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LAST THINGS

INTRODUCTION

All religions, from the most primitive to the most advanced, have beliefs about the “endtime.” This section in theology is called “eschatology.” The term comes from the Greek *eschatos* which means “last.” Indeed, from the very earliest Christian creeds convictions about the last things have been confessed. The Apostles’ Creed declares: “From thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead” and “I believe in . . . the life everlasting.” The Council of Toledo XI (A.D. 675) states: “There sitting at the right hand of the Father, He [Christ] awaits the end of time to be the judge of all the living and the dead.”¹

DEFINITION OF LAST THINGS

One Roman Catholic authority defines the doctrine of the last things as “the part of theology which treats of the final things: death, judgment, heaven and hell. More specifically this is concerned with a study of the Resurrection of Christ and His teaching to the disciples concerning His second coming (the *parousia*).”² A post-Vatican theologian observes that “the word *eschatology* means a doctrine about the last events and final circumstances toward which the history of mankind and the life of each individual are directed.” Christian eschatology can be distinguished “by its transcendental character from that secular faith in progress which in modern times has become a dominant theme of the European outlook on history.”³

1 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma* , para. 287, p. 112.

2 Broderick, *Catholic Concise Encyclopedia*, p. 148.

3 Michael Schmaus, *Dogma 6: Justification and the Last Things* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1977), pp. 149–50.

Theologians distinguish between “individual” eschatology and “cosmic” or general eschatology. In the former they treat the end of every individual in the world, and in the latter they consider “the last things” as they apply to humanity and the world in general. We will discuss individual eschatology first, dealing with experiences that lie in the future for us such as death, the possibility of an intermediate state, heaven, and hell. Then we will move to cosmic eschatology, which impacts the future of humanity and the entire creation. We shall see that Catholics and evangelicals share common beliefs about the future.

INDIVIDUAL ESCHATOLOGY

In considering individual eschatology, Roman Catholics include heaven, hell, and purgatory. Of course, preparatory to this is belief about the nature of death.

THE REALITY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF DEATH

Catholic theology teaches that, “in the present order of salvation, death is a punishment for sin (*De fide*). The Council of Trent teaches in the Decree on Original Sin that Adam became subject to sin by the transgression of the Divine commandment, that God had previously threatened him with death, and that he transmitted death to the whole of mankind.”⁴ Consequently, “All human beings subject to original sin are subject to the law of death (*De fide*).”⁵ The writer of Hebrews declares that “it is appointed that human beings die once, and after this the judgment” (Heb. 9:27). While death is indeed a reality, “our Christian faith teaches that bodily death . . . will be overcome by the all-powerful mercy of the Saviour, when man will be restored to the salvation lost thru his own fault.”⁶

The most important aspect of death is that with its arrival all possibility of conversion ends. Origen and a few of the early church fathers (notably Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa) held what was known as the *Apocatastasis* doctrine. This was the belief that all free moral creatures—angels, humans, and devils—will ultimately be converted. The modern form of this teaching is “universalism.” Contemporary theology is much enamored of this unfortunate notion, and it has affected both modern Roman Catholic and Protestant thought. Although the *Apocatastasis* doctrine was declared heretical by the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 543), once again we find the ancient church setting standards for orthodoxy which some in the modern church ignore.⁷

THE PARTICULAR JUDGMENT

⁴ Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 473.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 474.

⁶ Neuner and Dupuis, *Christian Faith*, p. 774.

⁷ Cross, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, pp. 69–70.

Roman Catholicism teaches that “immediately after death the particular judgment takes place, in which, by a Divine Sentence of Judgment, the eternal fate of the deceased person is decided.”⁸ This particular judgment is preparatory to the general judgment which all will experience at the end of the world. Catholicism rejects the modern “soul-sleep” theory which holds that souls, after their separation from their bodies, are in an unconscious state until re-unified with their bodies. Among Scriptural passages that refute the notion of soul-sleep is the story of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19–31). Upon death the former is immediately exposed to bliss whereas the latter is in torment. Also, as Jesus was about to die on the cross he told the penitent thief, “I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).⁹ Paul said he would “rather leave the body and go home to the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8), and the writer of Hebrews declared, “it is appointed that human beings die once and after this the judgment” (Heb. 9:27).

HEAVEN

The doctrine of heaven has great importance for the believing Christian. Heaven’s very name “takes its meaning from the end to which it is directed, and grace is only the means required to reach what is unattainable by any created being without elevation to the family of God.”¹⁰ Concerning the location and nature of heaven, Roman Catholicism teaches that “heaven is a place and condition of perfect supernatural bliss, which consists in the immediate vision of God and the perfect love of God associated with it.”¹¹ Support for the doctrine of heaven is provided by Catholic scholars from both Scripture and tradition.

