

# *Are We Living in the Last Days?*

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Have you ever had non-Catholic friends ask questions such as, "Do Catholics believe in the Rapture?" and "Why doesn't the Catholic Church interpret the book of Revelation literally?" Perhaps you or someone you know has read the best-selling *Left Behind* books and wants to know if they are "biblically sound." Maybe you saw a televangelist explaining that Christ will come soon to Rapture Christians from earth, but you've never heard your priest talk about it.

There has been a surge in interest in topics such as Bible prophecy and the Rapture in the last few years, largely due to the surprising success of the *Left Behind* series, co-authored by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, two Fundamentalist Protestant authors.<sup>1</sup> Many Catholics have read the books, and while some recognize that the books do not completely agree with Catholic doctrine, others assume they are compatible. Aren't the authors devout Christians trying to spread the Gospel?<sup>2</sup>

Given this situation, this article seeks to do two things. First, outline Catholic beliefs about the "last days," relying on Scripture and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Second, compare those teachings with the belief in the Rapture as it is found in the *Left Behind* books and similar works.

## **Are we living in the "last days"?**

Are we, as many Christians believe, living in the last days? In fact, the "last days" refers not only to the "end of time," but to the last two thousand years. Scripture teaches that the Incarnation ushered in "the last days." According to Hebrews 1:1-2, "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world."

At Pentecost, Peter preached that "the last days" had arrived, in fulfillment of the words of the prophet Joel: "For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only the third hour of the day; but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: 'And it shall be in the last days,' God says,

that I will pour forth my spirit on all mankind . . ." (Acts 2:15-17; cf. Joel 2:28-32).

"The last days" or "the end times," properly understood, refers to the time of the New Covenant, the gathering together of God's people in the Church, which is "on earth, the seed and the beginning of the kingdom" (CCC 567, 669; Lumen Gentium). The Holy Spirit, the "soul of the Church," has been and is being poured out, because of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ:

The Holy Spirit is at work with the Father and the Son from the beginning to the completion of the plan for our salvation. But in these "end times," ushered in by the Son's redeeming Incarnation, the Spirit is revealed and given, recognized and welcomed as a person. Now can this divine plan, accomplished in Christ, the firstborn and head of the new creation, be embodied in mankind by the outpouring of the Spirit: as the Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting (CCC 686).

This understanding of the "last days" differs from that of those who believe in the Rapture. Catholics agree that there will definitely be an "end of time" and that history as we know it will one day be complete. But we also recognize that each of us will face the end of our time on earth, and that this should, in many ways, concern us more than the end of the world (see CCC 1007).

## **Church authority and Bible prophecy**

How should we understand the Bible's teaching on the "last days"? For Catholics, the Bible is truly the Word of God, and when the Word of God says that the Church is the Body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23; 5:22-33) and the "pillar and support of truth" (1 Timothy 3:15), it points to a key principle: the task of authentically interpreting Scripture belongs to the Church. And the Church has a certain structure, based on Christ's own choosing of apostles and granting them authority: "For, of course, all that has been said about the manner of interpreting Scripture is ultimately subject to the judgment of the Church which exercises the divinely conferred commission and ministry of watching over and interpreting the Word of God (CCC 119).

This does not mean that the Catholic Church has definitively interpreted every single passage of Scripture or that individual Catholics cannot study Scripture for themselves. On the contrary, the Church has definitively interpreted less than a dozen passages, while encouraging Catholics to read the Bible in light of the "living Tradition of the whole Church" (CCC 113).

The issue of authority in interpreting Scripture is important because so much of what passes for "Biblical prophecy"

today is really pseudo-Biblical guesswork, noteworthy for its use of sloppy methods, hazy conjecture, and overt sensationalism. Many "prophecy teachers," especially in the last three decades, have taken passages of Scripture and applied them to current events and people with little or no regard for historical context or original meaning of the texts. This has resulted, for example, in the Antichrist being identified as the Pope, Hitler, Gorbachev, Ronald Reagan, Saddam Hussein, and other, lesser-known people.

