

DEATH A NEW BEGINNING

Rev. Walter Macken

People say that death is the great leveler; and yet I wonder if they really believe it. St. Thomas More had a picture of the last temptation which the devil uses to confuse a sick man: "Instead of sorrow for our sins and concern for Heaven, he puts us in mind of provision for honorable burying, so many torches, so many tapers, so many black gowns, so many merry mourners laughing under black hoods, and a hearse, with the delight of goodly and honorable funerals in which the foolish sick man is sometimes occupied, as though he thought that he should stand in a window and see how worshipfully he shall be brought to church".¹ Even at the last moment it is possible for a man to fool himself, to convince himself that death is still a long way off or that it is never going to happen.

The other extreme is using death, and all the possible horrors which surround this moment of our lives, to frighten us with a sort of nightmare. The current vogue in horror films is one expression of this extreme. We try to get rid of the fact of death by means of blood-curdling screams which somehow make us substitute fear for examination of conscience.

The Church always has had a down-to-earth, realistic, and at the same time immensely sympathetic view of death. The Roman Catechism warns against pastors who delay the last rites until it is almost too late. The Church has always wanted to give people the maximum opportunity to face the moment of leaving this life with all the help and assistance promised by our Lord.² Fundamentally the phrase of St. Paul, which is a cry of victory, always has been the basis for the Christian's attitude to death: "This corruptible nature of ours must be clothed with incorruptible life, this mortal nature with immortality. Then, when this mortal nature wears its immortality, the saying of Scripture will come true. Where then, death, is your victory? Where, death, is your sting?"³ Rather than the end, death has to be seen as a beginning; it is the beginning of real life, a life which is genuine and lasting, where there are permanent values and real absolutes. Beyond death lies the target which is truly definitive.

The fact of death

Death is a fact which indeed is hard to avoid. I have already pointed out the possibility we have of continually avoiding it, convincing ourselves of our own immortality. It is always someone else's funeral. Death is something morbid, dark, dreary, applying to someone else. I am never involved. I expect to live for years yet. There is no one so old that he does not expect to live another year. And all those who

are young try to convince themselves that death is as far away from them as the oldest man in town is in years.⁴ The reason for this subjective immortality is simple: we are afraid of the unknown.

We live in the midst of a culture that wants to consider only what is present. We agree with what we can see and feel; we accept the emotions which flow through our imaginations now. We tend to laugh at the past and make a myth of the future, creating a false image of the real world around us. This false imagery includes the elimination of the specter of death and of the fact that each and every one of us will rot in the ground, taking nothing with us into the grave.

How can people get around the fact? Notice—for one thing—the constant talk about evolution. Some thinkers emphasize the idea of evolution to such a degree that we think we might, just might, live forever. Marxism suggests each one lives on in the coldness of the collectivity. Some of the existentialist thinkers presume that by staring nothingness in the face, it might go away. In other words, we always retain a capacity to fool ourselves, to convince ourselves that we do not have to face death—at least not for the time being.

This fooling ourselves is the reason why the fact of death is central to our acceptance of what life is about. Death is not about death, but about life. To live fruitfully, there has to be a purpose for living. But death finishes all human purposes: no honor, riches, fame, glory, beauty, or importance can survive the death of a man. So we are compelled by the fact of death—my death, your death—to look beyond the here and now, to seek a destiny more permanent than anything we can find on Earth. That of course is a human form of reasoning, the one used by Socrates as he lay awaiting an "unjust" death. Beyond the reasoning of the mind, which informs us that death is not definitive, there stands what is revealed to us by God. "We have an everlasting city, but not here; our goal is the city that one day is to be."⁵ The fact that we cannot see that city with our eyes is no reason to believe it is not worth laying down our paltry life for. That is a city which we are building through this life, by our own day-to-day striving.

