

THE QUESTIONS WE CARRY WITHIN US

Josep Giménez, sj.

1. TO START WITH... ..	3
1. A hope for everybody	3
2. The unheard-of pretension of saying the "final word"	4
2. THE LANGUAGE OF HOPE IN THE BIBLE	8
1. A hope that comes from afar	8
2. The novelty of Jesus of Nazareth	13
3. GIVE REASONS FOR YOUR HOPE	16
1. Death	16
2. He will come in glory to judge the living and the dead	19
3. I believe in the resurrection of the dead	23
4. The "last things": heaven, hell, and purgatory	27
NOTES	32

Josep Giménez Melià, sj. is a Doctor in Theology. He works as a Professor in the Faculty of Theology in Catalonia, in the Institute of Fundamental Theology and in the Higher Institute of Religious Sciences of Barcelona. He works as a Visiting Professor with the University of Central America in El Salvador (UCA). He is editor of the review *Selecciones de Teología* and a member of the theological forum of Cristianisme i Justícia.

INTERNET: www.fespinal.com - Translated by Joseph Owens - Cover illustration: Roger Torres - CRISTIANISME I JUSTÍCIA Edition - R. de Llúria, 13 - 08010 Barcelona - tel: 93 317 23 38 - fax: 93 317 10 94 - info@fespinal.com - Printed by: Edicions Rondas, S.L. - ISSN: 0214-6509 - ISBN: 84-9730-222-2 - Legal deposit: B-30.800-09. July 2009.

The Lluís Espinal Foundation would like to inform you that its information comes from our historical archive belonging to our records. These go under the name of BDGACIJ and are registered with the code 2061280639. In order to access them, rectify them, delete or challenge them, please contact us at the street Roger de Llúria, 13, Barcelona.

1. TO START WITH ...

The scene in chapter 20 of John's gospel is one we can imagine perfectly. We have no trouble understanding the distress, the anguish, and the perplexity of Mary Magdalene when she could not find the Lord's body: «They have taken the Lord from the sepulcher, and we don't know where they have laid him» (John 20,13).

1. A HOPE FOR EVERYBODY

1.1. «They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him!»

The scene in chapter 20 of John's gospel is one we can imagine perfectly. We have no trouble understanding the distress, the anguish, and the perplexity of Mary Magdalene when she could not find the Lord's body: «They have taken the Lord from the sepulcher, and we don't know where they have laid him» (John 20,13).

When faced with death, especially the death of our loved ones, we are overwhelmed with questions. A first question is: where «are» the loved ones that death has snatched from us? A second question is: where will we «be» when the same hap-

pens to us? These are questions that are difficult to answer, and they leave us with doubts and anxiety.

1.2. Farewell to utopia

Long gone are the times when our parents' eyes filled with tears as they sang, «There will come a day when we lift up our eyes and see a land that gives us liberty».* Rather, now we are seduced by those caustic words: «God is dead; Marx too, and still I don't feel any better». Whatever happened to utopia? And what can we say of all the suffering in the world, of the victims left strewn by the wayside by «progress» as it strides triumphantly forward? Will they have a

place in the messianic banquet of which the prophet speaks (Isaiah 25,6)? Does not the prophet claim that God will wipe away all of our tears (Isaiah 25,8)? Or are we rather to believe that some tears will be dried only by the passage of time (that time which presumably cures all), leaving behind deposits of pain, untouched and untouchable, liable to be revived at any moment?

Christian hope claims to be available for everybody, living and dead ... It is not acceptable, then, to sacrifice the past to the future. God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. In God's eternal present, past and future are one. The stories of creation, as much as they speak to us of «origins», have a «futurist» flavor to them: they inform us

not so much about what «happened» at the beginning of time as about the goal toward which we are moving. Saint Augustine said: We learn here, not how heaven was made, but how we are to reach heaven.... As believers, then, we cannot look to the future while ignoring the originating design of the God of love, nor can we separate eschatology from the doctrine of creation. In this sense, time is not a merciless *Chronos*, ready to swallow its children; rather, for the Christian faith, time is *kairos*, opportunity, God's passing by, *Passover*... For it is as if time were «pregnant with God», as if pointing toward the fullness of time (Galatians 4), which is nothing less than the full manifestation of the sons and daughters of God.