The puzzling and sometimes shocking images of Revelation are interpreted in clever, bizarre, and often laughable ways. The mark of the beast (Rev. 13:16-18) is seen in bar codes, credit cards, computer chips and laser beams. Most Catholics who encounter such misinterpretations usually scratch their heads and steer clear of the biblical books that deal with apocalyptic themes, Daniel and Revelation. They are content to let their non-Catholic friends battle over these confusing matters.

This is unfortunate for a couple of reasons. First, Catholics should study all of Scripture, including difficult books such as Daniel and Revelation, because God gave it to the Church for that purpose. Second, the Catholic Church offers two thousand years of reflection and study of Scripture, resulting in a rich, balanced, and nuanced understanding of the whole Bible. If the Catholic Church has the authority that Catholics believe she possesses, then they need to take seriously her understanding of Scripture. At the very least, doing so will help them avoid the serious misunderstandings of some other Christians and will equip Catholics to discuss these misunderstandings with them.

### **Defining some terms**

The Left Behind books are based on a theological system known as dispensationalism. This term refers to the belief that God works in history through a series of different epochs, or dispensations. In each of these periods, God tests man in a certain way. Man fails the test, and then God judges man. On this view, man now lives during the "Church Age," which is so full of apostasy and error that only a remnant of "true believers" remains.

According to dispensationalism, God is pursuing two purposes in history: one involving an earthly people (Israel) and the other, a heavenly people (the Church).<sup>3</sup> Dispensationalists believe that when Jesus Christ came, He offered the earthly people, Israel, a physical, earthly kingdom, but that they rejected Him as their Messiah. Consequently, Jesus formed a heavenly people, the Church, who are not meant to reign here on earth, but will reign with Him in heaven.

However, God will still fulfill the many Old Testament promises to Israel, His earthly people, because,

dispensationalists insist, those promises were unconditional. When Christ founded the Church, all of those promises were "put on hold" until the heavenly people were removed from the earth in the Rapture. Since Israel has now been re-established as a nation, most dispensationalists believe that the removal of the Church via the Rapture can occur at any moment.

The Rapture will be a secret "snatching up" of all true believers in Christ to heaven; it will be immediately followed according to most dispensationalists by seven years of Tribulation and the reign of the Antichrist. At the end of the Tribulation, Christ will come again to establish an earthly, thousand-year reign, based in Jerusalem, where a new temple (complete with animal sacrifices) will exist.<sup>4</sup>

The dispensationalist view of the end times was developed in the 1830s by an ex-Anglican priest named John Nelson Darby, who condemned most of Christendom as apostate and worldly. Dispensationalism subsequently spread throughout the U.S., in the early 1900s, as a result of the popular Scofield Reference Bible, which incorporated dispensationalist ideas into its footnotes. In the 1970s, the doctrine was popularized through the best-selling books such as *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey.<sup>5</sup>

Some Catholics might dismiss these unusual beliefs as unimportant. But that would be a mistake for a number of reasons. For one thing, despite waning popularity in scholarly theological circles, dispensationalism is still a widespread belief system among Fundamentalists and many Evangelicals, even many of those who are unfamiliar with the term.

Another reason is that the vast majority of dispensationalists are either actively opposed to, or are very suspicious of, the Catholic Church. Many of them believe the Catholic Church will play a central role in a coming one world apostate religion. In a sense, this shouldn't surprise anyone, since the core of dispensationalism is incompatible with Catholic doctrine, even though they are compatible on some secondary issues.

Moreover, many Catholics who leave the Church are drawn towards groups that teach dispensationalism in some form or another. The belief in the Rapture is often what attracts these straying Catholics.

Finally, through Fundamentalist and conservative Evangelical political activity, dispensationalist ideas and interests have had a significant influence on U.S. foreign policy towards Israel and the Middle East, and on how many of these Christians view the U.S. Many Fundamentalist and Evangelical Christians are staunch allies of Israel for theological, rather than political reasons.