God tells us more about death: it is a punishment for sin. "It was through one man that guilt came into the world; and since death came owing to guilt, death was handed on to all mankind by one man."⁶ From what God has explained to us through Scripture, we know that man was created with an earthly immortality, a gift which was in fact beyond his nature, and which he lost as soon as he fell away from God. Because sin came into the world, we all have to die. (Interestingly enough, this point is brought out particularly clearly by a proposition which was condemned by the Church as far back as the year 418 at the sixteenth council of Carthage. The proposition states that "the first man, Adam, was created mortal so that, whether he sinned or not, he had to suffer bodily death, that is to say that he would have left his body, not for punishment of sin, but out of the necessity of nature."⁷)

Consequences of death

St. Thomas More insists that being mindful of death is one sure way of combating pride, the root of all vices; and particularly that pride which a person may take in his own supposed goodness. Such a person hardly thinks of death, except as a road which will lead straight to Heaven, to his reward for a virtuous life.⁸

The first consequence of death, then, must be a realistic approach to life. Each of us can profit from considering our last moments and trying to prepare for it from now on. Death is the definitive moment of life, the moment in which the eternal destiny of a person is decided. God keeps the moment we are to die hidden from us, so that we more easily can be helped to be vigilant.

To understand God's attitude to our death, we have to have faith, so that we recognize God's fatherhood: "The hairs of your head are numbered." The entire passage reads as follows: "And I say this to you who are my friends: Do not be afraid of those who can kill the body and after that can do no more. I tell you who it is you must fear: fear him who has power not only to kill but to cast a man into hell; you must fear him indeed. Are not five sparrows sold for a penny? And yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. As for you, he takes every hair of your head into his reckoning. Do not be afraid then. You count for more than a host of sparrows."⁹ In St. Luke's gospel this comment of our Lord's comes after a particularly difficult exchange with some Pharisees, who were hounding him. So first he warned the apostles not to be afraid of who can inflict merely bodily death; that is nothing. There is only one death to fear, spiritual death, when we find ourselves before God with a lifetime to explain. And immediately he added the bit about sparrows. Every one of those insignificant birds is known to God. Every hair on your head is known to God. He gives everyone the greatest possible chance at the moment of death, calling us when we are ready and not before.

This is the background for the explanation by St. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer of God's attitude towards death: "God does not act like a hunter, who waits for the smallest slip on the part of his prey to shoot at it. God is like a gardener who looks after the flowers; he waters them, he protects them, and he cuts them only when they are most beautiful, full of richness. God takes souls when they are mature."¹⁰

Then if we can manage to face the fact of death as something that comes from the hands of our Father God, death will appear to our minds both as just punishment for our sins and as a sign that, in spite of our ingratitude, God is ready to take us to himself when we are at our best. The mystery of death can help us realize the importance of eternal destiny throughout our life. This optimistic outlook strips death of its gloominess and its horror-film aspect. Death is the doorway to our final destiny, the thorny path that leads to God.

What doesn't die

Is the soul immortal? From what we have understood, it is clear that God has revealed to us the immortality of our souls. After this life there comes the definitive life. Jesus has won for us the gift of immortality which was lost by sin, a gift which we have to reach through death, the real separation between body and soul. Scripture describes the lament of the pagan who refuses to believe in immortality because no one has ever come back from the grave. And so, the godless man reasons, since "like the cloud-wrack our life passes away, unsubstantial as the mist," and "only a passing shadow this life of ours," then "let us enjoy pleasure while pleasure is ours: youth does not last, and creation is at our call; of rich wine and well-spiced we take our fill."¹¹ The study made in chapter two of the Book of Wisdom is a fascinating one. It could be applied to many present-day attitudes containing as it does the perennial wisdom of God, seeming to pick out the wildest absurdities that man continues to put forward as new discoveries. "So false the calculations that are blinded by human malice, the secret purposes of God they might not fathom... God, to be sure, framed man for an immortal destiny, the created image of his own endless being; but since the devil's envy brought death into the world, they make him their model and take him for their master."¹²

Man, then, is immortal. Behind this craven and at times decrepit being, rotting into apparent nothingness, there is a reality which the eye does not see. There is a spark of eternity in man.

