

## ESSAYS

### DARE WE HOPE FOR THE LAST JUDGMENT?

*Joseph Hagan, O.P.*

*Faith in the Last Judgment is first and foremost hope.*  
— *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI

**I**n *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI proposes the Last Judgment as “not primarily an image of terror, but an image of hope; for us it may even be the decisive image of hope.” It seems shocking. Most associate the Last Judgment with fear and dread. Yet Benedict invented nothing new in proposing the Last Judgment as an image of hope. Rather, he is bringing Christians back to their patrimony, even if it surprises our modern ears. The Second Letter of St. Peter states:

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, *waiting for and hastening* the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be kindled and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire! (2 Pt 3:11–12)

St. Peter acknowledges that Christ’s return will destroy heaven and earth, and in the same breath, he calls on Christians

to be “waiting for and hastening” this terrible day. Looking to the Second Coming, St. Paul cries out: “Our Lord, come!” (1 Cor 16:22), and St. John exclaims: “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rv 22:17).

We hope in God, that he will unite us to himself on the great and terrible day. We also hope in the way he will accomplish this, including the Last Judgment. But what does such hope look like?

### OUR DESIRE FOR JUSTICE

For all our fear before God’s justice, we hunger for justice with a growing impatience. Think of our country’s various political movements: women’s suffrage, civil rights, anti-war protests, women’s rights, gay rights, abortion rights, right to life, etc. In each case, we see a human judgment that something is unjust, and we see an earnest pursuit of justice.

There is something noble in seeking justice in this world, but there is also something fallible. It is easy to be wrong in judging what is just or unjust. Both advocates of abortion and its opponents see themselves as fighting for justice; one side is seeking a false justice. Even when we judge rightly, we are often unable to render full justice. Take for example the case of a murdered child. Even if the jury convicts the right man and the judge hands down a just sentence, no human could ever return the murdered child to her parents. Human justice can only extend so far.

Worst of all, a human pursuit of justice may bring about an even worse injustice. Here, we can think of the French Revolution and the Bolshevik Revolution. Real injustices triggered both these revolutions, but at the same time their attempts to reorder society unleashed new horrors. The Reign of Terror decapitated cloistered Carmelite nuns, and Lenin invented concentration camps—all in the name of justice apart from God. They proved Nietzsche’s aphorism: “He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster” (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 146).

The point is clear enough. Man's attempts at justice are limited at best and can even spark the worst atrocities. We long for a justice beyond our reach, a justice that can only be found in God, a justice that will be realized perfectly only in the Last Judgment.

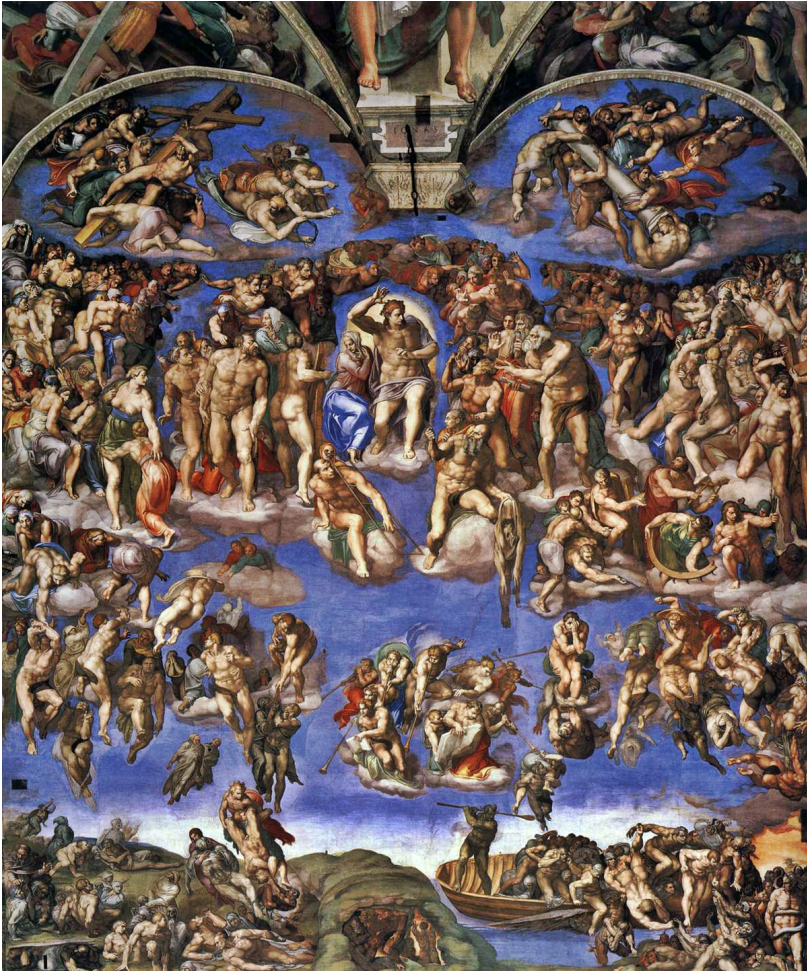
#### REASONS FOR HOPE AMID THE LAST JUDGMENT

