

Catholics and 'the Rapture'

Sr Cathy Jones r.a.

The gift of the Incarnation is the foundation of the hope that nourishes our faith during the season of Advent. But as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ, we might ask ourselves how we engage with a belief in the Second Coming of Christ, something which is often radicalised and even distorted in popular discourse, and as such may not be a strong tenet of faith for many Catholics. Sr Cathy Jones asks if there is a place for belief in 'the rapture' in the Catholic consciousness.

Catholics affirm their belief in Christ's Second Coming each time they attend Mass or whenever they recite the Creed. The belief that this present world will come to an end and that Christ will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead is an essential part of Christian doctrine, founded on the unambiguous words of Jesus Himself.¹ However, I am sure I am not the only Catholic who would say that this essential aspect of our faith has little impact on my everyday life as a Christian. Faced with such a great 'mystery' as the end of the world, or Christ's Second Coming, it is all too easy to put it to one side and not take the time and effort to reflect upon it.

In contrast to this rather ambivalent Catholic attitude, many Evangelical Protestant Christians put a great emphasis upon Christ's Second Coming. Fascination with the spectacular, coupled with literal readings of the Bible and clever marketing ploys have led to an unprecedented interest in the end of the world, particularly in what is known as 'the rapture' – a belief held by a significant proportion of Pentecostal and Evangelical Christians, particularly in the USA.

As an RE teacher in a Catholic Sixth Form College in South London where many of the pupils attended Pentecostal churches, I was amazed to find that the General RE class on 'heaven and hell' was the class that the teenagers most engaged with. As they shared their beliefs on 'the rapture' eagerly, I was acutely

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aware of the immense difference between their beliefs and mine, and, perhaps more importantly, between their theological methods (shared, I presume, with the pastors of the Churches they attended) and traditional Catholic methods of theology. I saw much 'faith' and practically no 'reason'; there was little attempt to understand, rather an enthused determination to integrate the varied concepts of the book of Revelation (taken literally) into

a system of what would happen at the end of the world. When the pupils ignored the bell to mark the end of the school day, staying to share their beliefs with one another instead of dashing away, I knew that I needed to do some research into what was meant by 'the rapture' and why these London teenagers were so fascinated by it.

As I began to do some initial investigation I came across some astonishing statistics. Firstly, the popularity of the 'Left Behind'² series in America was such that I wondered how I could have missed out on hearing about it:

Since 1995, over fifty million books bearing the banner of the Left Behind series have showed up not only in Protestant bookstores but also in mainstream, secular bookstores. In 1998 the original four books of the series simultaneously occupied the top four slots in the New York Times bestseller list—which does not count sales figures from Protestant bookstores.³

Alongside adult books and children's books, there are 'Left Behind' films, video games and music albums, and even a [video](#) specifically designed for those who it is believed will be literally 'left behind' after the rapture, with instructions on how to cope with 'the tribulation', when it is believed that those who are not found worthy to be 'raptured' will suffer horrendously.

The 'Left Behind' industry was one of the factors which led to the widespread influence of the predictions of the end of the world by Harold Camping, a Christian broadcaster from California (the president of Family Radio).⁴ His interpretation of figures found in the Bible led him to believe that the rapture would occur on 21 May 2011, when Jesus would return to earth, the 'righteous' ascend to heaven and those left behind on earth suffer five months of plagues, fire and brimstone, before the end of the world on 21 October 2011. Despite the explicit words of Jesus that no one ('neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son'⁵) knows the time of the Second Coming, Harold Camping convinced many that he was privy to this information.⁶

It has been reported that Camping invested \$100 million in a world-wide advertising campaign⁷; whatever we may say about his beliefs, it is indisputable that he was personally convinced that the end of the world was imminent. The number of people who actually believed Camping is unclear, but while sceptics held 'rapture parties', many devout Christians were persuaded by the cleverly designed-multi-media advertising, such as billboards proclaiming that 'the wise men knew' and '[wecanknow.com](#)', or ones which asserted boldly that '[the Bible guarantees it](#)'.