Man's spiritual powers

The first step in understanding the soul's immortality is to grasp its spirituality and its fundamental (intrinsic) independence of matter. Maritain maintained that immortality is almost self-evident. Once we concede that man is spiritual, we already have conceded that he is immortal. If he is spiritual, there is in him a spiritual principle which of itself (intrinsically) is independent of matter. When we show that there are powers and faculties in man which defy any merely material explanation, then it is clear that these powers must be derived from a spiritual source, a reality which is itself independent of matter, and so cannot become corrupted.

We can think thoughts completely independent of the material world around us. Justice, beauty, truth, personality, relationship, and measure are all notions which arise from the material world, it is true, but which cannot be explained exclusively by material things. From the material world around us, we extract ideas which are beyond the material world, which have a permanence, a universality, which the material concrete world lacks. No matter how many times you pronounce the word evolution, you will not evolve a thing from nothingness. In like manner, no matter how much propaganda is

published by atheist Marxists, they will never evolve a thinking, free intelligence from animals. And yet they try. And the reason for their continual efforts, it seems to me, is that they are afraid of immortality: they fear the eternal spark that exists in people, because it is easier, perhaps, to cope with a finite human destiny than with an eternal one. It is easier to face men than to face God. The cold and dead collectivity can always remain an abstraction. But Jesus Christ the Son of God on a cross, bleeding to death because he loves our immortality, is no abstraction.

Free will costs

We are free. Our will is satisfied only when confronted with complete goodness, absolute perfection. Then it—we—will stop desiring; then it will stop sending messages to the mind asking for more of this and more of that. Are we ever satisfied? No: not until we meet God face to face and are able to say, "There, there is the objective I have been seeking all my life; there is absolute goodness, Lord, I embrace you as you are."

The reason for this absoluteness of the will is that the will is a spiritual faculty since it follows the intellect, which is also (as we have just seen) a spiritual faculty. The good which the will desires is as wide as the truth which is the object of the intellect. No limited goodness can fill it. Only a good which knows no bounds can satisfy our will. "Only God seen face to face can invincibly attract and hold our will. On the other hand, our will is free to love or not to love an object which, although good in one way, is bad, or at least insufficiently good, in another way. In fact, liberty consists in this freedom of the will concerning an object that is not wholly and entirely good."¹³

Freedom is a word that many people use in a meaningless way. It becomes a slogan, a cry, often an excuse. There can be freedom only where the will is directed on its proper course. Freedom without direction is as meaningless as a river without banks, a star without firmament. Like all words emptied of their meaning, it becomes a slogan for those who are determined to keep their minds glued to this world. And yet we can rest only when we rest in God, because the will is a faculty which manifests the boundless reach of the human mind. Only when we desire and fight for God can we be truly happy, even on this side of death. All other strivings are futile.

Freedom really means the capacity to choose the means that lead to our last end. To drown this desire of the soul for eternity, some people try to show that we are all determined: by our environment or by our heredity, as if the capacity to choose were sucked out of us by something our poor grandmother did. Or else some tyrannical teacher is blamed for all our deficiencies. Environment influences. Heredity influences. But the most profound influence on people is what they themselves decide to do; to each of us is left the ultimate choice. This fearsome prospect—namely that we as individuals must personally choose good or evil—provokes some to deny immortality, to

deny our eternal destiny precisely to avoid having to be really responsible. All determinist attitudes and positions amount to opting out of personal responsibility, a refusal to bear the weight of eternity.

If the mind and the will are spiritual powers that can be satisfied only with perfect truth and perfect goodness, there is no doubt that they arise from a spiritual fountainhead, principle, or source. This source is named "soul."

The soul, the source of life, is a spiritual principle, since the actions of knowing and willing which lead us to admit its existence are spiritual. And this soul cannot be corrupted, for there is nothing in it which allows corruption.

