

“What Are We Created For? Where Are We Going?”

An Introduction to “Eschatology”

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Saint Irenaeus: “The glory of God is man fully alive. Man’s full life is the vision of God”.

This time last year I was talking about Creation, leading on to the Autumn Day when the subject was Creation and Evolution. The reason why I wanted to talk about that was because there was a lot of publicity last year for the 150th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin, and I felt that it was important to present the Church’s teaching on the subject. I hope that I managed to get across something of the extra spiritual dimension that is so important, as well as the purely materialistic, scientific doctrine. The discoveries we make about the age and extent of the cosmos, for example, invite us both to admire the greatness of the Creator, and also to thank God for giving us the ability to understand His creation.

But I was very much aware that what I said was not complete. In fact it is only half the story. I think I told you about the film character who said “If it be a natural thing, where do ‘e come from? Where do ‘e go?” We’ve done the “Where do ‘e come from?” bit, but we haven’t dealt with the “Where do ‘e go?” yet, and that’s a serious omission. The beginnings only make any sense in terms of what we have been created for. We have been made for a purpose, in this world and more importantly beyond it. The area of theology that studies this is “Eschatology”, and if you thought that creation and everything coming into being was exciting, then you ain’t seen nothin’ yet.

What Is Our Destiny?

Experience, if nothing else, teaches us that there is little if anything in this material universe that is infinite. Cars get old and end up on the scrap heap; machinery ceases to function and is too expensive to repair; electric light bulbs only last for so long. That is the observable reality that is recorded by science: everything comes to an end. There are very few people alive today who were alive a hundred years ago, and I have not heard of anyone alive today who is aged 150. By the laws of probability then, we can say that it is highly unlikely that in a hundred years-time anyone sitting in this room today will still be alive. It is a fact that we have to accept.

And it is not only individual human beings and other living creatures that will come to an end. Scientists tell us that, even if the earth manages to escape all the comets/ asteroids/black holes that are floating around in the universe that are quite capable of wreaking destruction on the earth, to say nothing of the damage that we can cause to life forms and the planet itself through our carelessness or our greed or our paranoia, then in about a billion years-time the sun itself, upon which we depend for our continued existence, will change and expand and get hotter, so that the earth will be consumed in fire and the elements will melt in the heat. So the earth itself is finite.

Even if human beings manage to escape from the earth, eventually there will come a time when there is nowhere left to run: the idea of an eternal universe is not widely held in scientific circles. It was in the 19th Century that a chap called Helmholtz said that according to the Second Law of Thermodynamics the universe is doomed. Put very simply, that Law says that all the energy of whatever kind in a closed system ultimately reduces to heat. The universe is a closed system and so it is believed that eventually, one day, all the energy in the universe will be used up. When this occurs the so-called “Heat-Death” will have been reached where the cosmos and all creatures living in it will die. If that were not enough, there is even a theory that says that the universe will one day stop expanding and start collapsing under the force of gravity, so that there will be a “Big Crunch” – the opposite of the “Big Bang”. So one way or another the whole of the universe is going to come to an end.

Like the natural sciences, the Church teaches that the life on earth of each one of us will one day have an end, and that the earth will likewise cease to exist one day, and even that the universe as we know it, even those parts of it that we are as yet hardly aware of, will die. The difference is that whereas science seems to see this as the great, unavoidable defeat, we see it as the final consummation of what it has all been created for. It is an event that is in God’s hands. Just as the beginning of the universe depended on a divine choice, so also the final end as we know it is a fruit of God’s free decision.

For the Christian, the mystery of the end of the world is intimately linked with the mystery of its beginnings, because it is in that end that all creation reaches its fulfilment. It is a constant theme of the OT that God created the universe, including man, and that He can destroy it if He wishes or even if He ceases to keep it in mind for a moment. (You take back your spirit they die, returning to the dust from which they came – Psalm 103). Furthermore, He created man for a purpose, and that purpose is to share His Own blessedness and glory. St. John tells us:

My dear people, we are already the children of God but what we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed; all we know is, that when it is revealed we shall be like him because we shall see him as he really is. (1 John 3:2)

This is pretty enigmatic, but a clue is to be found in what we already are – God’s children. The future is in some way contained in, and is a development of, the present. A much more exciting way of phrasing this is to say that eschatology examines the “blessedness” or “beatitude” God has in store for us, which is nothing less than a share in His own eternal life and happiness; here we are concerned with the way in which God brings us to blessedness. As the Catechism puts it:

CCC 1719

The Beatitudes reveal the goal of human existence, the ultimate end of human acts: God calls us to His own beatitude. This vocation is addressed to each individual personally, but also to the Church as a whole, the new people made up of those who have accepted the promise and live from it in faith.

