

THE HOPE OF HEAVEN: PRAYER AND THE END OF TIME

Introduction

A couple of years ago when I was still in Belgium, I had just finished the Sunday evening mass that a gentleman invited me to have a cup of coffee with him as he wanted to talk to me. Without asking myself any question about him and the reason why he wanted to talk to me, I sincerely accepted his offer.

When we were in the restaurant, he told me that his wife and he have decided not to have children, because they did not see any future to the world at all. He said that it would be selfish and even irresponsible of them to bring children into the world to which there is no future. After all, life finishes with death and the dissolution of everything, what sense does it make to have children or to hope for something after?

After listening to him attentively, with respect but with assurance of faith, I told him that I disagreed with him. I told him that the core of our Christian faith and hope is that with Jesus Christ a bright future is open to us in the kingdom of God our Father, where we will be happy forever. It is not the disappointments of the present time or the crisis of our world which can destroy the joy of eternal life that God has promised us.

The conversation I had with that gentleman reminded me of another peculiar event of my youth around the years 1970. At that time there was a widespread teaching from the Jehovah witnesses that God was about to destroy the world as he did at the time of Noah. For the Jehovah witnesses, the time of Armageddon the book of Revelation is talking about was about to come. Trembling and fearing, I saw myself with my siblings praying and fasting not only in order to repent, but also to find favor before the Lord as he was about to come back.

I presume that fear is in some people, even if they do not declare it loudly, when they think about the end of the world and their own end. As a priest today and called sometimes to assist the dying, I am confronted with people who are afraid to die or afraid at the idea that everything for which they have given so much love, pain and effort will stay behind them as they die. And yet, our faith in Jesus Christ is above all a Good News of hope and a promise of eternal life.

This morning I want to talk to you about our hope of heaven and the promise of eternal life in Jesus Christ. When we talk about eternal life in heaven we presuppose death and the end of time. Meanwhile as time is still going on, we live in the expectation of the realization of God's promise of eternal Life. The middle point and the attitude of those who await God's promise is prayer. But this hope of heaven is lived as a community of believers in the Church. This structures my talk around four main points: The reality of the end of time; the hope of eternal salvation in heaven; the importance of prayer and the role of the Church in the awaiting.

I. **WILL THE WORLD COME TO AN END?**

My inquiry on this point is completely theological and not scientific. I am not interested in the question of knowing if, from the considerations of science, the world can come one day to stop its course and die. I leave that discussion to the specialists of science. My concern is to know if, from the truth revealed to us and contained in the Holy Scriptures, we can talk about the end of the world and what implication such a claim can have for us today. Let us examine some witnesses from the Scriptures.

A. **Affirmation about the end of the world**

Some texts in the New Testament speak clearly of the possibility of the end of time or the end of the world. The parables like that of the weeds (Mt 13, 24-30) or that of the net (Mt 13, 47-50) are more explicit in talking about the end of the world. In the explanation Jesus gives about the first parable (Mt 13, 36-43), he says that "The man who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world; the good seed is the people who belong to the Kingdom; the weeds are the people who belong to the Evil One; and the enemy is the Devil. The harvest is the end of age, and the harvest workers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered up and burned in the fire, so the same thing will happen at the end of the age, etc.

In the parable of the Net, Jesus says that as people do with the content of a net by sorting out good fish from the remaining, so will be at the end of the age. The word end of age stands for the end of the world.

This teaching of Jesus is confirmed by the witness of St Paul in the theological development he gives in 1 Corinthians 15, 23-24. In this development, St Paul affirms that Christ will attract all the people to him and raise them from the dead and then comes up the end.

