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*The Second Coming*



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# The Second Coming

In addition to eternal life with God, Christian hope centers on the Second Coming of Christ. It would seem that most Catholics today do not have a significant awareness of this fundamental aspect of Christian hope, expressed by St. Paul in the letter to Titus 2:13: “awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.”

Christian hope profoundly changes the way we look at history and its “shape.” History is an arrow pointing to and preparing for its glorious culmination: Christ’s second coming in glory. Ancient cultures tended to think of history as cyclical, an endless series of cycles. In the nineteenth century Nietzsche tried to resurrect that ancient view, speaking of an “eternal return.” Given infinite time measureless space, he thought that the same events were bound to recur endlessly. Such a view inspires a sense of complete futility and fatalism, which Nietzsche futilely tried to overcome with his idea of the “superman” who faces this futility of history and rises above it somehow.

Judaism and Christianity introduced a new understanding of history into the world with the idea of an end to history that will occur in history itself, followed by the Kingdom triumphant, released from the shackles of history and time, blessed with eternal life. History will culminate with the return of the Messiah in glory, who will raise the dead and judge all of history and bring all the blessed into the perfection of the Kingdom in which God will perfectly reign.

All Christians pray for this in the Our Father, when we pray: “Thy kingdom come.” Although the Church already is the kingdom of God in seed and in exile, we pray for the fullness of that Kingdom which will be inaugurated through Jesus’ second coming.

This glorious coming of the Messiah is prophesied in Daniel 7:13–14:

Behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

When Caiaphas asks Christ if He is the Messiah, He answers by referring to this text of Daniel: “I am; and you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62).

The Apocalypse of St. John ends with the expression of Christian hope: *maranatha!* “The Spirit and the Bride say,

“Come.” And let him who hears say, “Come.” . . . He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22:17-20).

## *Liturgical Aspect of Hope in the Second Coming*

Before becoming Pope, Cardinal Ratzinger wrote profoundly on how Christian hope in the Second Coming is a structural principle underlying the orientation of the liturgy and prayer.

In the early Church, prayer was done facing east. This orientation signified, and reminded Christians, that we are awaiting Christ’s return.

When Christ ascended into heaven on the Mount of Olives, to the east of Jerusalem, two angels told the Apostles that they were to expect Jesus to return in the same way: “And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven’” (Acts 1:9-11).

To symbolize this expectation of Christ’s glorious return the Christians of the first millenium prayed facing east, departing from the Jewish custom of prayer facing Jerusalem. For this reason, churches were generally oriented to the east, unless the nature of the site made this impossible (as in St. Peter’s basilica). During the Eucharistic prayer, all the faithful—priests and laity—prayed facing east.

Benedict XVI, while still Cardinal Ratzinger, has pointed out what he holds to be the unfortunate aspect of the change in orientation of the priest in the general practice of the post-conciliar liturgy, by which the priest has come to face the congregation during the entire celebration.<sup>1</sup>

The general and common practice of all Christian rites for most of the history of the Church has been to have both the people and the priest face east during the Eucharistic liturgy. Although not always literally oriented to the geographical east, this practice symbolized the fact that the whole Church, head and members, hierarchy and faithful, are all turned towards God the Father, through Christ and in Christ, and in expectation of the parousia, the glorious return of Christ, the sun of justice who is symbolized by the dawn.

By having the priest and people share a common orientation towards the Cross, towards God, the liturgy manifests

<sup>1</sup> See Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. J. Saward, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 74–84.

the participation of the faithful in the priesthood of Christ which is exercised by the ministerial priest. The Church in worship is like a ship (which, by the way, is the meaning of the word “nave”) directed towards the east, towards the parousia. The ship is led by the ministerial priests, who offer the sacrifice of the Church in the person of Christ, but it is also composed of the faithful who offer that same sacrifice in a spiritual way, by uniting their lives, trials and hearts to the divine victim.

Or we may liken the church in worship to an army in battle array, led by her general and captains, all facing the common goal of their efforts. Both the ministerial priesthood and the royal priesthood of the faithful, although essentially distinct, share the same orientation towards God, towards the parousia.

The expectation of Christ’s Second Coming was also frequently graphically expressed in church architecture by portraying Christ coming in glory in the eastern apse above the altar. In *Spe salvi* 40, Benedict writes:

Faith in Christ has never looked merely backwards or merely upwards, but always also forwards to the hour of justice that the Lord repeatedly proclaimed. This looking ahead has given Christianity its importance for the present moment. In the arrangement of Christian sacred buildings, which were intended to make visible the historic and cosmic breadth of faith in Christ, it became customary to depict the Lord returning as a king—the symbol of hope—at the east end; while the west wall normally portrayed the Last Judgment as a symbol of our responsibility for our lives—a scene which followed and accompanied the faithful as they went out to resume their daily routine. As the iconography of the Last Judgment developed, however, more and more prominence was given to its ominous and frightening aspects, which obviously held more fascination for artists than the splendour of hope, often all too well concealed beneath the horrors.