The doctrine of heaven (as well as the future state in general) in the Old Testament is rudimentary in nature; it remained for the New Testament to fill out the details of our heavenly home. David mentioned the future state in Psalm 16 when he said, “You [God] will not abandon my soul to the nether world, nor will you suffer your faithful one to undergo corruption. You will show me the path of life, abounding joy in your presence, the delights at your right hand forever” (Ps. 16:10–11). Even before this Job declared, “I know that my Vindicator lives, and that he will at last stand forth upon the dust . . . and from [in] my flesh I shall see God” (Job 19:25–26). The Book of Daniel later affirmed that “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake; some shall live forever, others shall be an everlasting horror and disgrace” (12:2).

Heaven occupied a prominent place in Jesus’ teaching. Heaven is depicted as a wedding feast (Luke 14:15–24). He also said, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. . . . And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be” (John 14:2–3). In his famous Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, “Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God” (Matt. 5:8). The apostle John, commenting on the “Beatific Vision” (i.e., our vision of

⁸ Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, pp. 475–76.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Hardon, *Catholic Catechism*, p. 260.

¹¹ Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 476.

God in heaven) said, “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). Commenting on the imperfect nature of our present understanding Paul said, “At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12).

Support for the doctrine of heaven is also found in tradition. The last phrase in the Apostles’ Creed addresses the early church’s belief in the future bliss of the redeemed: “I believe in . . . the life everlasting.” The early Fathers and the later Schoolmen (especially Augustine and Aquinas) addressed the nature of the future heavenly bliss. In the *Constitution of Benedict XII* we find an authoritative statement on heaven: “We define that, since the passion and death of the Lord Jesus Christ, they (the souls in heaven) have seen and do see the divine essence with an intuitive and even face-to-face vision, without interposition of any creature in the function of the object seen.”¹²

As to the duration of heaven Catholic dogma proclaims that “the bliss of Heaven lasts for all eternity (*De fide*).”¹³ Augustine, on the concept of perfect bliss, also declared: “How can one speak of true bliss, when confidence in its eternal duration is lacking?”¹⁴ There will also be a difference in reward: “The degree of perfection of the beatific vision granted to the just is proportioned to each one’s merits (*De fide*).”¹⁵ Every redeemed person will receive blessings in heaven commensurate to the degree to which each used their opportunities and gifts while on earth. The Fathers are fond of appealing to the words of Jesus concerning the many mansions in the Father’s house (John 14:2). Tertullian remarked: “Why are there many mansions in the Father’s house if not on account of the difference of the merits?”¹⁶

HELL

The topic of hell has caused great consternation among unbelievers and believers alike. One Catholic scholar noted that “There are few doctrines of Christianity that cause more scandal to those who do not share the Christian faith than the mystery of hell.”¹⁷ Relating to the latter group, one Catholic authority comments that, “among the faithful, belief in eternal punishment places a heavy burden on their minds, since it seems to run so counter to all that revelation tells us about the goodness and mercy of God.”¹⁸ The fact remains that our Lord spoke to the reality of hell more than most other theological truths (cf. Matt. 10:28 ; 13:40 ; 25:41 ; Mark 9:43).

12 Benedict XII, Constitution *Benedictus Deus: Denzinger 693 (1304–6)*; quoted in Hardon, *Catholic Catechism* , pp. 261–62.

13 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 478.

14 Ibid., p. 479; see Augustine, *City of God* XII 13, 1; cf. X 30 and XI 13.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Hardon, *Catholic Catechism*, p. 268.

18 Ibid.

The Roman Catholic Church has faithfully witnessed to the truthfulness of this stern but essential doctrine in its theological formulations. The official Roman Catholic position on hell is that “The souls of those who die in the condition of personal grievous sin enter Hell (*De fide*). Hell is a place or state of eternal punishment inhabited by those rejected by God.”¹⁹ The unregenerate, upon physical death, go directly to hell. “Moreover we define that according to the general disposition of God, the souls of those who die in actual moral sin go down into hell immediately.”²⁰ Some liberal Catholic scholars acknowledge that they must believe there is a hell but deny that anyone actually goes there! This is clearly contrary to Catholic dogma. More realistically, Roman Catholic philosopher Peter Kreeft says, “Fear of hell is not a base motive. As George MacDonald says, ‘As long as there are wild beasts about, it is better to be afraid than secure.’”²¹