And it goes on:

CCC 1721

God put us in this world to know, to love, and to serve Him, and so to come to paradise. Beatitude makes us 'partakers of the divine nature' and of eternal life. With beatitude, man enters into the glory of Christ and into the joy of the Trinitarian life.

The idea of God's "glory" has a long biblical history. When the Hebrew word kabod is used of God in the Old Testament it normally means God's power, majesty and magnificence. It is almost something tangible. For example, Ezekiel has a vision in which he sees the glory of the Lord departing from the Temple and disappearing into the East (Ezekiel 11:23). In the Old Testament God does not share his kabod with human beings. The word was rendered as doxa in the Greek translation of the Hebrew bible (the Septuagint).

In the New Testament doxa has several shades of meaning – "renown", "power", "honour", and "divine revelation" – but our usual translation of it is "glory": To him belong glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. (I Peter 4:11).

The New Testament states that the faithful will behold the doxa of God (see I Corinthians 13:12), but, unlike the Old Testament, it also promises that the faithful are to be led, through their sharing with Christ in suffering, to a share in his doxa (for example, see Matthew 13:43 – Then the virtuous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father; or Romans 5:2 – Since it is by faith and through Jesus that we have entered this state of grace in which we can boast about looking forward to God's glory. Similarly you could look at Romans 8:17; Philippians 3:21; Colossians 1:27; 3:4; II Thessalonians 2:14). Aionios doxa (eternal glory) is the aim which they are called to achieve in Christ and the goal to which he is leading them, as members of his body (see II Corinthians 4:17; I Thessalonians 2:12; II Timothy 2:10; I Peter 5:4,10). "Glory", then, is the end to which we are being summoned, even though we are wounded by sin (see CCC1949).

We come to this glory through death and judgement. That is where "Eschatology" comes in.

In the handbooks for use in seminaries the term "Eschatology" came to replace the traditional scholastic term De Novissimis ("The Last Things"), but in essence it means the same thing. According to the old Penny Catechism (q.332), there are four last things that are ever to be remembered and they are: Death, Judgement, Hell and Heaven.[1] The problem is that out of these four "Last Things" we have no experience of three of them, and only second-hand experience of death. So what we are studying is largely a matter of faith.

These subjects are pretty heavy stuff, especially for a Friday night when we have been travelling. So rather than have me talk for hours about death, judgement, hell and heaven I want you to do the work! Divide into groups and discuss the following topics:

Death:

1. What is "death" in a theological sense?
2. What did Karl Rahner mean when he said, "Christianity is the religion which regards the death of a certain man as the most fundamental event of the history of salvation and of world history"?
3. Do you think we would have had to experience death if we had not sinned?

Judgement:

1. What do we mean by "Particular Judgement"?
2. What do we mean by "The General Judgement"?
3. Do you talk much about Judgement in your catechesis?

[1] This is derived ultimately from the Catechism of the Council of Trent, which refers to Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 7:40 (in the Vulgate, which is 7:36 in the JB and the RSV): In everything you do, remember your end, and you will never sin. Hell:

1. Do you believe that there is a hell?
2. If so, how do you believe that a good, loving, merciful God can condemn anyone to it?
3. What do you teach children about hell?

Purgatory:

1. What is Purgatory?
2. What is it for?

Temporal punishment due to sin which has been forgiven during the sinner's lifetime but for which the sinner has not made adequate satisfaction. This is the reason for purgatory that is found in the Conciliar documents.

Removal of the guilt of venial sin. This is not a reason found in Conciliar documents, but it is an anciently-held view.

Removal of concupiscence. Again, this is not found in Conciliar documents, but it is close to what some of the Fathers refer to as "evil dispositions" that must be destroyed by "purifying fire". Some modern theologians have stressed its importance.

- How long does it last?

Because the dead are outside time as we understand it we cannot answer this question, and speculation about the length of time souls might spend in purgatory is bad theology.

- What sort of punishments go on there?

There appear to be two sorts of punishment:

Temporary deprivation of the beatific vision.

Some positive punishment (which theologians in the Western Church for long widely believed was imposed by real fire, although Aquinas saw it as "a binding and hampering of the soul"), meant to repair the disorder caused by the partial withdrawal from God that comes from venial sin. This is often not mentioned much now because many theologians say that, for the dead, the pain of being deprived of the beatific vision is in itself punishment enough.