Life is fleeting

Before trying to describe exactly what happens after we die, it is worthwhile to give a few words of Scripture on the shortness of life, and the temporary quality of human glory. "Weariness" is the word used most by Ben Sirach in his short treatise on the absurdity of human affairs. "A shadow's shadow; a world of shadows. How is man the better for all this toiling of his here under the sun? All the rivers flow into the sea; yet the sea never grows full. Back to their springs they find their way and must be flowing still. Weariness, all weariness, who can tell the tale...? That which ever has been ever shall be; that which has happened once shall happen again. There can be nothing new under the sun."¹⁴ It is in many ways a harsh book, looking directly at the hard side of life. No matter what you do, no matter what the striving, man's life on Earth is basically absurd unless we fear God and keep his commandments.¹⁵

Why do we drink so much, make so much noise? Why do we flee from solitude and abhor silence? Why do we rush everywhere, hurrying about the small business of living? Surely one answer is that we want to drown the pangs of eternity. We don't particularly want to have the passing nature of this life made clear to us. "The pressure that every man experiences to draw away from the consideration of his eternal destiny is a strong one, and well stimulated by the devil," says St. Josemaría.¹⁶ This drawing-away process makes us attribute immortality to things that have just a passing presence. As someone said to me years ago: "When you come from the country into the city, man seems to be self-sufficient. The first time you arrive in town, everything looks as though it works. Everything seems to depend on man. In the country you are made more aware of God with the passing of the seasons, the perpetual movement of the tides; even the quiet whisper of Irish rain makes you aware of a power beyond yourself. In the city, however, all the lights and movement, all the telephones, typewriters, and concrete roads seem to say: man is independent of any destiny."

The answer to that is simple. Look at the rust, the ruts, the destitute, or even the well-built houses trying to create an illusion of space through expensive shrubs propped

up against drainpipes. It can be easy for a person to realize the passing nature of life, and to understand that the only purpose worth living for is the immortality which comes from living with God. Considerations of this kind also can help us give less importance to what we feel. We are inclined to depend on mere feelings for our religious experiences, which are the most temporary of realities.

Need for vigilance

What I have said does not mean that we can afford to turn into passionless people, coldly waiting for death to free us from this absurd life. That attitude would be close to the nihilism of the godless. What I do mean is that the kind of peace promised us by our Lord is not a mere absence of difficulty or even of violence. The longing for peace which is expressed everywhere by everybody has a false ring about it, as if we were waiting for peace to descend on us, instead of realizing that the reason there is no peace is that we are not fighting the right kind of battle. And I don't mean with bombs either. That solves nothing. I mean the kind of battle which takes place in each person's soul. The distinction between saints and sinners applies only beyond the grave. During this life there are only sinners who try and sinners who don't bother. Nobody is guaranteed salvation. Everyone must keep trying until the last moment. This could be the last moment. This could be the very last battle.

"Whatever lies in your power, do it while you can: there will be no doing, no scheming, no wisdom or skill left to you in the grave."¹⁷ That phrase of Scripture is one of many by which the Holy Spirit reminds us of the need to be ready. This readiness has to be a positive one, a constant attempt to improve. "Your loins must be girt and your lamps burning, and you yourselves like men awaiting their master's return from a wedding feast, so that they may open to him at once when he comes and knocks at the door."¹⁸ This is our Lord's very graphic way of asking for readiness. To be ready to go at any time means to be trying hard to improve all the time. The fact of death then becomes a spur to ever greater things. The Lord's knock can come at any time, and we must be ready, not caught unawares like the drunken servant. Then God brings us our reward. "Blessed are those servants whom their master will find watching when he comes; I promise you, he will gird himself and make them sit down to meat and minister to them... Blessed are those servants if he finds them alert."¹⁹ God promises a reward but not to those who are sitting down waiting for things to happen. It is not an expectation of easy paradise that the Lord proposes. He intends to reward those whom he finds in the midst of their work, hard at the task he has assigned to them on Earth. Christ himself, God made man, will then make them sit down at table and will serve them.