The New Testament presents the stark realities of the doctrine of hell held by both Catholics and evangelicals. Jesus issues the strong warning: “do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna” (Matt. 10:28). Modern Catholic scholars note that “this comes from the Hebrew ‘Valley of Hinnom’, a place near Jerusalem where ritual infant-sacrifices had been practiced (2 Chron. 28:3). The word became synonymous with the place of malediction (Jer. 7:31), and then in the New Testament with the abode of the damned, a place of torment, unquenchable fire and the consuming worm (Matt. 5:29 ; 10:28 ; 18:8f .; Mark 9:44ff .)”²²

Jesus describes hell as a place “where their worm does not die and the fire is not extinguished” (Mark 9:46). It is likened to a “furnace of fire” (Matt. 13:42 , 50), where there is darkness (Matt. 8:12 ; 22:13 ; 25:30) and “wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 13:42 , 50 ; 24:51 ; Luke 13:28). Paul (2 Thess. 1:9), Peter (2 Pet. 2:4–6), and John all mention the dreadful consequences of ending up in this place of torment.²³

The church creeds support the witness of Scripture. The Athanasian Creed states: “those who have done evil will go into eternal fire.”²⁴ The church fathers were united in their belief in the reality of hell. According to Ignatius of Antioch, the person who “corrupts the faith of God, for which Jesus Christ was crucified, by evil teaching, will go into the unquenchable fire; and so will the person who listens to him (Eph. 16:2).”²⁵

Concerning the duration of hell, the official Catholic teaching states that “the punishment of Hell lasts for all eternity (*De fide*).” The Fourth Lateran Council (A.D. 1215) declared that “those [the rejected] will receive a perpetual punishment with the

19 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 479.

20 Neuner and Dupuis, Benedict XII, “Constitution *Benedictus Deus*” (1336), p. 769.

21 Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith*, p. 162.

22 *New American Bible*, p. 421.

23 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 480.

24 See Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, no. 40, p. 16.

25 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 480.

devil.”²⁶ As to the degree of punishment, Roman Catholicism holds that “The punishment of the damned is proportioned to each one’s guilt.” Augustine taught that, “in their wretchedness, the lot of some of the damned will be more tolerable than that of others.”²⁷ Just as there are levels of blessedness in heaven, there are degrees of wretchedness in hell.

The doctrine of hell can serve as a warning. A contemporary catechism states: “The affirmations of Sacred Scripture and the teachings of the Church on the subject of hell are a call to the *responsibility* incumbent upon man to make use of his freedom in view of his eternal destiny.”²⁸

PURGATORY

On the doctrine of purgatory Protestants part company with Roman Catholics. The Eastern Orthodox Church also rejects the concept of purgatory: “(According to the normal Roman teaching, souls in Purgatory undergo expiatory suffering, and so render ‘satisfaction’ or ‘atonement’ for their sins.) Today most if not all Eastern Orthodox theologians reject the idea of Purgatory at any rate in this form.”²⁹ This topic will be addressed more fully in chapter 16 .

COSMIC ESCHATOLOGY

In the later prophets of the Old Testament, notably Daniel, we find traditional elements of prophetic eschatology given a universalistic spin. Here, “Cosmic imagery and a concept of plan were now combined with a greater emphasis on the transcendent nature of the event that would be definitive for all history.”³⁰ The Roman Catholic Church condemns the notion that the world will be destroyed “naturally.”³¹ In the following section we will deal with eschatology in its cosmic implications and effects on all of humanity and the created order.

THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST

26 Ibid., p. 481.

27 Ibid., p. 482. See Augustine, *Enchiridion* III.

28 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p. 270.

29 Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, rev. (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 259. Some Catholic scholars believe this is compatible with their view since they don’t deny this but only affirm that purgatory is for the *temporal* consequences for sins, not for their guilt or spiritual consequences.

30 *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 5:528.

31 Denzinger, “Errors of Zanini de Solcia,” 717a., p. 232.

All orthodox Christians believe, in the words of the Apostles' Creed, that Christ will return bodily from heaven: "From thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead." There are differences on the specific order of events surrounding Christ's Second Advent, but all agree on the fact of it.