## **Two people of God, or just one?**

Eschatology, the study of the last things, flows directly from ecclesiology, the doctrine of the Church. This explains some of the significant differences between what Catholics and many Fundamentalists believe about the end of time. While Tim Lahaye, Hal Lindsey, and other dispensationalists teach that God has two people, the Church and Israel, the Catholic Church asserts that God has always had only one people, or family, throughout history. According to Catechism, "This 'family of God' is gradually formed and takes shape during the stages of human history, in keeping with the Father's plan. In fact, 'already present in figure at the beginning of the world, this Church was prepared in marvelous fashion in the history of the people of Israel . . . . Established in this last age of the world and made manifest in the outpouring of the Spirit, it will be brought to glorious completion at the end of time'" (CCC 759).

Therefore, the Catholic Church has always understood herself as being the New Israel (Gal. 6:16; Eph. 2:11-12) and the new People of God (1 Pet. 2:9-10), the recipients of the New Covenant given through Christ (Heb. 8:8-13). The Old Covenant was not rejected by Christ, but fulfilled and taken up into the New Covenant; it concluded with the New Covenant and is included in it. This difference between dispensationalism and Catholic doctrine is the basis for other disagreements, including those involving the Rapture and the nature of the millennium.

(Interestingly enough, even Luther and Calvin understood the Church to be the true heir of Israel. They also would have rejected dispensationalism, which only emerged as a method of biblical interpretation in the last two hundred years or so.)

Catholic doctrine also teaches that the Church is intimately related to the Kingdom of God. The Church is "ultimately one, holy, catholic, and apostolic in her deepest and ultimate identity, because it is in her that 'the Kingdom of heaven,' the 'Reign of God,' already exists and will be fulfilled at the end of time" (CCC 865). The Kingdom is not yet complete, but began with the Incarnation and will be fully realized at the end of time: "The kingdom of heaven was inaugurated on earth by Christ. 'This kingdom shone out before men in the word, in the works and in the presence of Christ.' The Church is the seed and beginning of this kingdom. Its keys are entrusted to Peter" (CCC 567). In its fullness, the Kingdom is not an earthly reign, but the final triumph of Christ over the power of sin and Satan, culminating in an eternity spent in communion with the Triune God: "The kingdom has come in the person of Christ and grows mysteriously in the hearts of those incorporated into him, until its full eschatological manifestation" (CCC 865).

In contrast, dispensationalists believe that the Kingdom will be a thousand-year, earthly reign of Christ, known as the Millennium (from the Latin word for "thousand years"). Belief in a literal thousand-year earthly reign is called millenarianism or millennialism. It has been explicitly rejected by the Catholic Church. In 1944, the Holy Office warned against ". . . the system of mitigated Millenarianism, which teaches . . . that Christ the Lord before the final judgment, whether or not preceded by the resurrection of the many just, will come visibly to rule over this world. . . . The system of mitigated Millenarianism cannot be taught safely" (CCC 676).

It is true that some of the early Church Fathers before the fourth century believed in an earthly, millennial reign of Christ. This belief was largely formed in reaction to Gnostics, who taught that Christ and His Kingdom had nothing to do with the physical world since, the Gnostics claimed, it was inherently evil. However, St. Augustine, writing in the late 300s and early 400s, interpreted the reference to a "thousand years" in Revelation 20 as a metaphor for the age of the Church. This would become the accepted belief of the Church, going unchallenged for many centuries. Yet the Catholic Church has never made a formal statement about what the Millennium is, although Augustine's view has usually been accepted by Catholic theologians.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, none of the Church Fathers believed in a secret removal of true believers prior to the Tribulation. On the contrary, they taught that the Church would undergo a period of intense tribulation prior to the Second Coming. The idea of a "secret" Rapture, developed by John Nelson Darby in the 1830s, would have been both foreign and repulsive to the early Christians, as it was bothersome to many of Darby's Protestant allies.<sup>7</sup>

## **The rapture and the second coming**

The Church tacitly rejects the "secret" Rapture based on her doctrine of the Church. It has always been Catholic teaching, of course, that Jesus Christ will physically and visibly return to earth. As we say in the Creed each week at Eucharistic Liturgy, "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end" (cf. CCC 681-682).