2. THE UNHEARD-OF PRETENSION OF SAYING THE «FINAL WORD»

2.1. What is «eschatology»?

What does the word «eschatology» mean? «Eschatology» is a combination of two Greek words: *eschatos* (last) and *logos* (word or discourse); that is to say, it is the last discourse (or final word). Now, the problem we face is defining well the meaning of the first element of that combination: last, *eschatos*. The term can in fact be taken in several ways: as referring to the last things (*eschata*), to the ultimate person or thing (*eschatos*, *eschaton*), or to the last ones (*eschatoi*).

2.2. A discourse about what comes «after»

The term could refer to the *eschata*, that is, the last things. Understood in this sense, the «last things» are the events we experience after our death... These last events would be: death, judgment (particular and universal), purgatory, heaven or hell. In this case, we would be dealing with the traditional subject matter. Eschatology would treat about nothing more and nothing less than the «final realities». Yves Congar called this clas-

sical manner of treating the subject matter «finality physics». What is noticeable in this traditional presentation is its striking dualism (body/soul, individual/collectivity, history/eternity, here and now/after-life), which is in accord with the «two-storied» theology (natural/supernatural) characteristic of pre-Vatican II times. Eschatological reality is thus made into an «object» of study (even an «object of physics») and becomes, for all practical purposes, a sort of «science fiction». Such an eschatology does not relate to the reality experienced by the believer, and that concrete reality is in no way affected or moved by anything eschatological. With all tranquility people can shrug their shoulders and say, «I still have time». All this is in accord with the Church's uncritical accommodation to the history in which we live (Constantinianism). History becomes merely a «repository of proofs» which will decide about the future fate of individuals, but in itself it has no theological value. Human beings are deprived of their future dimension.

2.3. Confronted by the ultimate

The term might also be understood as referring to the ultimate person or thing (*eschatos/eschaton*), that is, whatever ultimately concerns us or affects us. In this case, eschatology would be an essential dimension of all theological thought. And that (or better, That) which ultimately affects us is God or the Christ. That is how Augustine puts it: God himself is our «place» after this life¹. Along the same line Hans Urs von Balthasar states: Christ is our judgment, our purification, our hell, and our heaven.

In this sense, eschatology would be the final word (*eschatos logos*). But doesn't this turn out to be extraordinarily pretentious? Shouldn't we rather believe that only God can have and can say this «final word»? Eschatology therefore should be more modest; it should be seen as a longing for, a search for, or a reflection on this final word spoken by God.

2.4. «The voice of those who have no voice» (Archbishop Romero)

Finally, the term could be understood as *eschatoi*: the last ones, those we consider to be the victims, the excluded, the marginalized. Their unbearable situation requires that there be a sustainable future for everybody, and it demands a radical questioning of the *status quo*. Their situation becomes the ultimate question about what is happening –a question demanding an answer. If we listen to the biblical testimony, we become aware that the most significant advances in humankind's «history of hope» come precisely from these often anonymous «suffering faces» whose mere existence becomes an uncomfortable question or denunciation, to which only God's fidelity can respond (the just sufferer of the psalms, the Servant of Yahweh, the martyrs,...). The hope announced by these *eschatoi* is a hope that ends up being universalized, but its fulfillment should not be postponed for an afterlife; rather, it is (or should be) already at work here and now.

2.5. Attempting a definition

Having stated this, we can define what eschatology is: eschatology is the answer, in Christian terms, to the question: what

can I (or we) hope for? The first letter of Peter reminds us that as Christians we should always be ready to «give reasons for our hope» (1 Peter 3,15). This is what eschatology seeks to do, and several important consequences flow from that.

2.6. The boldness and humility of knowing how to hope

The word that is used most (exclusively, we dare say) in this treatise is the word «hope», not the word «know». *We do not know: we hope*. We cannot claim to offer a sort of «preview» of what will happen at the end of time. Such a «preview» would be «false apocalyptic» (K Rahner).