Reality of the Second Coming. Roman Catholicism teaches that, "at the end of the world, Christ will come again in glory to pronounce judgment (*De fide.*)" ³² The Apostles' Creed, and indeed the whole of church tradition, is united in the belief that Jesus Christ will return. The *Didache* (1st century), one of the earliest of all Christian sources outside the Bible, declares that at this time "the world shall see the Lord come on the clouds of Heaven." ³³

The New Testament contains numerous references to Christ's second coming (Gk.: *parousia*) as well. Jesus foretold his coming again in glory. Matthew records him declaring: "For the Son of Man will come with his angels in his Father's glory, and then he will repay everyone according to his conduct" (Matt. 16:27). Luke notes him saying that "they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory" (Luke 22:27). Paul addresses the eschatological concerns of the church at Thessalonica (1 Thess. 4:15–17; 2 Thess. 1:8). And Peter (2 Pet. 1:16), John (1 John 2:28), James (5:7f.), and Jude (v. 14) all deal with the second coming of Christ.

Signs of the Second Coming. Roman Catholics, along with evangelicals, recognize a number of events that can be understood as signs of the return of the Lord to earth. These include the evangelization of the world, the conversion of the Jews, the falling away from the faith, the appearance of the antichrist, and the tribulation period.

Concerning evangelization of the whole world, Scripture states that "this gospel of the Kingdom will be preached throughout the world as a witness to all nations and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14). The point is made that there may be a length of time between this event and the final consummation. ³⁴ The conversion of the Jews is another sign. Paul said that when all of the elect among the Gentiles have been called into the church then all "Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:25–32). ³⁵ What exactly is meant by "all" in the above verses is in dispute. The coming of Elijah, which was foretold by Malachi (3:23–24), is understood to have been fulfilled in the person of John the Baptist (Mark 9:13). ³⁶

Jesus also warned that there will be a proliferation of false prophets before the end comes (Matt. 24:4ff.). Paul mentions an event which he calls "the apostasy" (2 Thess. 2:3). This will cause a "falling away" prior to Christ's second coming. ³⁷ This "falling

³² Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 485.

³³ *Didache* 16, 8. cf. 10, 6; quoted in *ibid.*, p. 486.

³⁴ Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 486.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 487.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

away” is facilitated by a malevolent creature known as “the man of sin,” “the lawless one,” and “the son of perdition.” These names all refer to the antichrist (2 Thess. 2:3 ; 1 John 2:18 , 22 ; 4:3 ; 2 John 2:7). The antichrist is understood to be a real person who is at the service of Satan.³⁸ “Such specific personal titles and characteristics [mentioned in Holy Writ] cannot refer to an abstract ethical force for evil, or to a collective body or to movements of evil. An individual is specifically pointed out and identified by his supreme capacity and stunningly unique career in the pursuit of evil.”³⁹

Finally, Jesus warns that the endtimes will be accompanied by wars, famines, earthquakes, and persecution of the faithful. This period before Christ returns is known as the time of tribulation (Matt. 24:9 , 29 ; cf. Isa. 13:10 ; 34:4).⁴⁰ It is a time of unprecedented suffering on the face of the earth. The belief in such an endtime apostasy is common to both Catholics and evangelicals.

The Time of the Second Coming. As to the precise time of Christ’s coming Catholicism maintains the words of our Lord that “no one knows.” Ott notes that “the time of Jesus’ second coming is unknown to men (*Sent. certa.*) . Jesus left the moment of the *parousia* indeterminate. At the conclusion of the *parousia* speech, He declared: ‘But of that day and hour no man knoweth, neither the angels in Heaven, nor the Son, but the Father’ (Mark 13:32).”⁴¹ Indeed, the last thing Jesus said before he ascended was, “No one knows the times or the seasons” of his return (Acts 1:5). Paul tells the Thessalonians that they need not know the exact time of the *parousia* (1 Thess. 5:1–2), and Peter “ascribes the delay of the *parousia* to the patience of God who wishes to give sinners time to repent.”⁴² However, Roman Catholics, like most evangelicals, teach that the Lord could return at any time: “Since the Ascension Christ’s coming in glory has been imminent (cf. Rev. 22:20) . . . This eschatological coming could be accomplished at any moment, even if both it and the final trial that will precede it are ‘delayed’ (cf. Mt. 24:44 ; 1 Thess. 5:2 ; 2 Thess. 2:3–12).”⁴³

As to whether Christ comes before or after the “thousand years” (millennium) mentioned in Revelation 20 the Roman Catholic Church has made no official pronouncement. Many but not all of the early church fathers held to a view called “chiliasm” (or “millennialism”) which held that a long period of time—one thousand years—would transpire until the final judgment was rendered. By and large this view has been rejected by Catholics in favor of “amillennialism,” the position favored by Augustine and popularized in his work *The City of God*. Augustine, however, admits that

38 Ibid.

39 Vincent P. Miceli, S.J., *The Antichrist* (Harrison, N.Y.: Roman Catholic Books, 1981), p. 18. In the appendix Miceli quotes a number of Christians (including Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Rousas John Rushdoony, and C. S. Lewis) to the effect that the final confrontation between Christ and the antichrist may be at hand (pp. 273–82).