Camping's beliefs led famously to the popularity of ingenious marketing ploys, such as 'After the rapture pet care',⁸ where for \$10 you can ensure that your pet will be looked after if you, as a good Christian, are 'raptured' up into heaven and your pet left behind. Similarly, '[youvebeenleftbehind.com](#)' offers an e-mail service for those who have been 'raptured'; for \$15 per year, pre-prepared e-mails will be sent to family and friends six days after the rapture, via a 'dead-man's switch' which will automatically send out the e-mails when the Christians running the business fail to log in (because they've been 'raptured').

As a British Catholic reading about these business ventures, my first reaction was to view them as a rather amusing joke. The mentality underlying them is so far removed from the Catholic consciousness that I found it difficult to understand how anyone, let alone millions of people, could (literally) buy into such a system.

However, since many Christians firmly and enthusiastically believe in the rapture, it is important that Catholics understand what is meant by this belief, and that they know why it is incompatible with both Catholic doctrine and the Catholic method of 'doing theology'. A reasoned reflection on some central elements of the belief makes this abundantly clear.

The term 'rapture' refers to Jesus taking 'the righteous' or the selected few up into heaven on a given date. The key text for belief in 'the rapture' is 1 Thessalonians 4: 16-17:

For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.

Note the significant phrase 'caught up' (or 'raptured').

Biblical scholars generally agree that 1 Thessalonians is the earliest of St. Paul's letters, written in AD 50 or 51. St. Paul is confronting the fact that the early Christians expected an immanent return of Christ and, contrary to their expectations, Christians were dying before Christ's return. St. Paul writes to reassure the Christians of Thessalonica so that they 'may not grieve as others do who have no hope'⁹, because those who are alive when Christ returns 'will by no means precede those who have died.'¹⁰

This is the context within which 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 is directly located, and, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us, we should 'be attentive to what the human authors [of Sacred Scripture] truly wanted to affirm, and to what God wanted to reveal to us by their words.'¹¹ Any reasoned reflection upon the text of 1 Thessalonians 4 leads to the conclusion

that the passage aims to console and comfort the Christians of Thessalonica, particularly when the following verse, ‘therefore encourage one another with these words’¹² is taken into account. It is far removed from the way in which ‘the rapture’ is described, with great stress upon the suffering to be inflicted upon non-believers. Furthermore, nowhere in 1 Thessalonians 4 is there any indication that this event of meeting the Lord is in any way to be distinguished from the end of the world and the Last Judgment; a fact over-looked by ‘rapture’ enthusiasts, who give the impression of reading their pre-determined beliefs into the text.

Those who believe in ‘the rapture’ understand it as being clearly distinct from the Last Judgment, which they believe will take place after a specified period (usually a thousand years) of Christ reigning during a time of ‘tribulation’ for the sinners who have not been ‘raptured’. This pattern is nowhere to be found in the Bible. Those who advocate belief in ‘the rapture’ have joined together literal interpretations of various Scripture passages. So, for instance, Revelation 3:10 is often quoted as a Biblical source for the great ‘tribulation’.

Revelation 3:10 states, ‘Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world.’ Even a few moments spent trying to understand this passage lead to the obvious conclusion that it has a specific meaning. As we know from Revelation 3:7, it is part of the message addressed specifically to the Church in Philadelphia (Asia Minor) at the end of the first century. It makes no sense to apply this specific message to the whole world at some unspecified time, thousands of years later, let alone arbitrarily to unite to it references about ‘a thousand years’ in the book of Revelation (e.g. 20:1-3).

The Catholic Church teaches that we should read a text in the light of the ‘whole’ of Catholic teaching. It instructs us to ‘be especially attentive to the content and unity of the whole Scripture.’¹³ A ‘rapturist’ reading of 1 Thessalonians 4 clearly clashes with a ‘holistic’ reading of the Bible. The Bible teaches unequivocally one future coming of Christ, not two.

Finally, belief in ‘the rapture’ is less than 200 years old; it was ‘invented’ by a man called John Nelson Darby, a Church of Ireland minister who joined the

Plymouth Brethren and became a leader within it. His preaching about ‘the rapture’ was even criticised by some of his Plymouth Brethren, who saw that it had no substantial Biblical foundation, but, significantly, he dismissed their objections, claiming that God had revealed this doctrine to him – this ‘personal’ revelation having more weight for him than the Revelation of Scripture.