In a few masterful sentences Jesus answers all the accusations made against Christianity by the various activists of history. "Religion is the sign of the creature oppressed by misfortune, the soul of a heartless world, in the same way as it is the spirit of a period that has no spirit. It is the opium of the people."²⁰ This famous phrase of Karl Marx expresses in essence what all atheists have thought in order to dismiss religion as some kind of alienation, and to substitute their own tyrannical philosophies. But religion is precisely what offers hope to man, hope if he works for that hope. Religion, by confronting man with the demands of an eternal destiny, helps him, more radically than any pagan theory such as Marx puts forth, to work for the betterment of this Earth. This is the only conclusion possible from the comment of Jesus mentioned above. He expects to find us burning our lamps; he expects to find us working hard at becoming better than we are, and at making this world a better place than it is.

The judgment

"Man's destiny is to die once for all; nothing remains after that but the judgment."²¹ What happens at the moment of death? First the soul is separated from the body, since the body can no longer hold onto it. The forces of the body fade, either quickly or slowly, and we first of all drift into unconsciousness. One gathers that this state of unconsciousness could last a while, hours, maybe even days. Who knows what lucid moments come and go in the last moments of life? Our life will pass before our eyes like a fast-moving film, as many people who have almost died assert. This would suggest the beginning of the judgment already.

When your soul leaves your body, you find yourself face to face with God. This is the real awakening. You awake from bodily to eternal life. Suddenly all the limiting matter that makes it so difficult to see God clearly in this life is rotting on Earth, and your vision becomes clear. The mind sees him "who is and who is to come, the omnipotent."²²

The gospel makes the point that death is the moment we cease to merit. Once the soul is separated from the body, the will is fixed immutably in good or in evil. "Watch therefore," says our Lord, "for you know not the day or the hour."²³ He implies clearly that when the day of death arrives, there is nothing more you can do. It will be too late to lament, "Lord, Lord, open to us," because the reply will necessarily be, *Nescio vos*: "I don't know you." The gulf that Jesus explains as existing between the saved and the damned in the parable of Lazarus²⁴ "symbolizes the impossibility, both for the elect and for the damned, of changing their destiny."²⁵ "Exhort one another everyday, while it is still today, that none of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin"²⁶ is a phrase from the epistle to the Hebrews which emphasizes the necessity of struggling now,

because there will not be any chance after death. "North or south as the tree falls, north or south trunk the will lie"²⁷ is the way the Old Testament expresses the same idea.

Theologians have argued at length on the different ways of explaining—as far as possible—this fact of the immutability of the will after death. The common feeling among people about it is often mixed with an image of God waiting for the innocent soul to line up in some sort of line, awaiting sentence, as if God were a human judge. In fact, the common teaching of the Fathers and theologians on this point shows clearly that the attitude of mind of a person at the moment of death is really a conclusion to his whole life.²⁸ The awakening of death is a discovery of God and a discovery of what our life has been with regard to God. There is no line. We shall be able to make up our own minds quite clearly. We shall be able to crown a lifetime of decisions with the final choice which will be unchangeable. Then we shall see all things in God with perfect clarity. We shall be able to say: "You are the Person I have sought all my life; all my efforts were directed toward coming to you." Or else we shall say: "You are the Person against whom I have always fought; you are the object of my undying hatred." This statement by the soul represents in fact what we call the particular judgment.