B. **Signs accompanying the end of time**

The New Testament gives even the signs through which the end can be recognized as close. Without discussing the context of these predictions, we found, for instance, that the evangelists give as signs precursor of the end of time, the troubles of wars, famines and earthquakes (Mt, 24, 7. 15-21; Mk 13, 14-24 and Luke 21. 20-24). They talk also about persecutions and the preaching of the Gospel to the whole world as signs that the end is close (Mt 24, 9-13; Mk 13, 12-13; Luke 21, 18-19 and Mt 24, 14). Another sign they give is the coming of the Anti-Christ and the presence of false prophets (Mt 24, 4. 23-24; Mk 13, 13 and Luke 21, 24).

C. The time of the end

In spite of all these signs that the New Testament gives to announce the end of time, there is a mystery surrounding the exact time when the end will come. In fact, no one knows the time when all that will happen. It is a secret that belongs to God alone. First of all, when asked if this will be the warning that the end is about to happen, Jesus says, “No one knows, however, when that day and hour will come – neither the angels in heaven nor the Son; the Father alone knows” (Mt 24, 36; Mk 13, 32; Luke 17, 26). After that, he directly says, “You must always be ready, because the Son of Man will come at the hour when you are not expecting him (Mt 24, 44; Mk 13, 37; Luke 17, 36).

D. The meaning of the end of time

As specific as these quotations might be, the end of time, however, does not mean necessarily an annihilation of everything that exists. It does not neither evoke a complete destruction of the existing world, as scientific sciences would expect it to happen with an atomic bomb or a nuclear catastrophe. More than a mere destruction of human life and the world, the end of the world presupposes its transformation and its renewal.

Such a claim is based on the fact that our God is a God of the living and not of the dead. For that reason St Peter says, “According to his promise, we await new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3, 12-13).

We find the same line of thought in Acts 3, 19-21: “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that he will forgive your sins. If you do, times of spiritual strength will come from the Lord, and he will send Jesus, who is the Messiah he has already chosen for you. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for all things to be made new, as God announced through his holy prophets of long ago”.

Even the book of Revelation, which is very rich in images of destruction and apocalypse, speaks of the transformation and the renewal of the earth and heaven. It means that what is supposed to be a simple destruction of the world is in fact its replacement by a new earth and a new heaven that God will establish:

“Then I saw a new heaven and new earth. And I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared and ready, like a bride dressed to meet her husband. I heard a loud voice speaking from the throne: “Now God’s home is with mankind! He will be with his people. God himself will be with them, and he will be their God. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain. The old things have disappeared” (Rev 21, 1-4).

What all that would like to say is that what we are waiting for at the end of time is a creation of a new world which will come from God's power. The transformation we are waiting for is not only *cosmic*, it is also *anthropologic*. Not only will earth and heavens be renewed, but also human beings will enjoy eternally living with God for ever. That is our hope and this hope irrigates and refreshes everything we do in this world. We know that all that lies before us is death, but death is not the end of everything, because God has promised us a big joy of eternal life in heaven. In the present time, we live out of that promise and hope for the joy of heaven.

II. THE HOPE OF ETERNAL SALVATION IN HEAVEN

We live in a time of hope and the realization of God's promise to give us eternal life. But, if the world will be brought to an end one day, how can we hope for eternal life? Where do we find strength and energy to hope while we really know that we will die? If it is true that one day or another this world will not exist anymore, why shall we hope for something different? What shall we hope for?

A. The resurrection as the foundation of Christian hope of heaven

Our hope of heaven finds its foundation in the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We know that it is for our sake that Jesus Christ took flesh and became a human being like us so that we partake in his own life and share in his own resurrection. As St John says, "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life" (John 3, 16). It follows, then, that the final fate of we who believe in Jesus is not to die, but to live forever in heavenly kingdom. As Christ lived and died for us, all those who live and die with him, will share in his resurrection.

B. The Paradox of the world's suffering

We cannot deny the reality of suffering and death. Suffering and death are inevitable for each one of us. We cannot deny the fact that the idea of being separated one day from those we love so much in this world is terrifying. We cannot minimize the fact that leaving behind us many things we are enjoying in the present life provokes in us a feeling of anxiety and fear.