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid., p. 488.

42 Ibid.

43 *Catechism 1994*, no. 673, p. 176.

he himself, like most earlier Fathers, once held this view but gave it up because he observed abuses among some groups that took it literally.⁴⁴ Most Protestants, especially in earlier centuries, being more concerned with soteriological differences with Catholics, have been content not to deviate from the later Augustinian and dominant Catholic view at this point. The twentieth century has experienced a revival of the premillennial (that Christ will return before the thousand years and literally reign over the earth) view held by the early Fathers. Few Catholics, however, hold this position.

Many contemporary evangelicals have a special interest in the return of the Jews to their ancient land. Some Roman Catholics are concerned that “a one-sided advocacy of Israel disregards the Palestinians (some of whom happen to be Christians). But, as the Vatican and the American bishops have pointed out, basic principles of human rights apply equally to all nations, including Israel.”⁴⁵

THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD

At Christ’s coming there will be a resurrection of the dead. All orthodox Christians confess with the *Apostles’ Creed* to “believe . . . in the resurrection of the flesh.” The fact of the bodily resurrection is not a matter of dispute between Catholics and evangelicals.

According to Catholic dogma, “All the dead will rise again on the last day with their bodies” (*De fide*).⁴⁶ The Athanasian Creed stresses resurrection: “On His coming all men with their bodies must arise.”⁴⁷ As to the exact timing of this event, the last thing Jesus said before he ascended was, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons” of his return (Acts 1:7).

Argument from Scripture. Both Old and New Testaments speak repeatedly about the bodily resurrection of both believers and unbelievers from their graves.

Old Testament passages on the resurrection of the body include Deuteronomy 32:39 , 1 Samuel 2:6 , Job 19:25–26 , Isaiah 26:19 , Ezekiel 37:12f ., and Daniel 12:2 . Daniel 12:2 declares that in the endtime “many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake; some shall live forever, others shall be an everlasting horror and disgrace.” In the New Testament Jesus said explicitly that “the hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out, those who have done good deeds to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked deeds to the resurrection of

44 See Norman L. Geisler, “A Pre-Millennial View of Law and Government,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July–Sept. 1985): 253–55. Others suggest that premillennialism was given up because the Roman persecution failed to end in the second coming that was predicted by some. This too would be an extra-biblical reason, based on an abuse of the doctrine, and not a proper use of it.

45 “The Book of Revelation,” *God’s Word Today* (St. Paul: University of St. Thomas Press, 1993), p. 49.

46 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 488.

47 *Ibid.*, pp. 488–89.

condemnation” (John 5:28–29). John noted that those who follow Jesus “came to life and they reigned with Christ for a thousand years,” but “the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were over” (Rev. 20:4–5). Paul also speaks of the resurrection of believers, insisting that “Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead came also through a human being . . . but each in proper order: Christ the firstfruits; then, at his coming, those who belong to Christ” (1 Cor. 15:20–21).

Argument from the Fathers. Irenaeus (c. A.D. 130–200) was one of the first great theologians of the Christian church. In his famous work, *Against Heresies*, he affirmed that, “Inasmuch as Christ did rise in our flesh, it follows that we shall be also raised in the same [flesh]; since the resurrection promised to us should not be referred to spirits naturally immortal, but to bodies in themselves mortal.”⁴⁸ Resurrecting the flesh, he insists, is no problem for God, for “since the Lord has power to infuse life into what He has fashioned, since the flesh is capable of being quickened, what remains to prevent its participation in incorruption, which is a blissful and never-ending life granted by God?”⁴⁹

Tertullian (c. A.D. 160–230) declared that Jesus “will come with glory to take the saints to the enjoyment of everlasting life and of the heavenly promises, and to condemn the wicked to everlasting fire, after the resurrection of both these classes shall have happened, together with the restoration of their flesh.”⁵⁰

Justin Martyr (c. A.D. 100–165), a converted philosopher and one of the great apologists of the early church, spoke plainly: “the resurrection is a resurrection of the flesh which dies.”⁵¹ He adds, “Let the unbelieving be silent, even though they themselves do not believe. But in truth, He has even called the flesh to the resurrection, and promises to it everlasting life. For where He promises to save man, there He gives the promise to the flesh.”⁵²

Athenagoras, the second-century Christian teacher at Athens, wrote a treatise on “The Resurrection of the Dead.” In it he affirmed in response to those who denied the physical resurrection: “Moreover also, that His power is sufficient of the raising of dead bodies, is shown by the creation of these same bodies. For if, when they did not exist, He made at their first formation the bodies of men, and their original elements, He will, when they are dissolved, in whatever manner that may take place, raise them again with equal ease: for this too, is equally possible to Him.”⁵³

48 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, chap. 7, 1, p. 532.

