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VI. Eschatology

VI/I The Doctrine of the Last Things

1. The Church and the End Time

Christian life points toward the Kingdom of God and the return of the Lord in glory. The faith of the Apostles that “here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come” (Heb. 13:14), and that “the form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor. 7:31), determines the content of Christian hope and produces a sense for the transitory and provisional nature of this world. The Church has always emphatically clung to the eschatological hope and thereby has stamped the character of the life of the faithful.

Eschatological hope is no empty experience, since the end time has already commenced in the midst of the life of the Church, which represents the continued unfolding reality of the Kingdom of God in historical time. The resurrection of Christ already ushers in his return in glory, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit inaugurates the last times which Joel prophesied (Joel 3:1–5; Acts 2). The Christian lives in the period of time between Pentecost and the Second Coming of the Lord as on the “eight day of creation”. We in the Church receive through the sacraments and the other divine means of grace the pledge of the Spirit, in the hopeful anticipation of the joyous experience of the whole which is yet to come.

Therefore the Christian does not press forward as though rejecting the experience of this world, but rather bears witness to God’s love through activity in this world; beyond that, however, he desires to enjoy something even greater: “We ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:23). “We do not reject the present, but we strive for the greater” (John Chrysostom, hom. 14.6 in Rom. – PG 60.531). For Christians, death has laid aside its terrible mask. For them it is the passage from the transitory to the eternal, the corruptible to the incorruptible. The day on which martyrs and saints died is the day on which the Church celebrates their birthday in the other life.

2. Life after Death

Death, which is a consequence of Adam’s sin, concludes the period of trial and spiritual progress for man. This is why the New Testament

and the Fathers of the Church warn the faithful not to disregard God's grace as long as they live. After death there will no longer be an opportunity for salvation, only judgement and scrutiny of past deeds will follow (cf. 2 Cor. 6:2; Gal. 6:10; Basil the Great, moral. 1.2, 5 – PG 31.700f, 704).

Men will be judged by God immediately after death on the basis of their deeds performed during their lifetime (cf. 2 Cor. 5:10; 11:15; Rom. 2:5–11): The righteous and the saints will be brought near to God; sinners, however, will be led far from God to Hades, as depicted in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19–31). “While waiting for the final judgement the souls of the faithful wait in a finer place, the sinners and evil ones in a worse place” (Justin Martyr, dial. 5.3 – PG 6.488). The honour which the Church accords the Saints rests on the belief that they are already in God's presence and, in a certain sense, are already enjoying the divine glory, the full enjoyment of which at the general resurrection at the Last Day they still await. Prayers to the Mother of God and the Saints to intercede for us with God in whose presence they live and are continuously heard by him rest on the same assumptions. The supplication of the Saints contributes to God's mercy being bestowed on the living. This forms a strong and perpetual bond between the Church militant and the Church triumphant.

Even though believing and teaching that, after death, it is not possible for those in the ranks of the sinners to cross over to join the righteous, the Church, following an ancient tradition, celebrates Eucharist in the faith, and with the hope, that God will remember those fallen asleep in mercy; it also conducts memorial services and commends acts of charity to the faithful. This gives expression to the loving fellowship between the living and those who have already passed on, together with the hope of one's own resurrection. “We believe that the prayer will be a very great advantage to those on whose behalf it has been brought” (Cyril of Jerusalem, catech. 23.9 – PG 33.1116f).

3. The Resurrection of the Dead and the Renewal of the World

The entire divine plan of salvation will find its historical fulfillment in the coming of the Lord in glory. The resurrection of the dead and the renewal of the world will accompany the Lord's appearance. These are fundamental truths of the faith as they are contained in the creeds of the ancient Church. The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed declares of Christ that “He will come again with glory, to judge the living

and the dead,” and concludes with an expectation of resurrection: “We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.”

The moment of the Second Coming of the Lord is unknown (Mk. 13:32); therefore the Church admonishes the faithful always to be prepared and to watch, for the Day of the Lord is coming as a thief in the night, at an hour when no one is expecting him (Mk. 13:33–37; Mt. 24:42–44; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10). The Church has rejected all attempts to determine the exact moment of the Lord’s return.

The final judgement will be preceded by the resurrection of the dead and the renewal of the world. The return of the Lord coincides with the transformation of all mankind and the world from a condition of corruption to one of incorruption (cf. 1 Cor. 15:51f; 1 Thess. 4:17). The bodies of those who have already fallen asleep will be raised and indestructibly reunited with their souls in that intimate relationship which it had enjoyed earlier; the bodies of the living will be transformed and creation will be renewed (cf. Rom. 8:19–22; 2 Pet. 3:13). The Church believes that the resurrected bodies will be like that of their glorified Lord (cf. also John Chrysostom, *delic.* 6 – PG 51.352).

All will experience the resurrection of the body, so that they may appear before the Lord with body and soul reunited and after the final judgement enjoy either blessedness or eternal damnation. The eternal happiness of the righteous as well as the eternal punishment of the wicked is a constant teaching of Holy Scripture and the Fathers of the Church.

Our daily prayer for the coming of his Kingdom will be fulfilled at the return of Christ, as is attested in the Book of Revelation: “I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away ... and death shall be no more ... and he who sat upon the throne said: Behold, I make all things new” (Rev. 21:1–5).

In the view of the Joint Orthodox–Old Catholic Theological Commission, the above text on “The Doctrine of the Last Things” represents the teaching of the Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches.

Kavala, October 17, 1987

Signatures