

POPE ST. JOHN PAUL II – GENERAL AUDIENCE,
Wednesday, April 22, 1998
(Eschatology and Apocalyptic Symbols)

1. While the path to the Jubilee recalls the first historical coming of Christ, it also invites us to look forward with expectation to his second coming at the end of time. This eschatological perspective, which shows the fundamental orientation of Christian life towards the ultimate realities, is a continual call both to hope and to involvement in the Church and in the world.

We must not forget that for Christians the “eschaton”, that is, the final event, is to be understood not only as a future goal, but as a reality which has already begun with the historical coming of Christ. His Passion, death and Resurrection are the supreme event in the history of humanity, which has now entered its final phase, making a qualitative leap, so to speak. The horizon of a new relationship with God is unfolding for humanity, marked by the great offer of salvation in Christ.

This is why Jesus can say: “The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (John 5:25). The resurrection of the dead expected at the end of time already receives its first, decisive realization in spiritual resurrection, the primary objective of the work of salvation. It consists in the new life given by the risen Christ as the fruit of his redemptive work,

It is a mystery of rebirth in water and the Spirit (cf. John 3:5), which deeply marks the present and future of all humanity, even if its effectiveness at the moment is shown only in those who totally accept God’s gift and radiate it in the world.

2. This twofold dimension, both present and future, of Christ’s coming is apparent in his words. In the eschatological discourse which immediately precedes the paschal drama, Jesus predicts: “They will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (Mark 13:26-27).

In apocalyptic language clouds signify a theophany: They indicate that the second coming of the Son of Man will not take place in the weakness of flesh, but in divine power. These words of the discourse suggest the ultimate future that will bring history to an end. However, in the answer he gives to the high priest during his trial, Jesus repeats the eschatological prophecy, formulating it in terms of an imminent event: “I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matthew 26:64).

By comparing these words with those of the previous discourse, one can grasp the dynamic sense of Christian eschatology as a historical process which has already begun and is moving towards its fullness.

3. On the other hand, we know that the apocalyptic images of the eschatological discourse about the end of all things should be interpreted in light of their intense symbolism. They express the precariousness of the world and the sovereign power of Christ, in whose hands has been placed the destiny of humanity. History advances towards its goal, but Christ has not specified any chronological date. Attempts to predict the end of the world are therefore deceptive and misleading. Christ has assured us only that the end will not come before his saving work has reached a universal dimension through the preaching of the Gospel: “This Gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14).

Jesus says these words to his disciples who are anxious to know the date of the end of the world. They would have been tempted to think of a date close at hand. Jesus makes them realize that many events and upheavals must occur first and will be only “the beginning of the sufferings” (Mark 13:8). Therefore, as Paul says all creation is “groaning in travail”, waiting impatiently for the revelation of the sons of God (cf. Romans 8:19-22).

4. The evangelization of the world involves the profound transformation of the human person under the influence of Christ’s grace. Paul pointed out that the goal of history lies in the Father’s plan to “unite all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1:10). Christ is the center of the universe, who draws all people to himself to grant them an abundance of grace and eternal life.

The Father gave Jesus “authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man” (John 5:27). If judgment obviously foresees the possibility of condemnation, it is nevertheless entrusted to the One who is the “Son of Man”, that is, to a person full of understanding and in solidarity with the human condition. Christ is a divine judge with a human heart, a judge who wants to give life. Only unrepentant attachment to evil can prevent him from offering this gift, for which he did not hesitate to face death.

(To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, the Holy Father said:)

I extend a warm welcome to the Board of Directors of the Major Superiors of Women Religious in the United States, and through you I greet all the members of your communities. I welcome the students from the Universities of Tromsø and Oslo, and the Ansgar group from Gothenberg. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, Canada, the United States, the Philippines, Taiwan and Japan, I cordially invoke an abundance of divine blessings.