We have always been curious about the mystery of the great beyond and desirous of «getting news» about it, as fragmentary as it might be, hoping that it would inform us about what will happen after death or at the end of the world or at the end of history. The genre of apocalyptic literature, by using a complicated symbol system and numerical combinations, would seem to satisfy this understandable curiosity of ours. Nevertheless, recent exegetical studies show us that this is not what the genre is all about. Biblical apocalyptic does not seek to satisfy people's curiosity about the great beyond (as legitimate as such curiosity may appear); rather, it seeks to «give a voice to those without voice» (Archbishop Romero). In other words: true apocalyptic is the expression of the victims' resistance to oppressive power. Apocalyptic is about giving the victims confidence, and this is done by announcing to them that the power to which they are opposed has been given a «date of expiration». God himself is most

definitely the first «subversive agent» in the struggle against established power, since he has decisively chosen to subvert history in order to turn it around in favor of the victims.² This explains why coded messages were so often used in this literary genre, messages that could be understood only by those to whom they were directed (the oppressed and the victims) and were necessarily incomprehensible to those who exercised oppressive power. It is necessary, therefore, to distinguish carefully between the form of expression and the message being transmitted, for the message contains not so much mysterious information about the great beyond, but words of resistance and hope. To be sure, apocalyptic uses a «catastrophic» sort of language when speaking of the end of the world, but what does that matter? For apocalyptic, a «catastrophic end» is preferable to an «endless catastrophe». (Motmann)

2.7. A single interest: salvation

If we do not have knowledge, but do have hope, and if hope is a theological virtue (that is, one that has God as its source and its goal), then the content of our hope can only be salvation, the God of our salvation. There can be no talk of some «doctrine of two ways» (a way of salvation and a way of perdition). Eschatology is interested only in salvation. We can hope only for good things: we do not hope for bad things (rather we fear them). From the perspective of salvation we can perceive other «possibilities», but only negatively.

Only the mystics can speak of hell. That is to say: only those who love (with

the aim of giving themselves, and giving us, reasons for loving more) can fully understand what it means to live without love. What they tell us can seem horrifying and barely credible. We can understand them a little better only if we manage to place ourselves at their starting point, which is simply that of being moved themselves (and moving us) toward greater love. In this way do they present the horrifying possibility of living without love. And after all is said and done, the mystics are still capable of praying like this: *«Heaven that you have promised me, my God,/ Does not move me to love you./ Nor does hell so dreadful move me/ to leave all that offends you»*.

From those of us not elevated to such heights, a supreme effort of sobriety can, and should, be demanded. Long gone (fortunately!) are those sermons in which the preacher sent to hell a part (a large part?) of humankind. Nowadays such sermons provoke in us nothing but a healthy «intellectual smile». Or we might say also: a healthy «pastoral smile»... Having said this, we dare to defend a certain «recoverability» of the theme of hell. Perhaps those of us not situated at the starting point of mystics can (and should) still situate ourselves at the starting point of the victims of history. Obviously, we are not saying that the mystics have different starting point, for what else do their «dark nights» teach us, as they imitate Jesus in his «descent into hell»? Whoever accompanies the victims in their «Good Friday» will be submerged with them in the silence of «Holy Saturday», so as to hear with them and to proclaim with them and from them the «*Exultet*» of the «Paschal night». This is the only credible way to recover this theme of hell.

2.8. Made to dream...

Eschatology adds nothing new to what we know already about the Christian vision of human beings and reality in general. Eschatology is anthropology considered from the perspective of its fulfillment. The Christian faith contemplates human fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth. And in that sense, eschatology is a kind of «applied Christology».

That is to say, eschatology presents for our consideration the goal of God's creative action as regards human beings: God wants them to resemble Jesus Christ as much as possible. God «has a dream» for humanity and for reality, and eschatology strives to decipher that dream. We come to understand that God's dream for humanity is called Jesus of Nazareth, the new man, the new Adam, and that God's dream for reality is called the «Kingdom of God». «The dream of one man alone will never be more than a dream, but a dream shared can be the beginning of a beautiful reality» (Helder Câmara). Eschatology attempts, modestly, to sketch out that «beautiful reality».