### **The Signs of the Second Coming**

When are we to expect the Second Coming? Jesus gives various signs of His second coming in His eschatological discourse recorded in the Synoptic Gospels (Mt 24; Mk 13; Lk 21). A positive sign is the preaching of the Gospel to the whole world. In Mt 24:14, He says: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come.” We see this condition being fulfilled more and more in our day.

At the same time, the “birth-pangs” of the parousia will be marked by great wars and catastrophes (Mt 24:7). Every time and place can see this sign at least partially realized, fueling Christian hope in times of trial.

In addition, there will be a falling away from the faith and a cooling of charity, for Jesus says (Mt 24:10-12): “And then many will fall away, and betray one another, and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because wickedness is multiplied, most

men’s love will grow cold.” This falling away from the faith is also implied in Luke 18:8: “When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

### ***The Apostasy and the Anti-Christ***

St. Paul gives more signs of the Second Coming in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-10. The Thessalonians had apparently over-reacted to St. Paul’s First Letter to them in which he spoke of the parousia, and some thought that the “Day of the Lord” was upon them. St. Paul cautions them by reminding them of the signs that had to be fulfilled before the second coming. The two principal signs that he gives them are the great apostasy (rebellion against the faith) and the reign of the Anti-Christ:

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to meet him, we beg you, brethren, not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, either by spirit or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come, unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.

“Apostasy” here means that a formerly Christian society has rejected the Faith. Surely this is true of the modern world, which is increasingly referred to as a post-Christian society. The roots of this apostasy reach back to the fourteenth century, with the loss of harmony between faith and reason, and grew with the sixteenth-century Protestant rebellion against the Catholic Church, but it is much worse today with widespread atheism and lack of faith. Although it may continue to develop for centuries, one wonders how much longer this process can go on.

Bl. John Henry Newman comments on the coming of the apostasy in an article on the Antichrist written in 1838, while he was still an Anglican: “Is there no reason to fear that some Apostasy is gradually gathering, hastening on in this very day? For is there not at this very time, a special effort made almost all over the world, that is, every here and there, more or less in sight or out of sight, in this or that place, but most visibly or formidably in its most civilized and powerful parts, an effort to be without Religion? Surely there is at this day a confederacy of evil, marshalling its hosts from all parts of the world, organizing itself, taking its measure, enclosing the Church as in a net, preparing the way for a general Apostasy from it.”<sup>2</sup>

With regard to the coming of the Antichrist, St. Paul gives an intriguing detail. He says that he told the Thessalonians orally when he was with them that there was a power that was restraining the future coming of the Anti-

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<sup>2</sup> *Discussions and Arguments on Various Subjects* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897), 59.

christ. Because of this, the Antichrist would not be able to appear until the restraining power is taken “out of the way”:

Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you this? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing and his coming. The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are to perish, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.

What is this that restrains the coming of Antichrist? St. Paul does not tell us in his letter. This, by the way, is a good illustration of why Catholics believe that Tradition is necessary as a source of Revelation, complementing Scripture. Not everything that was taught orally by the Apostles (as revealed truth) was written down in the New Testament. So what is currently restraining the advent of the antichrist? It is reasonable to think that it is perhaps the sacrifice of the Mass.

Although no time-frame is established for the Apostasy, an exact period of time is given in the Bible for the reign of the Anti-Christ, who will follow the Apostasy. The Anti-Christ will rule for three and a half years. The key sign of the Anti-Christ is self-divinization. The Catechism of the Catholic Church 675-676, gives a very profound explanation of the Anti-Christ:

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.

The Antichrist’s deception already begins to take shape in the world every time the claim is made to realize within history that messianic hope which can only be realized beyond history through the eschatological judgment. The Church has rejected even modified forms of this falsification of the kingdom to come under the name of millenarianism, especially the “intrinsically perverse” political form of a secular messianism.

The essence of the temptation of the Anti-Christ is to offer a radical distortion of the messianic hope, professing a secular salvation that will come in history and through human agency alone, so as to glorify man rather than God. We shall return to this theme in the following talk.

## ***The Conversion of the Jews before the Second Coming***

Jesus prophesied that “Jerusalem will be trampled by the Gentiles, until the time of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Lk 21:24). The fact that Israel is a sovereign nation today is perhaps an indication that that time has indeed been fulfilled, and this has confirmation in what could be called the great apostasy we seem to be witnessing today.