Granting our dissatisfaction with human justice, does it necessarily follow that we hope in the Last Judgment, or is it just the lesser of two evils? Certainly, the Last Judgment still retains its horrors. All will be revealed, putting our ugliest sins on full display before humanity. All evil will be punished, whether by hellfire or purification. Yet even in these aspects, there is a goodness, giving us reasons to hope in the Last Judgment.

When Christ sent out his disciples, he warned them of impending persecutions but also encouraged them: "have no fear of them; for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known" (Mt 10:26). The promise of public revelation casts away the disciples' fears! Fully realized at the Last Judgment, this revelation will manifest the truth of God's justice. We have suffered already from failed attempts at justice based on the lies of propaganda and false promises. We await and desire this public revelation in part because we desire justice based on truth.

To the unrepentant, the revelation of their sins will be their shame, for they will see how they crafted their own shackles. But to the repentant, the revelation of their past sins will cause the saints to sing praise to God for his mercy and to the once-sinner who overcame sin by grace. The sinner-turned-saint will in turn sing of the sheer gift of heaven. Thus, we also long that God will write our lives, no matter how wayward, into a song of eternal praise through the grace of repentance.

Perhaps the scariest part of the Last Judgment will be the sentence of the unrepentant to hellfire. This seems to be more a cause of consternation than anticipation, yet we trust that God will end all works of evil, not by a reign of terror but by just



*Michelangelo — The Last Judgment*

punishments. In this life, we vainly attempt to curtail evildoers, but in the Last Judgment, God will finally accomplish this. We also trust that God respects our choices. Like the prodigal father, his mercy is far greater than the sins of his wayward son, but he will not force his stubborn older son to join the banquet (Lk 15:11–32). His mercy is never outdone, but neither is it forced on us. Even

more, we hope that God will mercifully lessen the punishment of those who refuse his banquet. St. Thomas writes: “Even in the damnation of the reprobate mercy is seen, which, though it does not totally remit, yet somewhat alleviates, in punishing short of what is deserved” (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 21, a. 4, ad 1).

But what will happen to those repentant sinners in the state of grace yet still tainted by venial sins and earthly attachments? For those who die in such imperfection, we believe in the merciful purification of Purgatory. But what of the imperfect who are alive on earth on that final day? By grace, God will surely bring them to heaven while somehow purifying them. Among different ways of envisioning this purification, St. Paul speaks of fire: “Each man’s work will become manifest; for the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire. . . . If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire” (1 Cor 3:13–15). Think of the three young men in the Book of Daniel cast into the blazing furnace. The flames destroy their captors and their bonds, but they are unharmed (Dn 3). Similarly, at the Last Judgment, God will destroy all that binds us. Perhaps there will be pain inasmuch as we have clung to our own shackles, but certainly our true selves will be unharmed. Even more, as among the three young men there appeared one like the Son of God, we know that whatever that day brings, Jesus Christ will be with his elect. For us, repenting sinners, the Last Judgment is a call to responsibility. Even if we are among the elect, we will still be answerable for our sins, including the ones we may overlook. So as we hope in God’s mercy, we pray for the gift of deeper repentance so as to be purified by God’s mercy even today.