Yet from the Catholic perspective, the term rapture is problematic. On one hand, it can refer to being taken to be with Christ (1 Thess. 4:17; see CCC 1025). In fact, the term rapture comes from Jerome's Latin translation of 1 Thes 4:17, meaning "to be caught up." Catholics believe this will happen at the Second Coming, when our bodies are resurrected (see CCC 989-990).

On the other hand, the term "Rapture" is, in a sense, owned and copyrighted by dispensationalists. In popular discourse, it almost always refers to a secret snatching away of "true believers," prior to the Tribulation, and distinct from the Second Coming. Since the term Rapture is rarely used in Catholic circles, it is easy to see how confusion among Catholics might arise. But in any case the Rapture, as dispensationalists use the term, is contrary to Catholic belief.

### **Israel, tribulation, and Antichrist**

Another issue is the fate of Israel. What will happen to Israel in the end? According to the Catechism, "The glorious Messiah's coming is suspended at every moment of history until His recognition by 'all Israel', for 'a hardening has come upon part of Israel' in their 'unbelief' toward Jesus" (CCC 674). The Church, reflecting upon Romans 9-11, believes that Israel will somehow come to recognize Christ for who He is. Precisely how this will occur the Church has not said.

The Church also says relatively little about the time of trial or tribulation in the final days. The Church will go through the great trial, but we do not know how long it will last. The Catechism declares, "Before Christ's Second Coming the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers. The persecution that accompanies her pilgrimage on earth will unveil the 'mystery of iniquity' in the form of a religious deception offering men an apparent solution to their problems at the price of apostasy from the truth" (CCC 675; also see CCC 2642).

This time of trial will be at the start of the "last days" in the sense of the end of history: "According to the Lord, the present time is the time of the Spirit and of witness, but also a time still marked by 'distress' and the time of evil which does not spare the Church and ushers in the struggles of the last days. It is a time of waiting and watching" (CCC 672).

Along with this belief in a time of future testing and trial, the Church teaches that there have been many Antichrists, but there will also be the Antichrist who leads a worldwide system of anti-Christian belief:

. . . The supreme religious deception is that of the Antichrist, a pseudo-messianism by which man glorifies himself in place of God and of his Messiah come in the flesh. . . . The Antichrist's deception already begins to take shape in the world every time the claim is made to realize within history that messianic hope which can only be realized beyond history through the [end times] judgment. . . (CCC 675, 676)

This last sentence applies to any sort of utopian scheme that ignores man's fallen nature, the reality of sin, and man's need for salvation through Christ.

### **Interpreting the book of Revelation**

Interpretations of the book of Revelation are, undoubtedly, among the most hotly debated aspects of the Bible. The Catholic Church has not officially interpreted the difficult passages in Revelation. But various Catholic scholars have commented on them, and have debated the various interpretations.<sup>8</sup>

There are four main approaches to the book of Revelation: futurist, preterist, historicist and idealist. Futurists believe that most or all of the book of Revelation has yet to be fulfilled; preterists say that most or all of it was fulfilled in the first century; historicists claim that events described in Revelation have been transpiring for the last two thousand years; and idealists believe that the book of Revelation is allegorical and has little or nothing to do with historical events.<sup>9</sup>

The Catholic Church allows a wide range of interpretive possibilities, including forms of futurism, preterism, historicism and idealism. For example, a Catholic may believe the book of Revelation describes the conflict of good and evil as experienced by individual Christians or the Church (idealism), and makes prophetic utterances about events still to occur (futurism), and also refers to events that have already occurred, either in the early Church or later Church history (preterism and historicism). Catholic flexibility here is based on the fact that Scripture, inspired by God, often has different, yet complementary, meanings.

From early times, the Church, following the examples of Christ and the Apostles (i.e., Lk 24:25-27; 1 Cor 10:1-4), understood Scripture to have different senses, a literal and a spiritual sense (CCC 115). As the Catechism explains, the spiritual sense is always rooted in the literal sense: "The literal sense is the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by exegesis, following the rules of sound interpretation: 'All other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal'" (CCC 116).