However, the resurrection of Jesus teaches us that death is not the end of everything. There is life beyond death for those who believe in Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus gives us courage and strength to confront the reality of death with the hope of being delivered for eternal life. What happened to Jesus is

what will happen to us. In this sense, the resurrection of Jesus has value of exemplarity and assurance at the same time. In our suffering and death, our eyes have to be fixed on Jesus from whom our salvation comes.

There is no doubt that our body will die and will undergo putrefaction in the grave. But the soul, which is the mark of God's presence in us and what he put in us when we were created in the womb of our mothers, will live forever in his presence. The spirit of life he has insufflated in us at the beginning of creation will not die. For that reason, we can consider the physical death as a passage toward eternal life where God has prepared us a place.

Jesus puts it in a very practical way when he says, "There are many rooms in my Father's house, and I am going to prepare a place for you. I would not tell you this if it were not so. And after I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to myself, so that you will be where I am" (John 14, 1-4).

If that is true, then, we have to acknowledge that we live in the hope of the realization of God's promise to give us eternal life. That eternal life is already manifested and anticipated in the resurrection of Jesus. As such, our Christian hope is not based on human abilities, but on God's promise to save us in Jesus Christ. Christian hope is closely related to Christian faith which it irrigates with its trend of looking forward, and moving forward, toward the fulfillment of God's promise.

That is why faith without hope is a dead faith that lacks the light that dispels the clouds and the darkness that shadow the way to the accomplishment of the word of promise. Our hope of heaven is not a utopia, based on human projection, but an expectancy of a promised reality, but not yet given. Its fulfillment is based on the veracity and truthfulness of God that he will do it in spite of the present situation of suffering in the world.

C. The consequence of the resurrection of Jesus

A consequence to draw from this understanding is that, although the negative experience of the world with all its range of disappointment, suffering, disease and death, might be challenging, it cannot however break the strength of those who believe and hope in God. As matter of fact, those who believe in the God of Jesus know well that God will not abandon them. As God did not abandon Jesus, so will he not abandon those who trust in him. The world and its challenges certainly remain before us, but we are not discouraged or desperate, because we know that what lies before us, in the end, is not a defeat, but a victory.

III. PRAYER AS LONGING FOR HEAVEN

Meanwhile as we wait the fulfillment of God's promise, what shall we do? What shall our attitude be? St Paul says, "Be persistent in prayer, and keep alert as you pray, giving thanks to God. At the same time pray also for us, so that God will give us a good opportunity to preach his message about the secret of Christ. (...) Pray, then, that I may speak, as I should, in such a way as to make it clear" (Colossians 4, 2-4).

A. Importance of prayer

According to these words of St Paul, prayer is as central as it is the keynote of Christian life. It is the source of strength that sustains the work of the Church and the hope of the disciple in the waiting of the fulfillment of God's promise. What would our life be without prayer? Prayer is the elevation of our soul to God by offering him our homage and asking his favors, in order to grow in holiness for his glory and our well-being, including our eternal salvation.

Prayer is a conversation in which we open our hearts to God and let him speak to us as we talk to him. The prayer we talk about encompasses all our prayers done in the name of the Lord Jesus, including our devotions. The goal of all our prayers is to be united with Jesus, to give praise to the Father and to bring our needs and those of the world to the throne of God.

As Saint Therese of Lisieux said, "prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy"¹. It rises from the depth of the human heart as something inspired from the interior by an internal movement of one's being confronted with the problems of life. In this confrontation, the praying knows that after all only God can ultimately satisfy his deep longing for joy, peace and happiness. That is why, he turns to him with hope, trust and faith.