2.9. As it was in the beginning...

Finally, we must show the relation between eschatology and the doctrine of creation, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. The «first word» joins together with the last word. All God's creative work points toward the «sabbath of creation», in which God dwells among us³ and His ways cross with ours. So similar to Him have we been made, and so akin to us has God become...

2. THE LANGUAGE OF HOPE IN THE BIBLE

The Bible serves both as nourishment for our faith and as a criterion for discerning our faith's authenticity. Having recourse to the Bible is therefore crucial for us in fulfilling the task of «giving reason for our hope».

1. A HOPE THAT COMES FROM AFAR

1.1. The hope of ancient Israel

To begin with, we are confronted with a surprising affirmation: the content of the hope of Israelite believers consisted only in the land and in their descendents (see, for example, Genesis 12,1-2). That is to say, it does not seem that at first the faithful of Israel were interested in the «great beyond». They were too attached to «*this*» life and to «*this*» world to become concerned about «*another*» life or «*another*» world.

This «materialist» attitude of theirs, though it may seem strange and paradoxical, was actually due to their faith in God. The fact is that Israel's neighboring cultures were quite concerned about the great beyond and the afterlife, but in such a way that their concern ended up being a kind of

divinization of all those realities. In contrast, due to their strict monotheism, Israel proclaimed: only one God... only God is God. Moreover, God acts in history.

The pillars of the Israelite faith were twofold: first, a strict monotheism that relativized everything that was not God, reducing it to the category of a death-dealing idol; and second, belief in a God who walked with his people in history. Such a faith prevented the Israelites from fixing their gaze on the great beyond; they harbored no secret hope of assuring for themselves an existence after death. For Israel religion was not a type of tranquilizer, taken to ease the hardships of reality, nor was it a fanciful projection into another world in order to avoid this one. Furthermore, the people of Israel, even filled with

such hope, was a non-people (a Mr. Nobody), a nation belonging to the strata of the *eschatoi*, that is, the last and the least (Deuteronomy 7,7f.). But Israel, sustained precisely by its hope, moved from being a non-people to being a true people, the people of God, God's heritage and possession. God himself, then, was the source of Israel's dynamic hope. And the goal of that hope ended up being nothing less than God himself.

The priestly document of the Old Testament adds to this an element of great importance: God and the people belonged to one another mutually: «I will be your God, and you will be my people». Because of this mutual belonging, God would progressively reveal his Name to them. Of course, since for the Israelites names designated the very essence of what was named, this progressive revelation of God's name was effectively a progressive entering into Intimacy with God, into His Life, into His Love. What is more, this progressive entering into the intimacy of God was not for human beings alone, but for all creation. In fact, the ultimate hope was, and still is, for a «new heaven» and a «new earth» (Isaiah 65,17; 66,22; 2 Peter 3,13; Apocalypse 21,1).

1.2. The Sabbath

The final goal of all the travels of this people that has been chosen to enter into divine intimacy is the «eschatological Sabbath», the «seventh day», when God culminates his creative work. On that day also, human beings, God's creatures, are invited to take part in his rest and to contemplate in ecstasy, along with him, the Author of it all, the

beauty of the creative work (Genesis 1,31). Thus the «last word» refers back to the «first word». Or rather, the «first word» contains in itself more of utopia, more of the goal toward which we are journeying, than it does of a «chronicle of what happened at the beginning of time». In the course of its history the people of Israel, through the institution of the Sabbath, has always preserved a vestige of this ideal.

The Sabbath is something more than a law or a custom which, in the course of time, forgot its reason for being and became an oppressive millstone on human freedom. The Sabbath is about resolutely keeping alive the vital intuition: this is the true goal of human existence and of all creation: to enter into God's rest, totally reconciled with ourselves, with others, and with God. It is for this reason that the institution of the Sabbath was so important for the Israelite faithful. As an ancient aphorism of the rabbis proclaimed, «It is not Israel that keeps the Sabbath: it is the Sabbath that keeps Israel».

