]very knee should bow, in Heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*" (Phil 2:10-11). His promised return will happen in the last days and will mark the end of time. Since Christ ascended into Heaven, we have been in the last days. While the Lord promised that there would be signs of his return, he also said, "*Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come*" (Mk 13:35). Rather than becoming anxious about his return, the Lord asks us to be pre-



*Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning, by Fra Angelico, 1387-1455*

pared, that is, to live the present day as if it were the day of the Lord's return.

One of the signs that Jesus prophesied would signal the last days is the appearance of "*false Christs and false prophets*" (see Mt 24:24) who will assault the Church one last time before his glorious return (see Mt 24:3-24). The Antichrist is not necessarily one individual but refers to anyone who denies that Jesus is the Christ: "*For many deceivers have gone out into the world, men who will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh; such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist*" (2 Jn v 7; see also 1 Jn 2:18-23).

The Second Coming should not make us fearful, because

Christ has already won the victory. It is true that when he comes, the Final Judgment will take place, but like his first coming his return is also motivated by love. God the Father's love for his children is fully revealed in Christ both then, now, and forever. Even when he comes again, he still "*desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*" (1 Tm 2:4). If we repent and turn back to Christ even in the "eleventh hour" before the judgment, he will save us. The expectation of his coming is a constant reminder to be vigilant and call for conversion and ongoing conversion in our daily lives.

(CCC 668-679, 2771-2772, 2816-2818)

***"His promised return will happen in the last days and will mark the end of time."***