- Does it have anything going for it?

Yes, there are consolations in purgatory because the souls there are confirmed in grace; merit and demerit are no longer possible for them. They are certain of salvation.

- Finally, can we do anything to help?

Yes. The Church has stressed the importance of works of piety (prayer, indulgences, alms, fasting and sacrifices) for helping souls in purgatory. The theological basis for this belief is the doctrine of the communion of saints – "we are all in this together!"

What about Limbo?

I heard that the Pope had done away with that. Does that mean that Purgatory doesn't exist either. Discuss!

CCC 1030 All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.

CCC 1031 The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned. The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence and Trent. The tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire:

"As for certain lesser faults, we must believe that, before the Final Judgement, there is a purifying fire. He who is truth says that whoever utters blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will be pardoned neither in this age nor in the age to come. From this sentence we understand that certain offences can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come."

Limbo is different. The term comes from the medieval Latin phrase *in limbo*. *Limbus* originally meant a "hem" or "border" or "anything joined on". The concept of Limbo does not appear in Scripture, or in the writings of the Fathers, or in the Catechism. The existence of Limbo is not an article of faith.

There are two meanings of "Limbo". Firstly there is the "Limbo of the Fathers", or the "Limbo of the Patriarchs" (the *limbus patrum*). What this means is the temporary state of those who died in the friendship of God, but who could not enter Heaven until Jesus died on the Cross. This is where Jesus went on Holy Saturday and "harrowed Hell", as we mentioned earlier. But what people normally think of by "limbo" is what is called in scholastic theology the *limbus infantium* (the "children's limbo"): in other words, the state and place of those souls who while on earth were not baptised and never attained the use of reason. It was believed in the Church from the 5th Century that they were eternally excluded from the beatific vision solely because of original sin.

Actually, that idea is better than the original. St. Augustine taught that unbaptised infants were consigned to hell – namely, that they suffered not only the loss of the beatific vision but also the pain of sense, in other words the agony of hell-fire (though mitigated). The scholastics did not go along with this entirely. St. Anselm agreed that such infants were excluded from the beatific vision, but he and his followers postulated for them the existence of a place and final state of their own, i.e. limbo. In the 18th Century the rigorous Italian Jansenists (who embraced a strict Augustinianism) proclaimed at the Synod of Pistoia in 1786 that limbo as taught by the scholastics was a Pelagian fable and that the teaching that infants dying without baptism were condemned to hell-fire was revealed doctrine. However, in the Papal bull *Auctorem fidei* (1794) Pope Pius VI declared this proposition to be "false, rash, in Catholic teaching faculties harmful" (DS 2626). This is the only official document that contains the word "limbo". It did not define the existence of limbo, and in fact it tolerated the Jansenists' denial that it exists; it was only their manner of denial that was censured. However, after it Augustine's rigid doctrine was no longer taught.

In modern times the notion of limbo thankfully seems to have quietly dropped away. In the first half of the 20th Century some theologians questioned whether unbaptised babies really could be excluded from the beatific vision, bearing in mind God's universal salvific will and also the unity of the human race which as such was called to the supernatural life and redeemed by Christ. In general they proposed the possibility of a special kind of baptism of desire. This idea was discouraged by the Holy Office in 1958, in an admonition regarding the desirability of prompt baptism for infants. However, in *Lumen Gentium*, 14-16, Vatican II stressed that the Church is necessary for salvation but that a wide range of people not fully incorporated in the Church were related to the People of God

in various ways. In the SCDF document *Quaestio de abortu* (1974) loss of the beatific vision by aborted children does not appear as one of the arguments against abortion, and in 1995 Pope John Paul II, in *Evangelium Vitae*, 99, says to women who have had an abortion, “You will be able to ask forgiveness from your child who is now in the Lord”. That source of all wisdom, the Catechism, certainly upholds the necessity of Baptism:

CCC 1257 The Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation. He also commands his disciples to proclaim the Gospel to all nations and to baptize them. Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament. The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude; this is why she takes care not to neglect the mission she has received from the Lord to see that all who can be baptized are “reborn of water and the Spirit.” God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments.

But when it comes to children who have died without baptism it simply says:

CCC1261 “... the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed, the great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved, and Jesus’ tenderness towards children which caused him to say: ‘Let the children come to me, do not hinder them’, allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism ...”