Various Christian theologians also see the state of Israel as a possibility of grace, as represented in this statement by Edward Flannery, S.J.:

With Congar, we may think that God wished to bring a representative cross-section of the Jewish people to the Holy Land in order to bring it face to face with the great question of the messiah. Israel’s restoration to the land of the promise, even though under secular auspices, may thus be a distant preparation for her final encounter with grace.”<sup>3</sup>

Another important sign heralding the imminence of the parousia will be the conversion of Jews to faith in Christ. This hope is based on several biblical texts. In the Old Testament, the prophet Zechariah alludes to the future conversion of Israel in 12:10-14, for he prophesies that the day will come when the inhabitants of Jerusalem will weep over the Messiah whom they have pierced:

And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.

It seems that Jesus indirectly alluded to this future conversion of Israel when He wept over Jerusalem as He came down the Mount of Olives on Palm Sunday. While looking upon the Temple from the Mount of Olives, He said that the world will not see Him again until the Jewish People accept Him as the Messiah who “comes in the name of the Lord”:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you that kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you refused! Behold! Your house will be deserted, for, I promise, you shall not see me any more until you say: Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’ (Mt 23:37-39).

St. Paul develops this theme in Rom 11, in which he speaks of his anguish with regard to Israel’s rejection of Christ. He sees that the blindness of a large part of Israel was permitted by God to help the Gentiles to come into the Church. However, he reasons that “if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean, but life from the dead?”

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3 Edward Flannery, S.J., *The Anguish of the Jews: Twenty-three Centuries of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Macmillan, 1965). Quoted in Friedman, *Jewish Identity*, 159.

He compares ancient Israel to a cultivated olive tree. With the coming of the Messiah, some branches were lopped off because of their unbelief (a symbol of the Jews who did not believe in Christ), and other branches of wild olive trees (Gentile believers) were grafted in. But those who were ingrafted can easily be removed once again, and the natural branches more easily re-inserted. The hardening that has come upon Israel is only for a time, until the full number of the Gentiles come in:

So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means! But through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? . . .

And even the others, if they do not persist in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree. Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved; as it is written, “The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”; “and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.” As regards the gospel they are enemies of God, for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may receive mercy. For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all. (Rom 11:11-16; 23-32)

Drawing on this text of Rom 11, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 674, treats this theme:

The glorious Messiah’s coming is suspended at every moment of history until his recognition by “all Israel”, for “a hardening has come upon part of Israel” in their “unbelief” toward Jesus.<sup>4</sup> St. Peter says to the Jews of Jerusalem after Pentecost: “Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old.”<sup>5</sup> St. Paul echoes him: “For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?”<sup>6</sup> The “full

inclusion” of the Jews in the Messiah’s salvation, in the wake of “the full number of the Gentiles”,<sup>7</sup> will enable the People of God to achieve “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”, in which “God may be all in all.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Millenarianism**

When Christ returns in his Second Coming, what will He do? Will He immediately establish the definitive heavenly Kingdom through the Resurrection and the Last Judgment, or will He come to reign on earth first for a thousand years?

The expectation of a thousand year reign of the Messiah on earth before the Last Judgment is referred to as Millenarianism, which derives from the word, “millennium.” The roots of Millenarianism go back to Judaism in the centuries before Christ. The general expectation of the Messianic Kingdom to be established by the Messiah involved a reestablishment of the kingdom of Israel as in the times of David and Solomon, accompanied by a renovation of the natural world and a glorious reign of peace and harmony. This messianic kingdom was to be the last age of the world, after which there would be the Resurrection, the Last Judgment and the life of the world to come. The Apocalypse of St. John draws on the imagery of this belief in the Messianic kingdom, but expressed in symbolic or metaphorical language. In Revelation 20:1-8 we read:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years were ended. After that he must be loosed for a little while. Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom judgment was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life, and reigned with Christ a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with him a thousand years. And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be loosed from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations which are at the four corners of the earth, that is, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea.

Many of the early Pre-Nicene Fathers interpreted the book of Revelation in an excessively literal way (millenarianism). By the fourth century, however, the literal interpretation of the thousand year reign was generally rejected and abandoned, in favor of an allegorical understanding. According to this interpretation, popularized by

4 Rom 11:20-26; see Mt 23:39.

5 Acts 3:19-21.

6 Rom 11:15

7 Rom 11:12, 25; see Lk 21:24.

8 Eph 4:13; 1 Cor 15:28.

St. Augustine, the thousand year reign in which Satan was bound and the saints rule with Christ, refers to the Catholic Church, especially insofar as she is able to imbue society with the values of the Gospel. In other words, the thousand year reign refers to the period of Christendom. The binding of Satan for a thousand years should be connected with Christ's parable about the binding of the strong man<sup>9</sup> (Mt 12:29): "Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house." Christ bound the devil in His Passion. However, the devil continues to hold sway over the nations until they are progressively "plundered" by the expansion of the Church and the conversion of the nations.