Facing God in judgment

The first judgment, called "particular" because it is carried out between the individual soul and God, happens "as soon as each of us leaves this life, because we are immediately presented before the tribunal of God; and there an exact assessment is made of everything that the soul has done, said, or thought at any time."²⁹ The existence of the particular judgment is taken for granted in many declarations of the solemn magisterium of the Church, from some of the earliest professions of faith down to the Second Vatican Council.³⁰ "Today you will be with me in paradise," says our Lord to the good thief,³¹ thus confirming that there has to be a particular judgment as soon as the soul leaves the body. It is, as mentioned above, a logical consequence of the condition we are in after death. The separated soul meets God face to face for the first time, and all his actions pass through his mind, illuminated besides by the God he now sees clearly as his ultimate end and purpose.

As the Roman Catechism unequivocally suggests, on the other side of death all the actions of each person will stand out in his mind with diaphanous clarity, everything he did or thought, everything he dreamt or desired, every success and failure, every sin, mistake, and minor victory. That is a fascinating and frightening thought. There, face to face with God, we will see how every one of our free actions measures up with God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Our earthly lives will be over. Our time to merit will have ceased. No further change will be possible. What will we feel like then? We will either feel the utter joy of

homecoming, or the utter sorrow of remorse and hatred of a person thrown into external darkness. The point is that God will not have to say a word. We will see it all ourselves. We will take ourselves away to eternal punishment, or take ourselves into the presence of God forever.

St. Thomas expresses it clearly: "In the same way as bodies due to their weight or lightness occupy immediately the place which belongs to them unless impeded by some obstacle, thus it is with souls. Once separated from the body, which subjected the soul to being in the state of a wayfarer, the soul immediately reaches eternal reward or punishment unless something impedes this happening: thus for example, venial sin can impede the immediate achievement of the reward."³²

Preparing for that encounter

St. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer succinctly expresses the attitude we should have at the prospect of God's intense scrutiny of our souls after death. "Does your soul not burn with the desire to make your Father-God happy when he has to judge you?"³³ This is the most positive attitude, and one which enables us to derive practical lessons from the particular judgment. If we spend our time on Earth making sure we know ourselves, in spite of all the self-defensive fog we tend to generate, then there will not be too many surprises awaiting us at the moment of blinding clarity after death. We need to examine ourselves now. We must do our own particular judgment daily here on Earth. There is something intensely personal about that meeting with God after death which can inspire us to develop an intensely personal conversation with God each day of our present life here on Earth.

Today many people use as many collective words as they can, seeking to disappear into the anonymity of the multitude, eluding the responsibility of a personal conversation by talking ad nauseam about structures. Maybe this is the same thing we noticed about people drowning out thoughts with noise. Talk your head off; even drink your head off. But above all do not think. And you must particularly avoid thinking about your own soul, and what has to be done to improve it.

To cut down this jungle of self-defense, all that is needed are a few minutes each day, preferably in the evening, spent not thinking about a meaningless world or what other people have done wrong, or trying to conjure up an idea of the eternal (the excuse many people claim for not really examining themselves), but about how we have lived this day. Did I take God into account today? Did I take people into account today? Did I work well today? It could take as little as three minutes. And tomorrow you can always try with God's grace to do better. On this Earth we have the chance to improve. Once death takes us, we shall be able only to lament the times we did not bother even to try. Now, if we examine ourselves in a straightforward manner, without being

scrupulous, about the ordinary things of each day, we can be well prepared for the final examination, the only one that matters.

The general judgment

"It is an article of faith that, after the general resurrection, Christ will judge all men on their thoughts, desires, words, deeds, and omissions of their earthly life, that is to say, according to their good or bad actions, and he will render to each according to his works."³⁴ If the prospect of speaking to God, even though he is our Father, personally and individually about every action and thought of our lives is one that fascinates and frightens, imagine what it will be like to stand in the presence of every human being that has ever existed on Earth and account for your whole life. We shall have risen from the dead. We shall all be there, body and soul, faculties now in a perfect state, human minds finally clear. There is no point in trying to think about this scene in merely human terms. It is beyond the imagination. It is the moment when God will reveal the justice of his judgments. He will award to every man what his acts have deserved; eternal life to those who have striven for glory, but retribution of his anger to those who are contumacious, rebelling against truth, and paying homage to wickedness.³⁵ St. Paul sees the final judgment in that passage, and begins to explain the reasons for this final moment in history.