1.3. The prophets: witnesses of a people's hope

With their constant messages, the prophets tried to keep this hope alive. They did so by immersing themselves in all the vicissitudes of the people: the alliances with political powers, the division of the kingdoms (north and south), the exile, the difficult return... The hope of the prophets was not one that hovered haughtily over the events of history with all their ambiguities. Their message placed great importance on the attitudes adopted by individuals and, indeed, by the whole Jewish people: the prophets focused on how open people were

to conversion, how receptive they were to the Word, and how willing they were to make that Word reality in the day-to-day events of their history. The prophets always sounded a note of optimism, even though their hopes were frequently destroyed by the harsh and merciless conditions of existence.

The best efforts of the people were unable to ward off the tragedy of exile. The return of the people from Babylon was far from the triumph the prophetic oracles imagined, and beginning all over again was fraught with dispiriting difficulties. History appeared to be a vessel much too fragile to contain such extravagant hope (see 2 Corinthians 4,7). The empires with which the feeble people of Israel had to deal were powerful and invincible. And, along with all this, this journey of the people toward the never forgotten «promised land» was being soaked with the blood of too many victims...

1.4. Apocalyptic: hope for «tough times»

All this tragic history was preparing the ground for the birth of the literary genre called apocalyptic and, above all, for the development of the apocalyptic mentality, whose *leitmotif* was this: if human beings, and especially the people of Israel, are not ready and willing to carry out God's plan, then God will come personally to execute his designs for history. For apocalyptic, human collaboration doesn't count for much. If human beings feel small and impotent before the power plays of the oppressive empires, then it will be God himself who confronts the mighty and comes to the defense of their victims. These

empires have already been given their «date of expiration», so that challenging them is not a hopeless undertaking. Apocalyptic takes the side of the victims and keeps in mind the reality of martyrdom: the martyrs' fidelity to God, to the point of giving their lives for him, will not go without response. And this response will be that of the fidelity of God, who gives life to the dead and existence to what does not exist (Romans 4,17). God has his throne in heaven, but he looks down from there to behold (that is, to love) with predilection the poor and the oppressed (that is, those spurned by the currently powerful). Apocalyptic literature is already talking about resurrection, and it does so in the context of divine vindication of the blood of the innocent.

1.5. Some conclusions

What we have stated thus far helps us to sketch out some provisional conclusions: 1) We find vital expression of a hope that is collective (for the people, not just for individuals). 2) This hope is «materialist» as regards its content (it aspires only to land and posterity), but not as regards its dynamic (God is the origin and the goal of the hope). 3) This same dynamic of hope gives it a «transcendental» dimension: even though the encounter with God occurs in history, salvation cannot be engendered by that history^d. 4) Of course, this «transcendental» dimension is not «Platonic» (that is, spiritualizing in the worst sense of the term); rather it is «*kenotic*» (that is, in favor of the victims and the marginalized). 5) If this hope is expressed in collective terms, what is left of personal hope? What is the «*path*» followed by faith in the resurrection in the people of Israel?

1.6. A long journey

The hope of the people of Israel was, above all, a collective hope, very much in keeping with the communal character of the people (cf. LG 9). We are, however, increasingly less willing to recognize collective hopes which seem to ignore individual destinies. Posing the problem in this way means asking about how faith in the resurrection gradually emerged. This does not mean that we are dealing here with a purely individualist aspect of Israel's hope: we will have a chance to show that for Israel resurrection had certain universal, collective characteristics, but that the universality was grounded not in a neutral impartiality, but in the victims.

In the beginning of their history, the Israelite faithful did not profess faith in resurrection. The possibility of existence after death was foreign to their beliefs. Everything that was valuable, that is, the whole relation with God and with other people, ended with this life. As far as the dead were concerned, they would descend indiscriminately into «*sheol*», the place of shadows and death, out of which comes no praise to the Lord. If for the Israelite faithful the very meaning of life consisted in praising God³, then an afterlife in «*sheol*» was simply a meaningless existence.

