

THE SECOND COMING OF THE LORD AND THE LAST JUDGMENT

Will the last judgment occur at the second coming of Jesus or are the two events distinct and separate? As Catholics, we are mindful and profess in our Creed that Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead. The Second Vatican Council's "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" states, "Already the final age of the world is with us and the renewal of the world is irrevocably under way; it is even now anticipated in a certain real way, for the Church on earth is endowed already with a sanctity that is real though imperfect" (No. 48). To try to grasp the when, what and how of this Second Coming and last judgment, we really need to glean the various passages in Sacred Scripture to see how our Church has interpreted them. They are united in one drama.

Our Lord in the Gospel spoke of His second coming. He indicated that various signs would mark the event. Mankind would suffer from famine, pestilence and natural disasters. False prophets who claim to be the Messiah will deceive and mislead people. Nations will wage war against each other. The Church will endure persecution. Worse yet, the faith of many will grow cold and they will abandon the faith, even betraying and hating one another. St. Paul describes a "mass apostasy" before the Second Coming, which will be led by the "son of perdition," the "Man of Lawlessness," the "adversary who exalts himself above every so called god proposed for worship." This "lawless one" is part of the work of Satan, and with power, signs, wonders and seductions will bring to ruin those who have turned from the truth. However, "the Lord Jesus will destroy him with the breath of His mouth and annihilate him by manifesting His own presence." The Catechism affirms, "God's triumph over the revolt of evil will take the form of the last judgment after the final cosmic upheaval of this passing world" (No. 667).

Our Lord will come suddenly. "The Son of Man in His day will be like the lightning that flashes from one end of the sky to the other" (Lk 17:24). St. Peter predicts, "The day of the Lord will come like a thief and on that day the heavens will vanish with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire and the earth and all its deeds will be made manifest" (2 Pt 3:10).

Death will be no more. The dead shall rise and those souls who have died will be united again to their bodies. All will have a glorious, transformed, spiritualized body as St. Paul said, "He will give a new form to this lowly body of ours and remake it according to the pain of His glorified body..." (Phil 3:21).

At this time, the final, or general judgment will occur. Jesus said, "Those who have done right shall rise to life; the evildoers shall rise to be damned" (Jn 5:29). Our Lord described this judgment as follows: "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, escorted by all the angels of heaven, He will sit upon His royal throne and all the nations will be assembled before Him. Then He will separate them into two groups, as a shepherd separated sheep from goats" (Mt 25:31-32).

Here each person will have to account for his conduct and the deepest secrets of his soul will come to light. How well each person has responded to the prompting of God's grace will be made clear. Our attitude and actions toward our neighbor will reflect how well we have loved our Lord. "As often as you did it for one of My least brothers, you did it for Me" (Mt 25:41).

Our Lord will judge us accordingly. For those who have died and already have faced the particular judgment, their judgment will stand. Those living at the time of the Second Coming will receive judgment. Those who have rejected the Lord in this life, who have sinned mortally, who have no remorse for sin and do not seek forgiveness, will have condemned themselves to hell for all eternity. "By rejecting grace in this life, one already judges oneself, receives according to one's works and can even condemn oneself for all eternity by rejecting the Spirit of love (Catechism, No. 678). The souls of the righteous will enter heavenly glory and enjoy the beatific vision and those who need purification will undergo it.

We do not know when the Second Coming will occur. Jesus said, "As to the exact day or hour, no one knows it, neither the angels in heaven nor even the Son, but only the Father. Be constantly on the watch! Stay awake! You do not know when the appointed time will come" (Mk 13:32-33).