49 Ibid., chap. 3, 3, p. 530.

50 Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics*; quoted in *ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 249.

51 Justin Martyr, *On the Resurrection, Fragments* in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, p. 298.

52 Ibid., p. 297.

53 Athenagoras, *The Resurrection of the Dead*; quoted in *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 150.

The famous Latin bishop, Rufinus (A.D. 345–410), in his “Commentary on the Apostle’s Creed,” declared that even the lost particles of the dead body will be restored in the resurrection body. In his preface to “Pamphilus’ Defense of Origen,” he also emphasized the identity of the pre- and post-resurrection body, saying: “We believe that it is this very flesh in which we are now living which will rise again, not one kind of flesh instead of another, nor another body than the body of this flesh. . . . It is an absurd invention of maliciousness to think that the human body is different from the flesh.”⁵⁴

Epiphanius, in his *Second Creed of Epiphanius* (A.D. 374), an enlargement of the Nicene Creed, declared that “the Word became flesh . . . the same suffered in the flesh; rose again; and went up to heaven in the same body, sat down gloriously at the right hand of the Father; is coming in the same body in glory to judge the quick and the dead.”⁵⁵

Cyril of Jerusalem (A.D. 315–386), in his famous *Catechetical Lectures* (chap. 18), argued that God is able to reconstitute flesh that has become dust into flesh again. “Let no heretic ever persuade thee to speak evil of the Resurrection.” Belief in the physical resurrection of the body was part of the confession of the “one Holy Catholic Church.” For “The Faith which we rehearse” contains in order the following, “And in one baptism of repentance for the remission of sins; and in one Holy Catholic Church; and in the resurrection of the flesh; and in eternal life.”⁵⁶ Cyril referred to the resurrection body as “the very same body” we have before the resurrection.⁵⁷ Similar views were held by Gregory of Nazianzen (a president of the Constantinople Council), Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil the Great. From this it is evident that the early Eastern Church also confessed a literal, physical resurrection.

The greatest Christian thinker of the early Middle Ages was the Bishop of Hippo, Augustine. Augustine stressed the fact that resurrection is in the same physical body in which one lived before the resurrection. He believed that individuals would be raised in their same sex and even without any bodily loss, “lest the men who were largest here should lose anything of their bulk and it should perish, in contradiction to the words of Christ, who said that not a hair of their head should perish.”⁵⁸ Along with the early Fathers, Augustine believed that God would reconstitute all of the decomposed parts of the body in the resurrection, saying: “Far be it from us to fear that the omnipotence of the Creator cannot, for the resuscitation and reanimation of our bodies, recall all the portions

54 Cited by *ibid.*, p. 225.

55 Epiphanius, *Two Creeds of Epiphanius: Second Formula* (A.D. 374) in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), p. 37.

56 Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* (18, 22) in Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 139.

57 *Ibid.*, Lecture 18, 18, p. 139.

58 *Ibid.*, Lecture 22, 14, p. 495.

which have been consumed by beasts or fire, or have been dissolved into dust or ashes, or have decomposed into water, or even evaporated into the air.”⁵⁹

Anselm (A.D. 1033–1109), speaking to the topic “How man will rise with the same body which he has in this world,” concluded that “From this the future resurrection of the dead is clearly proved. For if man is to be perfectly restored, the restoration should make him such as he would have been had he never sinned.” Therefore, “as man, had he not sinned, was to have been transferred with the same body to an immortal state, so when he shall be restored, it must properly be with his own body as he lived in this world.”⁶⁰

Aquinas affirmed explicitly that “the soul does not take an airy or heavenly body, or a body of another organic constitution, but a human body composed of flesh and bones and the same members enjoyed at present.”⁶¹ Commenting on those who deny a physical resurrection, he wrote: “They have not believed in the resurrection of the body, and have strained to twist the words of Holy Scripture to mean a spiritual resurrection, a resurrection from sin through grace. . . . That St. Paul believed in a bodily resurrection is clear. . . . To deny this, and to affirm a purely spiritual resurrection is against the Christian Faith.”⁶²