Obviously, the devil always deceives many individuals in all times. However, when the faith takes hold in a particular society, the devil is not able to lead it astray in the same way that he does a pagan or non-Christian nation. His power is restricted by the presence of the Church. For example, when Christian views of marriage and family life, and the dignity of the human person, become social and civil norms, the power of the devil is bound. When a society rejects the normativity of those Christian views, then his power can be said to be loosed again.

The thousand year period should not be taken literally, for it is the custom of Scripture to use figures like a thousand years in a loose or symbolic sense. It clearly refers to a very large period of time: an age or epoch.<sup>10</sup> The unloosing of the devil should be associated with the prophecies of the great apostasy, which culminates in the brief reign of the Anti-Christ, after a long preparation.

The "first resurrection" spoken of in Rev 20:5 should be understood to refer to Baptism and the life of grace given to us through the sacraments of the Church.

After St. Augustine, millenarianism was completely eclipsed, although it tended to reemerge in heretical sects. A notable example was the abbot, Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202, Calabria), who gave a Trinitarian theology of history, according to which God's dealings with mankind is organized in three dispensations: the age of the Father (Judaism), the age of the Son (the institutional and hierarchical Church), and the age of the Holy Spirit. He predicted that the age of the Holy Spirit was imminent. This was to be a millennial period of peace and blessing in which the institutional and hierarchical Church would be superseded by an entirely charismatic church. This revolutionary doctrine was condemned by the Church in the thirteenth century. Nevertheless, it inspired various heretical movements in the later Middle Ages.

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<sup>9</sup> St. Augustine makes this connection in the *City of God*, book 20, chap. 8.

<sup>10</sup> If one sought a more literal reading, it could be taken to refer to the height of Christendom, from about 325 to 1350 or 1500.

After the Reformation, millenarian ideas have tended to reappear massively in various forms. The two dominant forms this has taken in modern Protestantism are known under the terms, Postmillennialism and Premillennialism. The "post" and "pre" in these terms refers to whether the Christ's Second Coming is understood to occur before or after the thousand year Kingdom spoken of in Revelation 20:1-6. Premillennialism puts the Second Coming before the millennial kingdom, whereas Postmillennialism puts it at the close of the millennium.

In other words, for premillennialism, both the reign of the Antichrist and the Second Coming will precede the millennial Kingdom. Christ will come to destroy the kingdom of the Antichrist, and then personally establish his millennial kingdom, in which He will rule from Israel.

For postmillennialism, the Kingdom will not come about through Christ's Second Coming, but through human agency within human history. This view clearly suffers from unrealistic optimism and trust in progress.

In addition to these two alternatives, Protestant theologians also speak of a third view, which they refer to—inaccurately—as amillennialism, and which they identify with the position of St. Augustine and thus with the traditional Catholic view. It is called "amillennial" because it denies that there will be a literal thousand year Kingdom in which Christ will rule in person. In reality, the Catholic interpretation is that the thousand year Kingdom in which the devil is bound, refers to the age of the Catholic Church. It would be better to refer to it as an "ecclesiological interpretation of the Millennium."

Postmillennialism reached its peak in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Anglo-American Protestant community, and was marked by an (excessively) optimistic view of human history, viewed as the march of universal progress. This view expected a glorious thousand year reign of Christ to come about through the march of human history. At the end of this glorious period, Satan was to be unleashed, Armageddon would occur, and Christ would return in glory. Thus the millennium is understood to come before the Second Coming.

The millennium was often understood in political terms, as a glorious age to be brought about by political revolution, social justice, and the putting into place of new political structures. Not surprisingly, each revolutionary group tends to think of itself as the one that will bring in the millennium. For example, the millennium has often been thought of by Americans as an age of democracy to be led in through the example and influence of the United States. The French Revolution was seen in a similar way, at least at first, by the intellectuals of the Enlightenment. Curiously, this scheme was common both to believers and to skeptics. Often millenarian ideas went together with progressivist views and experiments in socialism and

communism. Even militantly atheist revolutionaries were affected by this mentality. As we shall see in the following talk, millenarian ideas were influential in preparing the soil for Marxism, Nazism, and other totalitarian regimes.

