

GENERAL JUDGMENT (Matthew 24:29-31)

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For some reason, people just love apocalyptic prophecies. There was a rash of them as we approached the year 2000 and now, the movie "2012" presents the most recent apocalyptic vision with a doomsday scenario of catastrophic proportions. Although it is supposedly based upon a prediction embedded within the ancient Mayan calendar, it is nothing more than fantasy. And by the way, its vision of the world's cataclysmic destruction also just happens to be intensely anti-Catholic.

So many of the modern apocalyptic scenarios, especially those in the movies, have no use for what Sacred Scripture has to say about the subject. For many people, God and His writings are no longer relevant. But although the Bible does give us much information about that final chapter in the history of the world, the problem is in understanding and interpreting the texts. For instance, in Jesus' apocalyptic discourse found in today's gospel written by St. Matthew, we have two very separate themes, which people often get mixed up. In the first part of this passage, Jesus is talking about the destruction of Jerusalem, which would come within the lifetime of many of His listeners. In the second part of the passage, on the other hand, He deals with the end of the world, of which the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple would only be a symbol.

Because biblical passages dealing with the End Times are very symbolic in character, it is very difficult to determine what the actual events of those last days will look like. There are some elements, however, on which the Church has been clear. One of them can be seen in the following passage from today's gospel: "And they will see the Son of Man coming upon the clouds of heaven with great power and majesty. And he will send forth his angels with a trumpet and a great sound, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other."¹

Before this final moment at the end of time, each of us first faces, shall we say, "private" personal judgment just between me and God, when standing alone before Truth Himself the truth of one's whole life will be revealed and his fate for eternity is sealed. It is not so much that God judges and then condemns as it is that the person himself comes to the realization that he has ended his life either in God's friendship or in alienation to Him and the consignment to either heaven or hell is merely the logical consequence of that fact. This is what we call the Particular Judgment.

But what the passage from St. Matthew's gospel talks about is a second judgment: the General Judgment, when on the last day, all people who have ever lived will be reunited with their bodies and stand together before the Eternal Judge. We will not be re-judged as if some new evidence had come to light because our fate as determined at the Particular Judgment was sealed for all eternity. Instead, this time it will be a social judgment, at which each person's life will be revealed for all to see.

The General Judgment will be both a universal and simultaneous judgment. All human beings will be judged in such a way that the whole of mankind will witness the event. In ways that we cannot now comprehend, every human being will somehow be

aware of what every other human being had done.² In some manner, all of our sinful, as well as our virtuous actions will be revealed for all mankind to see.

But the purpose of the General Judgment is not just to reveal our sins and virtuous actions once again in order to merely ratify the sentence that has already been passed on each person. Its primary purpose will be to reveal the consequences of our sins and virtuous actions to all humanity, for “every virtuous action we perform, no matter how trivial, has a ripple of consequences that go on and on until the end of time. So, too, every sinful action we perform has results that will literally never end.”³ The General Judgment then is to reveal the consequences of all acts of free will throughout all history in order to show how both sin and virtue have a lasting effect in some manner throughout all time. Therefore, in the Particular Judgment we are accountable on a personal level before God for all the sins that we have committed against Him. In the General Judgment, however, we will be accountable on a societal level for the consequences of those sins because there is no such thing as a “sterile human act.”⁴ Nothing is done in a vacuum. Nothing is done which does not affect all of creation in some manner. We shape the future by what we do—good or bad, so we will be accountable not only for our actions alone but also for what follows as a result of them.

Unfortunately, there is a tendency in our world today to talk only about the love and mercy of God. He is seen as so merciful that His justice is all but negated—If God is so loving and merciful, how could He ever punish anyone? Too many think that He just look the other way when it comes to evil. True justice, however, means that each gets his due. The bad receive their just punishment, but the good receive their just reward. You can’t have one without the other. One of the reasons for the General Judgment, therefore, is to reveal God’s divine justice, which is not always vindicated here on earth.

The evil that we have done, however, will not be revealed in order to humiliate us, but rather to show God’s Providence in how He mysteriously brings good out of evil. “All of our sinful actions will not necessarily be revealed as sinful actions. . . . One of God’s mysterious reasons for allowing sin is that His mercy might be glorified toward the repentant sinner, and the sinner might be honored by his humble repentance.”⁵ And it is believed that the manifestation of God’s mercy will take several forms: “the mercy of God in forgiving sinners; the mercy of God in drawing good out of evil; the mercy of God in not punishing as severely as sinners deserved; the mercy of God in giving sinners time to repent; the mercy of God in showering with His gifts the repentant sinner.”⁶

Jesus told us about the Last Days and the General Judgment so that we would think more seriously about what we do on this earth and the consequences of our actions. He didn’t tell us the day when it will happen because we would only put off doing what is right. Instead, Jesus urged us to prepare now and to always be ready as if that day was coming soon. We may shudder at the thought of the General Judgment but what really counts is the Particular Judgment, which awaits us at the moment of death. And that moment could come at any time.

On that Last Day, Christ will come in all His glory to judge the living and the dead. God’s justice will be revealed, confirming the good in their just reward and the evil in their just punishment. In both cases, “the last judgment will glorify God; His infinite justice no less than His infinite mercy.”⁷ “His purpose is to reveal the mystery of His providence from the dawn of sin at the beginning of the human race until the last sin to be

committed before the dawn of eternity.”⁸ He will reveal how each of His rational creatures served Him, rewarding each one according to his deeds.

¹ Matthew 24:30-31.

² Hardon, John A., *The Catholic Catechist's Course for Parents and Teachers: Explanations fo Questions, Volume I: the Apostles Creed*. (Inter Mirifica: Kensington, Maryland, 1994), 150.

³ Hardon, John A., 150.

⁴ Hardon, John A., 150.

⁵ Hardon, John A., 151.

⁶ Hardon, John A., 151.

⁷ Hardon, John A., 149.

⁸ Hardon, John A., 152.