As for the seeming impossibility that a body that dies can be restored with numerical identity, Aquinas concluded that “by conjunction to a soul numerically the same the man will be restored to matter numerically the same.” Therefore, “although this corporeality yields to nothingness when the human body is corrupted, it cannot, for all that, be an obstacle to the body’s rising with numerical identity.” Hence, “it is clear that man returns numerically the same both by reason of the permanence of the rational soul and by reason of the unity of matter.”⁶³ The fact that human bodies have parts that are changing “is not an obstacle to his being numerically one from the beginning of his life to the end of it . . . for the form and species of its single parts remain continuously through a whole life.”⁶⁴ From this “it is clear, also, that there is no obstacle to faith in the resurrection—even in the fact that some men eat human flesh,” for in the resurrection “the flesh consumed will rise in him in whom it was first perfected by a rational soul.” As for those who ate flesh that will not be part of their resurrection body, “what is wanting will be supplied by the Creator’s omnipotence.”⁶⁵ These unequivocal statements leave no doubt that Aquinas believed that the resurrection body was numerically identical to the pre-resurrection body.

59 Ibid., 20, p. 498.

60 Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo* 2.3 in *St. Anselm: The Basic Writings*, S. W. Deane, trans. (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing, 1962), p. 241.

61 Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology*, 153, in Thomas Gilby, *St. Thomas Aquinas: Philosophical Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), no. 764.

62 Aquinas, *III Summa contra Gentiles*, 79 in Thomas Gilby, *St. Thomas: Theological Texts* (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth Press, 1982).

63 Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, IV.81.6, 7, 10.

64 Ibid., IV.81.12.

65 Ibid., IV.81.12–13.

The Reformers did not forsake their theological roots in Catholicism at this point. They too continued the unbroken confession of the resurrection of the physical flesh. The Lutheran *Formula of Concord* (A.D. 1576) confessed: “We believe, teach and confess . . . the chief articles of our faith (of Creation, of Redemption, of Sanctification, and of the Resurrection of the flesh).”⁶⁶ *The Belgic Confession* (A.D. 1561), adopted by the Reformed Synod at Emden (A.D. 1571) and the Synod of Dort (A.D. 1619), affirmed: “we believe, according to the Word of God . . . that our Lord Jesus Christ will come from heaven, corporally and visibly as he ascended with great glory and majesty, to declare himself Judge of the quick [the living] and the dead. . . . For all the dead shall be raised out of the earth, and their souls joined and united with their proper bodies in which they formerly lived.”⁶⁷ Likewise, the Westminster Confession of Faith declared: “At the last day, such as are found alive shall not die, but be changed: and all the dead shall be raised up, with the self-same bodies, and none other (although with different qualities) which shall be united again to their souls for ever.”⁶⁸ *The New Hampshire Baptist Confession* (A.D. 1833) also acknowledged the material nature of the resurrection body, speaking of raising “the dead from the grave” where the material corpse was buried.⁶⁹ Other Anabaptist and Baptist groups also confessed the literal, physical nature of the resurrection body.

In brief, evangelical Protestants, following Catholics, confessed the physical bodily resurrection of believers in the day when Christ returns. Thus, a current trend among some scholars to approve as orthodox opposing views is totally out of line with historic orthodoxy,⁷⁰ for they deny the essential physical nature of the resurrection body. Such a view denies the historic Catholic (and evangelical) confession of a physical resurrection from the grave in the last days.

THE GENERAL JUDGMENT

Roman Catholicism teaches that there will be a general judgment at the end of time. This will be after Christ returns to earth. As a result of this judgment, persons will be sent to their final destiny. “Christ, on His second coming, will judge all men (*De fide.*)”⁷¹ The Lateran Council (A.D. 655) declared: “If anyone does not properly and truly confess in accordance with the Holy Fathers that God the Word himself . . . will come again . . . to judge the living and the dead, let him be condemned.”⁷²

Further, Christ will function as judge upon his return is proclaimed by all of the creeds. In the New Testament Jesus says that the Father has assigned the Son the office of

66 Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:98.

67 *Ibid.*, pp. 433–34.

68 Westminster Confession of Faith (Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, n.d.), chap. 22, 2 (p. 19).

69 *Ibid.*, p. 748.

70 See Geisler, *Battle for the Resurrection*, chap. 6.

71 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, pp. 492–93.

72 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, Can. 2, 255, p. 102.

