

Comments on the Eschatological Teaching of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1020 – 1060) in the light of the Word of God in the Apocalypse

Observations

In CCC 1024 it is stated “*Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfilment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness*”. If this were true, the souls of the martyrs under the altar in Heaven would not be longing for something else. According to their petition in Rev 6,10 (“*How much longer, Holy and True Master, until you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?*”), they are longing for the final expression of God’s judgment on earth, which leads to the eschatological fulfilment of his plan – a fulfilment described in the Apocalypse as the ‘new Heaven and the new Earth’ (Rev 21-22). If the present Heaven were indeed “*the ultimate end and fulfilment of the deepest human longings*”, the martyrs would not be longing for the final judgment or waiting for the present Heaven to be transformed into the ‘new Heaven and the new Earth’. Only the ‘new Heaven and new Earth’ can truly be described as “*the ultimate end and fulfilment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness*”.¹

In CCC 1035 it is stated “*Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishment of hell, eternal fire*”. There are good reasons, however, for not confusing the place of the dead after death called ‘Hell’ (which is the usual translation for ‘Hades’) with the ‘eternal fire’ (otherwise called ‘Gehenna’ or the ‘lake of Fire’). In the Apocalypse, as in other parts of the New Testament, the ‘eternal fire’ is only mentioned in connection with the final judgment.² Before the final judgment, the souls of the blessed go to Heaven (e.g., Rev 14,13), and all the rest go to a region that is termed ‘Death and Hades’ to await the final judgment (Rev 20,13). ‘Death and Hades’ appear to correspond to the two divisions of Sheol in the Jewish tradition, and to Purgatory and Hell in Christian theology. At the final judgment, ‘Death and Hades’ will give up their dead so that they may be judged, and then ‘Death and Hades’ itself will be thrown into the ‘lake of Fire’ (Rev 20,11-15). This passage clearly distinguishes between ‘Death and Hades’ and the ‘lake of Fire’, thus confirming that ‘Death and Hades’ is only a temporary abode for the dead, which operates up until the final judgment and no longer.

¹ It is not necessary here to enter into the question of whether or not the martyrs under the altar experience the beatific vision of God (a mediaeval debate which resulted in the promulgation of *Benedictus Deus* in 1336, by Pope Benedict XII). Regardless of whether the martyrs “*see God face to face*”, their petition for vengeance in Rev 6,10 reveals beyond doubt that their happiness is still not perfect. The actual reason for this is given later in the text, when the assembly in Heaven is at last invited to celebrate over the destruction of the city called Babylon, because in this way God has answered their petition (Rev 18,20; 19,2). It is reasonable to conclude that the existence of Babylon is not only offensive to the saints and martyrs in Heaven, but is also impeding the full realization of God’s plan for mankind – the new Heaven and the new Earth – so much desired by them.

² This confusion can be traced to the Gospel of St. Luke, according to the convincing thesis of Chaim Milikowsky, in ‘Which Gehenna? Retribution and Eschatology in the Synoptic Gospels and in Early Jewish Texts’ (*New Testament Studies* 34 [1988] 238-249). In contrast to Matthew, Luke appears to use the word ‘Gehenna’ (traditionally the place of eternal punishment by fire after the final judgment) for the place of the dead immediately after death (e.g., compare Matt 10,28 and Luke 12,5). This is the first attestation of ‘Gehenna’ being used in this way, although similar usage is found in later Rabbinical writings. It is most probably the result of Hellenistic influence.