Hoping in our heavenly reward is straightforward enough, but we also hope that God will reward those to whom we are indebted. How could I ever repay my parents for the gift of life, for the sleepless nights of my infancy, and for their patience during my adolescence? Or how could I properly honor my fellow countrymen, from the settlers who made our nation to the soldiers

who stormed Normandy? At the Last Judgment, we long to see God reward all whom we could never fully repay in this life.

### THREE “SETTINGS” FOR LEARNING AND PRACTICING HOPE IN THE LAST JUDGMENT

Hope in the Last Judgment, though reasonable, remains strange. It goes against our fabric, confronting our desire for self-preservation with death, our desire for pleasure with purification, and our desire for reputation with public revelation of our sin. Overcoming our dread before the Last Judgment requires more than a few words in an article: we need a reeducation of the heart. For such a reeducation, and in homage to *Spe Salvi*, I propose the following three “settings” for learning and practicing hope in the Last Judgment: Confession, Mass, and heavenly friendship.

#### THE FIRST JUDGMENT, CONFESSION, AND FILIAL CONFIDENCE

Perhaps our dread concerning the Last Judgment stems from man’s First Judgment, marked by fear and failure. Adam and Eve had just eaten the forbidden fruit, they heard God approaching, and they fled, ashamed of their nakedness. When called to responsibility, they passed the blame, fearing God’s punishment. For our part, we are sons of Adam and daughters of Eve. We have inherited their brokenness. This inheritance helps explain our dread of the Last Judgment. When God approaches again in the Second Coming, all our actions will be laid naked, we will be called to responsibility, and we will be justly punished. But unlike the First Judgment, this time there will be no hiding.

All the sacraments help remedy this inherited dread of judgment, but particularly Confession. In this sacrament, God forgives our sins and heals our wounds. By frequent confession, we slowly undo the failures of Adam and Eve. Instead of hiding in shame, we freely approach God through his priest. Instead of passing the blame, we take responsibility for our sins. Instead of



trying to avoid punishment, we do penance for our sins. Overall, Confession teaches us to move from fearing a wrathful judge to trusting a loving Father. Confession's opening line, "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned," addresses the priest, but even more so our heavenly Father. Confessing to our Father teaches us filial confidence. Thus, we learn to long for the Last Judgment because we have confidence in our Father's great mercy, far greater than our sins and the world's greatest atrocities. We have only to run into his arms.

There is one major difference between Confession and the Last Judgment. Confession is strictly private, protected by the seal. It only has a few elements of being public: we must verbally confess to a priest—that can be intimidating enough!—and we are spiritually reconciled to the Church. On the contrary, the Last Judgment will be fully public. Perhaps this explains why God instituted the sacrament with these public elements. Many argue that God can forgive sins without any middleman. That's true enough, but God has greater plans. Confession not only forgives our sins, but by confessing to a priest, we prepare for the Last Judgment, when all will be made manifest.

#### THE MASS AND THE LAST JUDGMENT

**T**he Mass touches the past, the present and the future: it is a memorial of Christ's sacrifice, it makes Christ present now in truth and reality, and it anticipates the Kingdom of God and heavenly worship that is to come. Participation in the Mass helps us to look forward to and prepare for the Last Judgment, almost as if it were a dress rehearsal, yet with all the surpassing truth, grace, and efficacy of a holy sacrament. Think of it. God's people gather at the appointed hour. We stand and face the East, at least symbolically, and this signifies our desire for Christ's return. Then, the priest enters and ascends to his throne, like Christ the Head coming to his judgment seat. After a brief introduction, our first communal act is to publicly confess our sinfulness: "I confess to almighty God

and to you, my brothers and sisters, etc.” The priest absolves the congregation, forgiving venial sins (mortal sins are reserved for Confession), and we rejoice in God’s might and mercy: “Glory to God in the highest.” The rest of the liturgy is a prolonged foretaste of that heavenly bliss, hearing the Word of God, praising him, and savoring his Sacred Banquet.