A common misconception is that Catholics interpret Scripture especially the book of Revelation "symbolically," while Evangelicals interpret it "literally." This has often been used to explain why the Catholic Church rejects an earthly, thousand-year reign of Christ. Yet few "literalists" bother to interpret literally other images in Revelation, such as the Beast, the dragon, the locusts, and the four horsemen.

### **A last word on the last days**

In conclusion, it can be seen that the Catholic Church says relatively little about future events leading up to Christ's Second Coming. Many of her teachings are rejections (either implicit or explicit), not affirmations, of particular beliefs such as the dispensational dichotomy between the Church and Israel, the "secret" Rapture, and the earthly millennial kingdom. What she does teach is quite clear, as well as succinct: there will be a Second Coming, a time of trial which the Church must endure, an Antichrist, a conversion of Israel to Christ, a definitive judgment of all people, and the fulfillment of the Kingdom that has already begun in the Church. Within those parameters, Catholics may freely roam, search the Scriptures, and seek to better understand the Word of God.

7. A minority today among Fundamentalists and Evangelicals, historical premillennialists who do not agree with the dispensational distinction between Israel and the Church, but do believe there will be a literal, one thousand-year reign of Christ on earth.
8. Highly recommended is the Navarre commentary, *Revelation: Texts and Commentaries* (Four Courts Press, 1992). Another solid Catholic commentary still in print is Dominican H. M. Feret's *The Apocalypse Explained* (Fort Collins, CO: Roman Catholic Books, 1958). An excellent, detailed, and scholarly commentary, written by Presbyterian theologian David Chilton, is *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Fort Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987). Chilton also wrote a shorter, more popular commentary, *The Great Tribulation* (Fort Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987).
9. A helpful volume is *Revelation: Four Views* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), a parallel commentary edited by Steve Gregg, an Evangelical teacher. A related work is *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), edited by Robert G. Clouse.

## Endnotes

1. The first book of the series, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days*, was published in 1995. Seven books have followed, with the last two, *The Indwelling* and *The Mark*, reaching the top of numerous best-sellers lists, including the *New York Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal*. The series has now sold over 30 million copies.
2. Some Catholics with whom I have corresponded have taken this attitude. One Catholic suggested that we focus on the positive things in the Left Behind series and how to use them to evangelize. This correspondent described it as "paranoid" to try to find anti-Catholicism in the books.
3. Charles C. Ryrie, a leading dispensationalist of the last forty years, writes, "A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the Church distinct" (*Dispensationalism Today*[Chicago: Moody Press, 1965], 44). He quotes Lewis S. Chafer, another leading dispensational theologian: "The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity" (*Dispensationalism Today*, 45).
4. This belief is held by almost all dispensationalists and is based on their interpretations of Old Testament prophecies. In his commentary *Revelation Unveiled*(Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), LaHaye explains that the prophet Ezekiel "goes into great detail regarding the matter of worshipping in the Temple, even pointing out that the sacrificial systems will be reestablished. These sacrifices during the millennial Kingdom will be to the nation of Israel what the Lord's Supper is to the Church today: a reminder of what they have been saved from. No meritorious or efficacious work will be accomplished through these sacrifices. Instead, they will remind Israel repeatedly of their crucified Messiah . . ." (*Revelation Unveiled*, 341). What LaHaye fails to mention is that Ezekiel never states that the sacrifices will merely be reminders this is a completely unwarranted conclusion and is inconsistent with LaHaye's supposed "literal" interpretation of Scripture.
5. Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* was the best-selling book of the 1970s, according to the *New York Times*. Translated into over fifty languages, it has sales of thirty-five million copies. Lindsey has authored close to twenty books and still maintains a high profile in the world of "Bible prophecy."
6. In writing about St. Augustine's view of the millennium, Fr. Vincent P. Miceli, S.J. states that "The real meaning of the thousand years is that the saints are reigning at the present time with Christ in His kingdom the Church. For the Church is now, today, His kingdom" (*The Antichrist* [Harrison, NY: Roman Catholic Books, 1981], 74).