In related passages (CCC 1051, cf. 1022) it is stated “*Every man receives his eternal recompense in his immortal soul from the moment of his death in a particular judgment by Christ, the judge of the living and the dead*”, but this is by no means supported by Scripture. In the scriptural tradition the eternal destiny of each soul is not determined until the general resurrection for judgment at the end of history. Each soul will then be judged according to his deeds, and only those whose names are not recorded in Christ the Lamb’s Book of Life will suffer eternal condemnation in the ‘lake of Fire’ (Rev 20,11-15). A close examination of the text of the Apocalypse does not support the assumption that, after ascending to Heaven, Christ is continuously engaged in the process of judging souls at the moment of their death. This process is actually delayed until the final eschatological period – until after Christ has opened the seals of his scroll of Life (Rev 8 et seq) and is able to remove the names of those who ‘follow the Beast’ (Rev 3,5; 13,8; 17,8).³

From this we learn that the particular judgment that takes place after the death of each person simply determines where the soul must go to await the final judgment: Heaven, Death or Hades. Nothing is said explicitly about the kinds of punishment suffered by those waiting in Death or Hades, but of those going to Heaven it is written: “*Blessed are the dead, they that die in the Lord from now on. Yes, says the Spirit, so that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds go with them*” (Rev 14,13). Concerning those who do not go to Heaven, we can therefore postulate the following: they do not rest from their labours, they do not take their deeds with them, or both. In ‘Death and Hades’, then, there is a relative absence of rest, and no sense of achievement or satisfaction from life’s experiences. In this restless, empty, unfulfilling environment the souls who did not ‘die in the Lord’ await, perhaps rather anxiously, the eternal verdict that will be given to them at the final judgment, and not before.

Explanation

By comparing the catechetical statements quoted above with relevant passages in Scripture a specific modification can be discerned. In all the issues examined above – the temporality of the present Heaven, the intensity of retribution in the immediate post-mortem state and the characteristics of the particular and final judgments – we find that the Catechism has conflated and fused the final expectation with the present situation. The present Heaven has absorbed all the characteristics of the ‘new Heaven and the new Earth’, the immediate temporary post-mortem state (Hades) has acquired features of the state of eternal punishment following the final judgment (i.e., Gehenna, the ‘Lake of Fire’), and the particular judgment after the death of each individual has assimilated all the features of the final judgment. The reason for this tendency to confuse the ‘not yet’ with the ‘now’ is indicated in CCC 1036: the Church has always coloured the immediate present with the severity of the future and eternal judgment in order to promote repentance and awareness of personal responsibility. Out of important pastoral considerations, then, the Church has found it convenient to bring forward, into the present, an acute awareness of the joys and sorrows of the future and final judgment.

³ For a full treatment of the final Judgment in Apocalypse, please see: <http://www.newtorah.org/pdf/The%20Last%20Judgment%20in%20the%20Book%20of%20Revelation%20final.pdf> .

Implications

However, the pastoral usefulness of this anticipation of the ‘last things’ must not deceive us about the true nature of the eschatological events prophesied in Scripture. For as a result of this subtle ecclesiastical alteration of the prophecies, there is indeed a tendency to misunderstand the nature of the eschatological transformation.

For example, if one truly believes that the “*present Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfilment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness*” (CCC 1024), then one readily ignores the material aspect – the new Earth – in descriptions of the true fulfilment, the ‘new Heaven and a new Earth’. The ecclesiastical vision of the future fulfilment therefore tends to be so otherworldly and immaterial that it refuses to recognize that the eschatological transformation and renewal takes place on this planet and involves this creation.

The merging of the temporary post-mortem state (Hades) with the state of eternal punishment following the final judgment (Gehenna, or ‘the Lake of Fire’) overlooks the divine wisdom of delaying judgment until the end of the historical process (cf. Matt 13,24-30.36-43). By attributing eternal retributory punishment to the immediate post-mortem state, there is a tendency to over-emphasize the severity of divine judgment at the expense of divine mercy.⁴

Similarly, the confusion between the particular and final judgments seriously distorts our understanding of eschatological events. The belief that a final judgment takes place at the death of each individual (CCC 1022, 1051) has the effect of voiding the final judgment of content. This crucial element of the eschatological transformation loses much of its importance if it simply endorses a judgment that was given at the death of each individual. This was noted by the biblical scholar, T.F.Glasson, in his published reflections on the final Judgment: “Orthodox Christian teaching ultimately envisaged two judgments, one immediately after death and the Final Judgment. But if men know their fate after death what is the purpose of the final collective judgment, which can produce no trepidation or uncertainty since everything is already fixed? No satisfactory answer has been given”.⁵