Postmillennialism has become much less common in the course of the last century, because the unbelievably brutal events of the twentieth century, together with the rapid decline of Christian faith and morals, have made such an optimistic view of history seem absurdly naïve.

Premillennialism, which is the most common Evangelical view today, is more pessimistic about the current trend of history. It does not expect the 1,000 year Kingdom of God on earth to come about through human agency or progress in history. On the contrary, it sees contemporary history as regressing in the religious and moral dimension, due to the increasing secularization of Western society.

### Rapture

This view has several peculiarities. First of all, premillennial dispensationalists believe in a “Rapture,” popularized in the *Left Behind* series. The Biblical basis for this belief is 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17. In this passage, St. Paul is responding to a concern, or excessive grief, of the Thessalonians about the members of their community who had died:

But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up<sup>11</sup> [“raptured”] together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord.

The Thessalonians are not to grieve excessively over the faithful departed in their community, as do the pagans “who have no hope.” The faithful departed are not separated from Christ, and will suffer no disadvantage with respect to those still alive at Christ’s Second Coming. Both the living and the dead will witness the Second Coming. The faithful departed will witness it because “the dead in Christ will rise first.” In other words, St. Paul seems to be saying that the Second Coming of Christ will coincide with the general Resurrection of the dead. The trumpet call mentioned in 4:16 is a frequent symbol in Scripture for the Resurrection. Both of these events—Resurrection and Second Coming—seem to constitute the “day of the

Lord,” which, as St. Paul reminds them in the following verses, comes as a “thief in the night” (1 Thes 5:2).

Premillennialists, on the other hand, take this passage to refer to a Rapture prior to the Second Coming, prior to the reign of the Antichrist, and prior to the general Resurrection. The resurrection referred to by St. Paul as preceding the “rapture,” would just be partial.

Clearly this interpretation does violence to the text of St. Paul. Even from the point of view of *sola Scriptura*, such an interpretation is exceedingly implausible.

### Dispensationalism

Another very peculiar feature of premillennialism (also called premillennial dispensationalism) is their understanding of Israel and the Church. They understand the promise of the millennial Kingdom to refer not to the Church, but to Israel according to the flesh, that is, to ethnic Jews. They see the Kingdom as the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham and Israel, and they deny that the Church should be understood as the new Israel. In the millennial Kingdom, the Mosaic Law will be in force, and they expect the Jewish Temple to be rebuilt and animal sacrifices to be resumed.

The age of the Church from the Gentiles, for premillennial dispensationalists, is thus merely a kind of “parenthesis” in history, which is going to be “whisked” out of the world at any moment by the “Rapture,” so as to spare true believers from the “great Tribulation” of the reign of the Antichrist.

What should we think about all of this? First, the idea of a “rapture” to spare true believers from the Tribulation is contrary to God’s way of working, which is to bring about holiness through a participation in the Cross of Christ. God does not whisk those whom He most loves out of the danger of trial and suffering, but allows trials to be the crucible in which holiness and charity are consummated.

Secondly, the entire system is based on a fundamental error of tremendous importance: they fail to recognize that the Kingdom whose advent Christ preached, and which was foretold by the prophets, is the Catholic Church founded at Pentecost—the Church that Christians profess to be “one, holy, catholic and apostolic.” They cannot recognize this without ceasing to be Protestants. Thus they fail to recognize that the Kingdom spoken of in Revelation 20:1-6 is none other than the Catholic Church, through the influence of which the power of Satan is bound and hindered from seducing the nations.

The Evangelicals who follow this system (dispensationalism) have ironically, and tragically, missed the presence of the Kingdom for which they so yearn. Christ founded His Kingdom in the Catholic Church, and they have failed to recognize it.

A mitigated form of Millenarianism was condemned by a decree of the Holy Office in July 21, 1944: “In recent times on several occasions this Supreme Sacred Congre-

<sup>11</sup> The Latin term here, “*rapimur*,” is the origin of the term “Rapture.”

gation of the Holy Office has been asked what must be thought of the system of mitigated Millenarianism, which teaches, for example, that Christ the Lord before the final judgment, whether or not preceded by the resurrection of many of the just, will come visibly to rule over this world. The answer is: The system of mitigated Millenarianism cannot be taught safely.”

We already blessed to live in Christ’s kingdom, which is the Church. Now we are in the stage of the Church militant, awaiting the consummation of history and the manifestation of the Church triumphant, the heavenly Jerusalem. Christ already reigns, but under sacramental veils and not in visible form. In the Second Coming He will reign unveiled in glory, a glory to be shared by all who are united to Him.