The Roman Catechism elaborates that explanation further. "Sometimes, after men have died, their children still live; they imitate their parents. And also their books, their disciples, and others who propagate and defend their example live on; their doctrines and actions continue to have repercussions, from which follows the necessity of increasing the rewards or punishments of the dead. And since this influence for good or evil has to be propagated from one to another until the end of the world, it is logical and just that a complete reckoning be made of all these teachings and deeds, whether good or bad."³⁶

We find it hard indeed to visualize the entire population of history drawn up before the judgment seat of God. It is an immense panorama. When we try to appreciate it in the light of the gospel—the only true light that illumines us—it becomes a wonderful prospect. The true value of each person will be seen clearly. Many who were held as wise and intelligent during human history will be seen for what they were, masters of arrogant error. Many doctors of the Church, many Christians who smiled their way through the obscure battles of an everyday apostolate, will receive the honor and praise which is their due. St. Paul seems to foresee this when speaking to the honor-conscious Corinthians: "You do ill therefore to pass judgment prematurely, before the Lord's coming. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness, and reveal the secrets of men's hearts; then each of us will receive his due reward from God."³⁷

God's will made clear

What we only see dimly now³⁸ will then become perfectly clear; all the plans of God for our salvation, the exact impact of the cross of Jesus on human history, the exact place of every ounce of suffering of all the saints, and how a life lived close to God led so many people to the only salvation that matters: their eternal salvation.

How does evil triumph in the world so much? Here is a question all of us ask many times in our lives. Men who are perhaps (for who really knows?) evil, nations that persecute the freedom of their own people, countries under tyranny, and incarceration in concentration camps in a world that is supposed to be civilized. Even here there is a pattern. Who knows what God's plans are for the purification of people through suffering? Job asked God that question already, and to some degree God's answer was: "Wait and see." At the moment of the general judgment we will be enabled to see why evil seemed to triumph momentarily, why people who walk on others' rights seem to be so successful. Perhaps it was their only chance for some happiness, a few years of small satisfaction on Earth. Every man does some good. Every man is entitled then to some short time of ease. For afterward he may have to die eternally.³⁹

The trumpet will sound throughout the earth.⁴⁰ Heaven and Earth will dissolve in the presence of the supreme Judge.⁴¹ And in the midst of an immense silence⁴² the books that contain the deeds of all men will be opened.⁴³ All men will stand with their resurrected bodies in the presence of the Judge, in the presence of the angels, apostles, and also, some Fathers of the Church think, the martyrs.⁴⁴ Sentence will then be pronounced, in the hearing of all; an assessment will be made of all the actions of all men. And the fundamental guideline for judgment is already given us by Jesus. That guideline is love of others for love of God.⁴⁵

There is no doubt that meditation on this last event of human history is difficult. Part of the reason is its solemnity, its terrifying quality. We think of it as the end of all human grandeur, the burial of all human hopes. When the apostles came to Jesus, they told him how beautiful the temple was; and it was indeed beautiful. "You see this?" said Jesus. "Not one stone will be left on another." That was and is a terrifying statement! No human civilization can last. They are all only phases in the movement of mankind toward the last event, the general judgment. All the wars and empires, all the books and symphonies, all the artistry, all human adventures are only steps toward the last event, and are meaningful only insofar as they prepare us for the last event.