Throughout the Mass, our spoken responses point ahead to the Last Judgment. In the Creed, we profess: “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.” After the words of consecration, when the priest says, “The mystery of faith,” the people respond with different options, including “We proclaim your death . . . until you come again” or “When we eat this Bread . . . until you come again.” These responses show how the Eucharist recalls Christ’s sacrifice, makes him truly present in this moment, and points forward to his return. Later, in the Our Father, we pray: “thy kingdom come.” This petition includes different aspects, but it certainly voices a plea—even if only implicitly—for the definitive establishment of God’s kingdom at the Last Judgment. Hope for this definitive establishment appears in the priest’s subsequent prayer: “as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.”

This liturgical desire for the Last Judgment peaks on the First Sunday of Advent. In the Collect, the priest prays: “Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God, the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ with righteous deeds at his coming, so that, gathered at his right hand, they may be worthy to possess the heavenly Kingdom.” And later, in the Preface, he prays: “when he comes again in glory and majesty and all is at last made manifest, we who watch for that day may inherit the great promise in which now we dare to hope.” Such prayers rekindle our desire for Christ’s return, like a dress rehearsal giving way to the moments before opening night, rallying us for when the curtain raises.

Of course, this is not the usual experience of Mass. For many, it’s a minor miracle to be focused during the Mass, let alone to recall Christ’s Cross and Resurrection. Yet the Mass undeniably



also looks forward to Christ's return and judgment. And even while anticipating the heavenly liturgy, the Mass is much more than a dress rehearsal. It offers grace to heal and strengthen our hearts before that day, and even now allows us to enjoy Christ's presence in the Eucharist.

#### LOVE THROUGH THE FIRE

To overcome our dread of the Last Judgment, we are helped by the love of friends in heaven. In *Purgatorio*, the second work of the Divine Comedy, Dante comes before a wall of purifying fire. He is paralyzed with fear. An angel assures him of the blessedness awaiting him on the other side, but he dares not enter the fire. Then his guide Virgil promises him that the fire will not destroy but only purify him. Still, Dante resists. Finally, Virgil unlocks Dante's fear:

He saw me stiffened and immovable,  
he said, a little troubled, "Son, look now,  
what's keeping you from Beatrice is this wall."  
... my stiffness softened, at the name  
that ever rises fresh within in my mind.

(*Purgatorio*, xvii, 34–36, 41–42)

With the hope of seeing Beatrice, his beloved, Dante enters the fire. The flames painfully scour his soul, but they do not destroy. Amid the fire, Virgil keeps encouraging Dante:

But my sweet father spoke of Beatrice  
with every step he took, to comfort me:  
"I think I can already see her eyes." (ibid., 52ff.)

No eloquence stirs Dante's frightened heart, and similarly for us, arguments melt before the refiner's fire. Of course, purgatory is a distinct reality from the Last Judgment, yet like Dante before the wall of fire, we may feel a similar dread before the Last Judgment.

We trust in the blessedness awaiting the elect on the other side, but the Last Judgment, with its trials and mysteries, can freeze our blood and lock our knees. Such dread has tempted Christians since the beginning. St. Paul exhorted the Thessalonians: “concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to meet him, we beg you, brethren, not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited” (2 Thes 2:1–2). But what will calm our nerves and steady our minds before that day? Arguments can only do so much. We need friends, and in particular heavenly friends, our own Beatrices.



*Gustav Dore — Beatrice in the Purgatorio*

For many, this heavenly friend is a deceased parent, spouse, or even child. Even more, the most exalted saints offer us friendship of extraordinary love and power, especially the Blessed Mother and St. Joseph. Above all, it is the love of God and the promise of seeing him face-to-face that strengthens our footsteps through the purifying fire. St. John puts it powerfully:

We know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. In this is love perfected with us, *that we may have confidence for the day of judgment*, because as he is so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but *perfect love casts out fear*. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love. (1 Jn 4:16–18)

The perfect love of God casts out our fear and gives us confidence for the Last Judgment. Love and confidence are the two great gifts that God give to the heart that asks for them. It is by love and confidence that we dare to await and hasten the Last Judgment.

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