Prayer embraces the prayer of worship and that of petition. According to Mgr Charles Hugo Doyle, an important figure in spirituality who lived at the beginning of last century, worship is the honor and reverence we owe to God as our creator. To worship is to submit ourselves to God's will and acknowledge our dependence upon him. Worship comprises the prayer of adoration, thanksgiving, and reparation of sins. The prayer of petition, in turn, is acknowledgment that we need God's help in order to live a decent life, to be sustained in our trials, and to better cope with the present life for our eternal salvation.

¹ Saint Thérèse de Lisieux, *Manuscrits autobiographiques*, C 25r.

B. The Our Father as a model of all our prayers.

The model and source of all our prayers is the Our Father (Mt. 6, 9-15). The Our Father is the model of prayer for all the disciples of Jesus, the source of inspiration for all the prayers done in the name of Jesus, and the font of blessings for those who turn to God in the spirit of Jesus. It provides us with inspiration, as well as the ways of how we can present ourselves before God if we want to please him.

The Our Father embraces the whole of human life, both past, present and future, and brings it before the throne of God so that it might be guided through the unknown in the future, rescued from the weight of the past, and sustained in the needs of the present. It expresses the relationship that links God to human beings as their creator who deserves to be praised by his creatures, and who is capable of coming to the help of his beloved ones.

The Our Father comprises two parts, each one having three petitions. While the first part of the prayer deals with the glory of God, the second deals with human needs and necessities. A relation exists between the search for the glory of God and the bringing of human necessities in the presence of God. It is only when God has received the honor and place that are due to him in our life that our human necessities are addressed in the right order. For that reason, the prayer of Our Father brings the whole of human life to the presence of God and, at the same time, the whole of God to our lives. In this perspective, our prayer must never be an attempt to bend the will of God to our desires, but rather a submission of our wills to the will of God².

The petitions contained in the first part of the Our Father have to do with the sanctification of the name of God, the coming of his Kingdom and the fulfillment of his will. The three other petitions that comprise the second part of the prayer of Our Father cover the whole range of human life.

The request for bread is about the maintenance of our life here and now while it brings our needs in the present time to the throne of God. In the same way, the request for bread recognizes the providence of God upon us as the one who sustains us in life and provides for our needs.

The request for forgiveness is about the restitution of our inner peace, and the reconciliation with ourselves, with our fellows and our heavenly Father. As such, it brings all the happenings of our past life in the presence of God so that we might be forgiven, purified and strengthened by turning the page of the past for a new life with Christ.

The request for help in temptation is about our faithfulness in our commitments. It puts the unknown of our future into God's hands. It reminds us that we need God in order to be strong and able to triumph over the eventual temptations of evil.

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Volume I, Louisville. London, Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, p. 228.

After all, the whole of our life is no stranger and unknown to God. It has something to do with his will. In the same way, the line of time we call past, present and future is qualified so according to human calendar and our measure of time. All these momentums, and each instant of our life, however, are continually and permanently present to God (Ps 90, 4; 2 Peter 3, 8)

When we toil in our jobs and daily commitments God is ready to bless us, because it is his will that we may have what we need to sustain us in life. Where our life went wrong and we have failed in our commitment, God is ever ready to grant us his forgiveness; because it is his will that we rebuild anew our relationship with him and with our brothers and sisters. As life goes on and we do not know what is lying ahead of us in terms of temptation, we are assured that the ever present God is disposed to rescue us so that we remain faithful to him and to our commitment.

C. Why shall we pray?

In all these petitions, Jesus teaches us to lay the whole of our life, past, present and the future, before the grace of his Father. More profoundly, we can say that prayer contributes to the attitude of vigilance Jesus is expecting from us until the time he comes back. In order word, when we pray, we acknowledge our dependence upon God as our Creator and submit our lives to his majesty. When we pray we ask God to guide us in our lives and in the things we do in the world until the day we will be in his presence holy among the holy. When we fail to pray, we fall into lethargy and the possibility of losing our eternal salvation is close.