In chapter twenty-one, St. Luke gives us an additional description by Jesus of the end. Having told the apostles that the temple will be destroyed, that the sun and moon and stars will give portents and on Earth the nations will be in distress, bewildered by the roaring of the sea and its waves, having painted a truly terrifying portrait, he

changes key. Still with that portrait in mind, as a backdrop, he goes on to say: "When all this begins, look up and lift up your heads; it means that the time draws near for your deliverance."⁴⁶

Suddenly, and intentionally, our Lord strikes the note which helps us prepare now for the final event. "Keep watch then, praying at all times, so that you may be found worthy to come safe through all that lies before you, and to stand erect to meet the presence of the Son of Man."⁴⁷

"Come," our Lord is telling us, "make use of the time now, prepare this world for its final event, so that the end of time is not the end of everything." It will be just a beginning. For centuries man has dreamed of new worlds, just around every corner, just behind every breeze. There is only one new world. It will happen when the Son of Man comes with all his power and majesty to judge the world, to lay the foundation stone for a world which will last forever. "Behold," he insists, "I make all things new."⁴⁸

Notes

1 Thomas More, *The Four Last Things*, ed. D. O'Connor, 1935, p. 24.

2 Cf. *Roman Catechism*, ti, 6, 9.

3 1 Cor. 15:54-55.

4 Cf. Thomas More, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

5 Heb. 13:14.

6 Rom. 5:12.

7 XVI Council of Carthage, 418 A.D. Dz. 101 (222); cf. St. Damasus I, *Epist. ad episc. Orient.*, 374 A.D. Dz. (146); II Council of Orange, 529 A.D. Dz. 175 (372); Council of Trent, Session V, Dz. 789 (1512); St. Pius V, Bull "Ex omnibus afflictionibus," 1 October 1567, Dz. 1078 (1978); Pius VI, constitution *Auctorem fidei*, 28 Aug. 1794, Dz. 1517 (2617).

8 Cf. Thomas More, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

9 Lk. 12:4-6.

10 *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 167.

11 Wis. 2:3, 5, 6.

12 *Idem*, 2:21-25.

13 Garrigou-LaGrange, R., *Eternal Life and the Depths of the Soul*, p. 19.

14 Eccl. 1:2-9 (cf. St. Augustine's explanation of this book in *De civitate Dei*, book 20, chapter 3; he follows traditional scriptural studies in interpreting Ben Sirach [the spokesman] as being King Solomon).

15 Eccl. 12:13; Ps. 111:10.

16 J. Escriva de Balaguer, Letter, March 28, 1973, n. 10.

17 Eccl. 9:10.

18 Lk. 12:35-36.

19 Lk. 12:37.

20 Marx, Karl.

21 Heb. 9:27.

22 Rev. 1:8.

23 Mt. 25:13.

24 Cf. Lk. 16:19-31.

25 Garrigou-LaGrange, R., op. cit., p. 59.

26 Heb. 3:13.

27 Eccl. 11:3.

28 Garrigou-LaGrange, R., op. cit., pp. 60-64.

29 Roman Catechism, I, 8, 3.

30 Cf. II Council of Lyons, Dz. 464 (856-858); Benedict XII, Constitution Benedictus Deus, Jan. 29, 1336, Dz. 530-531 (1000-1002); Council of Florence, Dz. 693 (1304-1306); Vat. 1I, LG 48.

31 Lk. 23:43.

32 Summa Theologiae, Supplement, q. 69, a. 1.

33 J. Escriva de Balaguer, The Way, no. 746.

34 Garrigou-LaGrange, R., op. cit., p. 72; cf. Dz. 54, 86, 287, 429, 693.

35 Rom. 2:5-8.

36 Roman Catechism, I, 8, 4.

37 1 Cor. 4:5.

38 Cf. Idem, 13:14.

39 St. Augustine deals with this problem in De civitate Dei, book 20, ch. 2, and points out that God's judgments during this life will appear to be clearly just on the last day.

40 Cf. Mt. 24:31.

41 Cf. 2 Pet. 3:12.

42 Cf. 1 Thess. 4:16; 1 Cor. 15:52; Rev. 8:1.

43 Cf. Rev. 21:5.

44 Cf. Lk. 22:2.

45 Cf. Mt. 25:34-48.

46 Lk. 21:28.

47 Idem, 21:36.

48 Rev. 21:5.