The most recent document on this subject came three years ago (22nd April, 2007) in a document from the International Theological Commission called “The Hope of Salvation for Infants who die without being Baptised”. It was originally commissioned by Pope John Paul II, but he died before they finished their deliberations. After tracing the history of the various ideas about the subject, the commissioners ended:

Our conclusion is that the many factors that we have considered above give serious theological and liturgical grounds for hope that unbaptized infants who die will be saved and enjoy the beatific vision. We emphasize that these are reasons for prayerful hope, rather than grounds for sure knowledge. There is much that simply has not been revealed to us. We live by faith and hope in the God of mercy and love who has been revealed to us in Christ, and the Spirit moves us to pray in constant thankfulness and joy.

What has been revealed to us is that the ordinary way of salvation is by the sacrament of baptism. None of the above considerations should be taken as qualifying the necessity of baptism or justifying delay in administering the sacrament. Rather, as we want to reaffirm in conclusion, they provide strong grounds for hope that God will save infants when we have not been able to do for them what we would have wished to do, namely, to baptize them into the faith and life of the Church.

It does not seem to me to be a particularly revolutionary statement, but of course the media picked it up and there were headlines saying “The Pope abolishes Limbo”, as though the Pope had had an astonishing change of heart and wiped out a central plank of Christian doctrine. In fact, the document explicitly states that “This theory [of Limbo], elaborated by theologians beginning in the Middle Ages, never entered into the dogmatic definitions of the Magisterium, even if that same Magisterium did at times mention the theory in its ordinary teaching up until the Second Vatican Council. It remains therefore a possible theological hypothesis” (second preliminary paragraph); and in paragraph 41 it repeats that the theory of Limbo “remains a possible theological opinion”.

Heaven:

1. What do you imagine heaven to be? What do you say about heaven to the child whose idea of complete joy is eating ice cream, kicking a football around and reading comics?
2. "Will I meet my pet goldfish in heaven?"
3. Who is in heaven now?

CCC 1023 Those who die in God's grace and friendship and are perfectly purified live for ever with Christ. They are like God for ever, for they "see him as he is," face to face:

By virtue of our apostolic authority, we define the following: According to the general disposition of God, the souls of all the saints... and other faithful who died after receiving Christ's holy Baptism (provided they were not in need of purification when they died,... or, if they then did need or will need some purification, when they have been purified after death,...) already before they take up their bodies again and before the general judgement — and this since the Ascension of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ into heaven — have been, are and will be in heaven, in the heavenly Kingdom and celestial paradise with Christ, joined to the company of the holy angels. Since the Passion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ, these souls have seen and do see the divine essence with an intuitive vision, and even face to face, without the mediation of any creature.

CCC 1024 This perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity — this communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, the angels and all the blessed — is called "heaven." Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfilment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness.

CCC 1025 To live in heaven is "to be with Christ." The elect live "in Christ," but they retain, or rather find, their true identity, their own name.

For life is to be with Christ; where Christ is, there is life, there is the kingdom.

CCC 1026 By his death and Resurrection, Jesus Christ has "opened" heaven to us. The life of the blessed consists in the full and perfect possession of the fruits of the redemption accomplished by Christ. He makes partners in his heavenly glorification those who have believed in him and remained faithful to his will. Heaven is the blessed community of all who are perfectly incorporated into Christ.

CCC 1027 This mystery of blessed communion with God and all who are in Christ is beyond all understanding and description. Scripture speaks of it in images: life, light, peace, wedding feast, wine of the kingdom, the Father's house, the heavenly Jerusalem, paradise: "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him."

CCC 1028 Because of his transcendence, God cannot be seen as he is, unless he himself opens up his mystery to man's immediate contemplation and gives him the capacity for it. The Church calls this contemplation of God in his heavenly glory "the beatific vision":

How great will your glory and happiness be, to be allowed to see God, to be honoured with sharing the joy of salvation and eternal light with Christ your Lord and God,... to delight in the joy of immortality in the Kingdom of heaven with the righteous and God's friends.

CCC 1029 In the glory of heaven the blessed continue joyfully to fulfil God's will in relation to other men and to all creation. Already they reign with Christ; with him "they shall reign forever and ever."

CCC 1024 heaven is the ultimate end and fulfilment of the deepest human longings;

- CCC 1025** though they live 'in Christ' they retain, or rather find, their true identity;
- CCC 1026** heaven is the blessed community of all perfectly incorporated into Christ;
- CCC 1027** it is beyond all understanding and description;
- CCC 1028** God gives the blessed the capacity to see Him as He is (the 'beatific vision');
- CCC 1029** they reign with Christ.