Negative Consequences on the Exegesis of The Apocalypse

The ecclesiastical modifications examined above reveal a tendency to confuse elements of the future and final eschatological transformation with the present state of the after-life, which in turn fosters the belief that the greater part of the final transformation has already been ‘realized’ with the first advent of Christ. This tendency then acts as a powerful pre-understanding (*Vorverstandnis*) in the exegesis of the eschatological parts of the New Testament, in particular the text of The Apocalypse.

⁴ This has always been the objection of those who have proposed theories of universal restoration (universalism), or apocatastasis. An appreciation of the true process of judgment, as described in the Apocalypse, would go a long way to resolve their objections to the Church doctrine of Hell and allay their concerns about the role of divine mercy in this process.

⁵ T. Francis Glasson, “Last Judgment—in Rev 20 and related writings” in *New Testament Studies* Vol 28 (1982), 537-8. The author raises the same issue on pages 531-2 of his work, and for a discussion he refers the reader to his book *His Appearing and His Kingdom: The Christian Hope in the light of Its History* (London, 1953), chs. 7-10.

Under the influence of this ‘realized’ eschatology, it is no coincidence that the Preterist interpretation⁶ of the Apocalypse has become so widespread, despite its many faults.⁷ According to this interpretation, the text is understood more or less completely as a description of the persecuted Church in the Roman period (centered either in Jerusalem or in Rome⁸). The chapters dealing with the eschatological judgments of God are either reinterpreted, as described above, to conform to the view that the final transformation has already taken place, or are seen as a relatively insignificant, and perhaps even mistaken, appendix to the author’s main concern, which is asserted to be his anticipation of the triumph of the Christian Church over the Roman Empire.⁹ The most extreme examples of this approach leave absolutely no room in the Apocalypse for a future fulfilment.¹⁰

It is often claimed that the Catholic Church does not have a fixed doctrine regarding the interpretation of the Apocalypse, but a quick glance at the references to the ‘Great Tribulation’ (cf. Rev 7,14) in the Catechism show a definite bias in favour of the inadequate Preterist interpretation:

1. In CCC 2642, the ‘Great Tribulation’ of Rev 7,14 is referred to as a past event, in accordance with the Preterist interpretation: “*The Revelation of ‘what must soon take place’, the Apocalypse, is borne along by the songs of the heavenly liturgy but also by the intercession of the ‘witnesses’ (martyrs). The prophets and the saints, all those who were slain on earth for their witness to Jesus, the vast throng of those who, having come through the great tribulation, have gone before us into the Kingdom, all sing the praise and glory of him who sits on the throne, and of the Lamb.*”
2. In CCC 2113, the killing of the martyrs at the hand of the Beast, during the Great tribulation, is again referred to as a past event, as in the Preterist interpretation: “*Many martyrs died for not adoring ‘the Beast’, refusing even to simulate such worship*”.
3. Finally, in CCC 675, there is a description of the Church’s ‘final trial’ as a future event that perfectly reflects the ‘Great Tribulation’ unleashed upon the faithful

⁶ Also called the Contemporary-Historical interpretation by some scholars.

⁷ The main arguments against it are: 1) the delayed reception and futuristic interpretation of the text in the early Church does not support the underlying assumption of the Preterist view, which is that its message was addressed primarily to the Church of this time. 2) The history of the early Church does not conform to many important aspects of St. John’s prophecy. For the presentation of these arguments see, for example: <http://www.newtorah.org/pdf/GreatMistake.pdf>.

⁸ See G.K.Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999, 42-46 for a fuller description of the two versions of the Preterist approach and their weaknesses.