Judge: “Nor does the Father judge anyone, but he has given all judgment to his Son, so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father” (John 5:22–23). Peter preached that Christ is “the one appointed by God as judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42). Paul also referred often to Christ as “judge” (Acts 17:31 ; Rom. 2:5–16 ; 2 Cor. 5:10).

Catholics believe that the scope of judgment extends to “all the nations.” Jesus said, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him” (Matt. 26:31–32). The purpose of the general judgment is “the glorification of God and of the God-Man Jesus Christ (2 Thess. 1:10) by revealing the wisdom of God in the government of the world, His goodness and patience towards sinners and above all His rewarding justice. The glorification of the God-Man achieves its apogee in the exercise of the office of Judge of the World.”⁷³ The church fathers affirm this teaching. Polycarp, Clement, Augustine, and others, quoting from the Old and New Testaments, designate Christ as the Judge of the World.

THE END OF THE WORLD

Following the teaching of Scripture, Catholics and evangelicals believe that there will be an end to this world. Ott succinctly states the position of the Catholic church: “The present world will be destroyed on the Last Day.”⁷⁴

Jesus spoke of the “end of the age” (Matt. 24:3f). He even promised his disciples that he would be with them (through the ministry of the Holy Spirit) “until the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). Peter described the end of the world in graphic terms: “the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a mighty roar and the elements will be dissolved by fire, and the earth and everything done on it will be burned up” (2 Pet. 3:10). That is the bad news.

The good news is that “the present world will be restored on the Last Day.”⁷⁵ That which will be destroyed will also be renewed. The prophet Isaiah speaks of God’s restoration: “Lo, I am about to create new heavens and a new earth” (Isa. 65:17). Jesus speaks of a “new age” (Matt. 19:28), and Paul teaches that the whole of the cosmos awaits redemption (Rom. 8:18–25). Peter tells of a “new Heaven and earth” (2 Pet. 3:13) and John describes this restoration concerning the nature of this “new creation” (Rev. 21:1–8). “St. Augustine teaches that the properties of the future world will be just as suited to the immortal existence of the transfigured human body as were the properties of the corruptible existence to the mortal body.”⁷⁶ Thus, the general eschatology of Catholics and evangelicals is the same. Christ will return bodily to earth. There will be a resurrection of the dead, followed by eternal bliss for believers and eternal condemnation for unbelievers.

⁷³ Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 493.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 494.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 495.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* See Augustine, *City of God* XX.16.

CONCLUSION

We have attempted to present the major points covered in Roman Catholic eschatology. Concerning these, Catholic scholars note that “The ‘last things’ in Biblical theology are not so much last as ultimate, and their chronological sequence does not correspond to their degree of definitiveness.”⁷⁷

Many evangelicals are quick to note that Roman Catholic eschatology has different emphases and tends to have “simpler” theological constructs. For instance, in dealing with the concept of judgment (and judgments) in Scripture, Roman Catholics speak of one general judgment. Many evangelicals, however, find more than one judgment in the Scriptures; some scholars identify at least five different judgments dealing with believers, Israel, the Gentiles, angels, and the “great white throne of judgment.”⁷⁸ Many Protestants, however, particularly amillennialists, agree with the Catholic view of one general judgment.

As to the time of and the events surrounding the second coming of Christ Catholicism does not have the variety which exists among evangelical theologians; however, the major points of Christian eschatology are there.⁷⁹ The reality and significance of death are taught, as well as a conscious intermediate state. The reality of judgment and the identity of the Judge are established. There is a “heaven to gain and a hell to shun.” Jesus is returning to claim his bride, the church, believers will be reunited with their bodies, and heaven and earth will be made anew. Augustine addressed this subject:

[God] shall be the end of our desires Who shall be contemplated without ceasing, loved without cloy, and praised without weariness. There will be degrees of honour there, based on merit, but there will be no jealousy; and free will will not only continue to be exercised by the saints, but will be the more truly free because liberated from the delight in sinning.⁸⁰

As Vatican II states: “The Church, to which all of us are called in Christ Jesus and in which, through God’s grace, we acquire holiness, will reach her consummation only in the glory of heaven, when the time will come for the restoration of all things.”⁸¹ So here too, both Catholics and evangelicals share a common core of basic beliefs about the future.

⁷⁷ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 5:532.

⁷⁸ See John Walvoord, ed., *Lewis Sperry Chafer: Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, abridged edition (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1988), pp. 500–504.

⁷⁹ For a brief treatment of the differing views concerning the millennium, see Robert Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1977).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 22, 30 I.2f.; quoted in Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 489.

⁸¹ Neuner and Dupuis, “Dogmatic Constitution,” *Lumen Gentium* (1964), p. 772.