IV. THE CHURCH AS A SPACE OF LIVING OUR HOPE OF HEAVEN

In this time of vigil we have a great gift Christ has left us, which is the Church. Among many ways the Catechism of Catholic Church interprets the Church, one is worthy of being noticed, especially with regard to the subject we are treating, namely that the Church is “the continuation of Christ in the world” and the space where we live our hope of heaven.

According this understanding, the mission of the Church is a continuation of Christ’s work in the world. Christ organized the Church to carry on his work in the world, bringing his ministry and truth to all and always. It is Christ who accomplishes all that is done in the Church for our salvation. The Church survives over time and crisis because it comes from Christ who has promised to be with it to the end of time³.

³ Catechism of Catholic Church, # 748-838; 846-848; 857-887; 1200-1206.

In this perspective, to be in the Church is like being in a secure place in a boat that protects us in time of strong tornado on a sea. In this boat, which is the Church, we are not alone, but with many other people throughout the world who bear the same hope of heaven and who await with impatience the manifestation of the Son of God at the end of time, when he comes to renew everything.

The consequence to draw from such an understanding is that we cannot consider ourselves as independent Christians, living our faith at the margin of the Church's teaching. It would truly be a mistake to isolate ourselves as Christians and not care about what is going on in the Church.

Because of that particular reason, we have to acknowledge also that many brothers and sisters around us and in the world are living of the same hope. Like us, in spite of the difficulties crossing their own lives, they try to be faithful and live openly their faith as Christians and disciples of Jesus. Moreover, in our hope for heaven and in our prayer, we are assisted by a multitude of witnesses who are the saints in heaven.

All these people are to us a source of inspiration and courage, a model of faith that fosters our hope and expectation of eternal salvation. As the letter to the Hebrews states, "As for us, we have this large crowd of witnesses around us. So then, let us rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way, and of the sin which holds on to us tightly, and let us run with determination the race that lies before us" (Hebrews 12,1), till victory.

This time of ours is a time of vigil. In this time of vigil, we live out of hope. We hope to see the realization of the promise of being delivered from the bondage of death not only as an individual, but also as a community and members of the body of Christ. This evocation reminds me of one of the prayers the Legion of Mary often recite at the end of their gathering: "...Grant us a lively faith,... a courageous faith..., a faith which will be our Legion's Pillar of fire – to lead us forth united – to kindle everywhere the fires of divine love ...; so that – the battle of life over – our Legion may reassemble, without the loss of any one, in the kingdom of your love and glory. Amen".

All that is to say that we do not think as isolated entities, apart from the Church as a structure, but as one body in which many witnesses, dead and alive, before us and now, give us strong examples of courage, trust and hope. The Church calls that life of communion, the communion of the saints. What is meant with it is a community of all the faithful in Christ – those on earth, those in purgatory and those in heaven. The Church in this sense transcends the earthly limits of time and space and reaches into the non-temporal life with God.

The communion of saints involves also the idea of mutual communication and exchange of supernatural goods, like prayers and merits, between the faithful living on earth and those who died in peace with God who are either in purgatory or in heaven. Since all are united together in a common supernatural life that

comes from Jesus Christ through the Spirit, all are able to share that life with one another and so can help one another⁴.

Conclusion

In the end, let me finish by commenting Fr Baker and say that the end of the world will be, first of all, the conclusion of the redemptive work of Christ. At that time, Jesus having submitted all his enemies and all the powers of Satan, he will hand over to the Father everything for his glory. For those among us who will be faithful to Jesus until the end, that time will be a moment of union with him and of seeing God face to face. (1 Corinthians 15, 24-28)⁵. Human history having come to end, the world will completely be transformed and become a space of the inhabitation of God with his people forever. Instead of being a simple destruction of the present world, the end of the world theologically speaking means re-creation, renewal and restoration of the world so that it is conform to the image of what God wanted it to be since the foundation of the world.

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⁴ Kenneth Baker, *Fundamentals of Catholicism*, Volume 3, p. 149-150.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 388.