⁹ E.g., Mitchell G. Reddish, “John, like other apocalyptic thinkers, was wrong in tying the events of his day so closely to the end of the world” *Revelation*, Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Inc., 2001, 32-33; M. Eugene Boring, “Just as John accepted a flat earth with corners as the spatial framework within which he expressed his message (cf. 7:1), so he accepted a world shortly to come to an end as its temporal framework. As he was wrong in the one case, so he was wrong in the other.” *Revelation: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Louisville, Ky: John Knox Press, 1989, 73.

¹⁰ See, for example, “Quand les prophéties de l’Apocalypse s’accompliront-elles?” by Fr. Ariel Álvarez Valdés in *La Terre Sainte* (magazine of the Custody of the Holy Land) Sept-Oct 2003, no. 567, 251-56). Fr. Valdés concludes «Jean, préoccupé, en tant que chrétien, par la situation présente de ses frères, a voulu leur annoncer un joyeux message, une espérance pour eux tous : le christianisme sortira triomphant face à l’opposition des juifs et à la persécution des Romains, les deux grands drames de cette époque-là. Donc sont déjà accomplies toutes les prophéties de l’Apocalypse. (de même que sont déjà accomplies les prophéties d’Isaïe et de Jérémie ; de même que sont déjà accomplies les prophéties de Jésus sur la destruction du Temple)».

during the reign of the Beast described in the Apocalypse: “*Before Christ’s second coming the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers. The persecution that accompanies her pilgrimage on earth will unveil the ‘mystery of iniquity’ 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 religious deception is that of the Antichrist, a pseudo-messianism by which man glorifies himself in place of God and of his Messiah come in the flesh*”. Incomprehensibly, though, the only biblical references given are to Lk 18:8, and Mt 24:12, and there is not a single reference to the relevant passages of the Apocalypse (cf. Rev 7,14; 13,5-7; 15,2-4).

With these affirmations and omissions in the Magisterial teaching of the Catechism, it appears that the Church is officially recommending the Preterist interpretation of the Apocalypse as the correct one.¹¹ This is regrettable not only because the Preterist interpretation falls far short of explaining the text adequately, but also because, by backing this interpretation, the Magisterium is effectively saying that the Apocalypse refers primarily to the past and not to the eschatological future.¹² The important eschatological teaching of this text is therefore neglected, with great detriment to the accuracy and reliability of the Church’s eschatological doctrine.

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¹¹ This conclusion is further supported by Pope Benedict XVI in his book *Gesù di Nazaret* (Milan: Libri Oro Rizzoli, 2008, 197-198), where he presents the Preterist interpretation of the reign of the Beast (Rev 13). Of note, though, is the author’s perceptive insistence on the relevance of this description for the present day: “Anche se l’impero romano e le sue ideologie non esistono più – quanto è ancora attuale tutto ciò!” (op. cit. 198). One wonders what it will take for the Church leaders to finally discard the Preterist interpretation and come round to see these chapters as a prophecy for the imminent future of the world, and therefore very relevant indeed for understanding the present times.

¹² Cf. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1985, 47: “The goal and high point of the composition of the whole book, as of the individual ‘little apocalypses’, is the final judgment and the eschatological salvation”. So prominent is this theme of eschatological salvation and judgment, that Schüssler Fiorenza is able to present a compelling case for eschatology, and not history, as the proper horizon for the understanding of Revelation. She demonstrates how the whole composition of the text is organized by three main themes: the Christian community as the already established kingdom of God and Christ in heaven and on earth, the imminent expectation of the eschatological fulfilment of this kingdom from the point of view of being only a short time before (cf. Rev 6,9-11); and the ultimate fulfilment of the kingdom of God and Christ through their judgment on this world (*Justice and Judgment*, 46-56). In her words: “This means that in Rev. ‘history’ is completely subordinated to eschatology and receives its significance from the future” (op. cit. 46).