For Catholics, the key criterion for judging a private revelation is its conformity with public revelation, namely whether it agrees with Scripture and the Church’s tradition. Furthermore, no individual is to be the judge of their ‘experience’ of a ‘revelation’ of the meaning of Scripture.¹⁴ The methodology of John Nelson Darby clashes with Catholic methodology on both of these points.

So, when asked ‘what do Catholics believe about the rapture?’ the answer is simple: Catholics don’t believe in it. As Professor Guinan aptly states: ‘It is not about the future, the question, Will I be taken up by the rapture? Rather, it’s more about a present question: Will I be taken in by it?’¹⁵

Having analysed one distorted understanding of the end of the world, we are left with the question of what place Christ’s Second Coming should have within a Catholic theological framework. One reason why Catholics don’t give the same emphasis to the end of the world as many Christians of other denominations is the Catholic emphasis on what St. Bernard of Clairvaux called Christ’s ‘intermediary coming’¹⁶; Christ’s hidden presence in our midst (in our souls, in the sacraments and in other people).

Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) describes Christian hope as not being ‘some news item about tomorrow or the day after tomorrow’, for, ‘hope is personalized now. Its focus is not space and time, the question of “Where?” and “When?” but relationship with Christ’s person and longing for him to come.’¹⁷ In a wonderfully inspiring description of the relevance of Christ’s Second Coming to our everyday lives as Catholics, Ratzinger teaches that Christ’s Second Coming is the ‘highest intensification and fulfilment of the Liturgy’; and that it provides an ‘obligation to live the Liturgy as a feast of hope-filled presence directed towards Christ, the universal ruler.’¹⁸

He also provides several reasons why we should pray for Christ's return in glory, as we do at every Mass. The end of time inaugurated by Christ's return in glory will be the final victory over death, sin and evil, and those who have died will once again be 'whole', their souls united with their bodies. Furthermore, stressing human interdependence, Ratzinger emphasises that it is only at the Second Coming that the Church, the Body of Christ, will realise its true nature. Only then will Christ's joy be complete, for he 'does not want to receive perfect glory without you: that means, not without his people which is "his body" and "his members."'”¹⁹

With such a vision we can see the vital place a 'balanced' understanding of Christ's Second Coming has within Catholic theology. It is fitting that we rejoice in and respond to Christ's presence here and now, but also it is important to remember that our theology (and prayer) is weakened if the Second Coming isn't given its rightful place. For Catholics, Christ's Second Coming is a deeply joyful mystery of our faith; a mystery of hope, of fulfilment, of communion.

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This article is adapted from a lecture delivered as part of the Faith Matters series at Westminster Cathedral on 22 November 2011. You can read and watch the full lecture at: <http://www.rcdow.org.uk/faithmatters/autumn2011/>.

¹ Cf. Matthew 25:31-46

² <http://www.leftbehind.com/>

³ Akin, J. False Profit: Money, Prejudice, and Bad Theology in Tim LaHaye's Left Behind Series Catholic Answers Online article:

http://www.catholic.com/library/false_profit.asp

⁴ www.familyradio.com This website includes audio clips of Harold Camping explaining why the Second Coming didn't occur as he predicted.

⁵ Matthew 24:36; Mark 13:32

⁶ Following the non-momentous October 21st, he now believes that we can't know the time of the Second Coming.

⁷ Cf. <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/may/21/local/la-me-rapture-20110521>

⁸ www.aftertherapturepetcare.com

⁹ 1 Thessalonians 4:13

¹⁰ 1 Thessalonians 4:15

¹¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church §109 (Cf. *Dei Verbum* 12 § 1)

¹² 1 Thessalonians 4:18

¹³ Catechism of the Catholic Church §112.

¹⁴ Church teaching is clear that 'the task of interpreting the Word of God authentically has been entrusted solely to the Magisterium of the Church' (CCC §100.)

¹⁵ 'Raptured or Not? A Catholic Understanding' by Professor M Guinan:

www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/CU/ac1005.asp

¹⁶ Sermon 5 on Advent (St. Bernard describes a 'threefold coming of Christ' - in the Incarnation, his 'intermediary coming' and his coming again at the end of time.)

¹⁷ J. Ratzinger, Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life [Second Edition] page 8.

¹⁸ Ibid. Page 204.

¹⁹ Ibid. Page 186, quoting Origin (*In Leviticum homiliae VII, 1-2*)