

## **Eschatology: Theology of Death and Eternal Life\*\***

**Robin Ryan, CP**

**\*\* *Life is Changed, Not Ended: An Introduction to Christian Eschatology.*** Paulist Press, 2024.

- The First Preface for Mass for the Dead: “Indeed for your faithful, Lord, life is changed, not ended. And, when this earthly dwelling turns to dust, an eternal dwelling is made ready for them in heaven.”

### **Introductory Reflections**

- Eschatology --- *eschata*: last or ultimate things – “The area of belief that speaks of the final destiny of humankind and the world, and articulates a vision of the ultimate aim toward which creation tends” (Jeannine Hill Fletcher)

- Pope Benedict XVI: “Here too we see as a distinguishing mark of Christians the fact that they have a future: it is not that they know the details of what awaits, but they know in general terms that their life will not end in emptiness (Encyclical *Spe Salvi*)

- Jesus proclaimed the Reign of God and made it present

- The language and vision of Hope

- Scholastic Eschatology: the four Last things

- Shift in emphasis in the years leading up to Vatican II -- Eschatology became more closely connected with Theological Anthropology and Christology

- A recent shift: exploration of the hope that Christians have for the cosmos

- North American context: “a secular age” (Charles Taylor)

- Gerhard Lohfink on the skepticism about life after death – “Don’t let them get your hopes up! Today is all there is” (Bertolt Brecht, “Lucifer’s Evening Song”)

- Jürgen Moltmann: “Modern society has no time for mourning and no space, so it has no respect and no protection for mourners, either.”

- Belief in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the foundation of Christian hope for life beyond death

- Karl Rahner –Eschatology is a forward look from the experience of the grace of Christ in the present – the “hiddenness” of the last things

- **The Virtue of Hope** – Thomas Aquinas: “This is simply to say that we should hope for nothing less from God than his very Self; His goodness, by which he confers good upon creaturely things, is nothing less than his own being.” -- Hope means clinging to God as the source of absolute goodness”

- Moltmann --- “Christianity is wholly and entirely confident hope, a stretching out to what is ahead and a readiness for a fresh start”

### **Facing Death**

- The Paschal Mystery as the key to discerning the meaning of life

- Dermot Lane: “It is only when we have faced the question of death in all its ambiguity that we have fully understood who God is and have come to grips fully with who we are.”

- Karl Rahner – rehearsing our deaths throughout our lives

### **The Resurrection of the Body**

- The Risen Christ is “the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor 15:20)

- Elizabeth Johnson: “In view of the solidarity of the human race, Christ’s destiny means that our hope in Jesus does not merely clutch at a possibility but stands on an irrevocable ground of what has already transpired in him.”

- Rahner: Christians are “the most sublime of materialists”

### **The Intermediate State**

- The traditional view of death as the separation of the soul from the body – on the Last Day the soul will be reunited with its body

- Contemporary objections – the argument for resurrection in death

- Support for the traditional view - - Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI: the idea of resurrection in death dematerializes the resurrection

### **Particular Judgment**

- The coming to light of the deepest truth of a person's life
- Ratzinger: "In death, a human being emerges into the light of full reality and truth. . . . Judgment consists of the removal of the mask in death."

### **Purification In/After Death**

- Early Christian theologians wrote about the purification of the soul
- "Purgatory" referred to as a "place" in the 12<sup>th</sup> century
- Lyons II (1274), Florence (1439), Trent (1563)
- A process of one's basic choice for God permeating one's entire being
- Benedict XVI – the encounter with the Risen Christ, who is pure love, and whose love sears through us like a flame, enabling us to become totally ourselves and thus totally of God
- Preachers turned metaphorical fire into literal fire
- "Rehabilitation" (Maureen Hackett)

### **Prayer for the Dead**

- Lohfink: our prayer for the dead is meant to mitigate the consequences of the wrongs committed by our beloved dead
- Benedict XVI: prayer for the dead is the way that love reaches into the afterlife – "No one is saved alone"

### **The Life of the Blessed Dead**

- Benedict XII (1336): the souls of the blessed see the divine essence with an intuitive vision and even face to face
- Thomas Aquinas - - the Light of Glory – "In the felicity that comes from the divine vision, every human desire is fulfilled" – the active life will come to an end

- John Thiel – The blessed dead are “presently engaged in the same graceful activity of reconciliation, both among themselves and toward those in earthly life where the actuality of sin ever threatens the solidarity of the saintly community.”
- Benedict XVI: Eternal life with God is “like plunging into the ocean of infinite love, a moment in which time, the before and after, no longer exists” – Heaven is “a stranger to isolation”

### **The Possibility of Eternal Loss**

- 6<sup>th</sup> century – condemnation of universalism (*apokatastasis*) espoused by some monks who were inspired by Origen of Alexandria (3<sup>rd</sup> century)
- Official teaching of the Church that believers must acknowledge the possibility of eternal separation from God because of a sinful life – a possibility for *myself*
- Modern discussion about the relationship between God’s redemptive grace and human freedom
- Hell is viewed as a self-chosen state of alienation from God, not an external punishment inflicted by God upon the sinner
- The Church has never taught that any particular person has been or will be lost
- Heaven and hell should not be considered as equally possible outcomes
- We may hope that all will be saved
- Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Mystery of Holy Saturday
- Moltmann and Schillebeeckx
- Gregory of Nyssa (4<sup>th</sup> century) and the purifying action of God

### **Limbo**

- 2007 Statement by the International Theological Commission – There are ways other than sacramental Baptism that God can act to remove original sin

- The prayers of the liturgy simply entrust the child into God's loving care

### **Communion of Saints**

- Perpetua and Felicitas – Augustine
- “The union of the wayfarers with the brethren who sleep in the peace of Christ is in no way interrupted” (*Lumen Gentium* 49)
- Karl Rahner: “We should realize that in the course of the world's history an innumerable multitude has already been drawn into the eternity of God before us, so that we are the late-comers. And the realization of this should generate hope and consolation in us, courage and trust.”

### **The Parousia**

- “Presence”
- Zachary Hayes: “It is the final breaking through of the victorious grace that has been present continuously throughout history and in a special way since the death and resurrection of Christ.”

### **General Judgment**

- Ratzinger: “Even though that definitive truth of an individual is fixed at the moment of death, something new is contributed when the world's guilt has been suffered through to the bitter end. It is at this point that one's final place in the whole is exhaustively determined.”
- The definitive establishment of divine justice

### **For Reflection and Discussion**

*As a person of Christian faith, what do I hope for myself and for the world?*