The fact that the Israelites believed that everybody was indiscriminately consigned to «*sheol*» after death raises some questions. Was death considered stronger than God? If there is truth in the saying, «Loving is saying to the beloved, 'You cannot die,'» is not God telling us this when he loves us? But if he says that, is he then incapable of «prevailing» over death? What purpose is there in being faithful to God if in the end everyone, faithful and unfaithful, ends up

the same? The problem presented here has a theological character: it seeks to respond to the question, What God do we believe in? In a God who keeps faith with his faithful, or in a God from whom his faithful are snatched away by death? It is not so much a question of trying to placate the strong human desire for survival after death, as it is a question of the nature of the God that people believe in. It is not the human instinct for survival after death that provokes the believers' reflection; rather it is the need to have certainty that Israel believes in a God who is faithful to his promises, a God who keeps faith with his faithful.

1.7. The doctrine of retribution

The first response to this question was the doctrine of retribution: God rewards the good and punishes the bad. Of course, the prosperity or the misfortune that would come upon people as God's recompense for good or bad deeds would be limited only to this world. Whoever fulfilled God's law would be happy in *this* life and on *this* earth, and whoever did not fulfill God's law would be unhappy in *this* life and on *this* earth... You don't have to be a genius or a die-hard believer to realize that things don't usually work that way. If we may be allowed the expression, even God doesn't believe in the doctrine of retribution! At first retribution was understood in a collective way: the good or evil conduct of some members of the clan had repercussions on the other members of the same clan. Later on, during the exile, when there no longer existed the identifying characteristics (land, temple, monarchy...) that united the people, retribution began to be understood in a more individual manner.

1.8. The book of Job: a way of talking about God ... and people

A further step in this history was taken in the book of Job. Job was a just man who suffered, but he was in no way responsible for the evil that came upon him. Although his friends tried to make him think so, they turn out to be misdirected consolers and out-and-out defenders of the traditional doctrine of retribution. In this sense, the book of Job expounds bad theology: the weapons of a poorly understood tradition are useless when wielded against experience (of God and of reality), and especially against the suffering of innocent victims. This is unequivocally shown to be the case since it is God himself who proves Job right: Job has spoken well of God... though some of his words might offend certain pious ears. The same cannot be said of his friends, who, to be sure, will eventually have to be saved from the divine wrath by Job himself (Job 42,7ff.). Theology cannot ignore the «authority of the victims» (J. B. Metz).

1.9. The language of prayer

With the book of Job there is a complete discrediting of the doctrine of retribution, both individual and collective, and the discrediting comes from the same divine authority. But then the problem only becomes more acute: what about God's faithfulness? Is death stronger than God, so that it can wrest his faithful away from him? Where theology fails to reach, prayer succeeds. In the psalter there are three psalms (16, 49, and 73) which in their own way express the psalmist's hope in a love and faithfulness on God's part that are stronger than death. The psalms do not ex-

press a clear and unequivocal belief in resurrection, but they do contain the initial elements which will later be used to express that belief.

1.10. The contribution of the prophets and apocalyptic

Certain prophetic oracles bore witness to the people of Israel's budding faith in resurrection, but they did so at first in an extremely inarticulate way, referring to the people as a whole, and only later referring to individual resurrection. Faith in the resurrection reaches its fullest expression in apocalyptic literature, but there is also the testimony found in the literature produced during the Maccabean revolt. These latter writings arose out of a concrete situation: the revolt of faithful Israelites against those who were trying to take away from them their identifying signs, the greatest of which was their fidelity to the Covenant and to the God of the Covenant. This fidelity cost the people dearly in terms of death and martyrdom, so that they asked: if the people were faithful to God, would not God also be faithful to his people? The answer was unmistakable: God is faithful and shows it by raising those who give their lives for him. God defends the cause of the victims. Faith in the resurrection, therefore, did not arise as the fruit of detached reflection or «armchair theology», with the aim of pacifying human longings for immortality and afterlife; rather it arose from a dramatic dialogue of the people with God. It was dramatic because it was a result of siding with the victims in their struggle against oppression and because it was seeking after God's justice, so often impugned by the prevailing injustice⁶.

2. THE NOVELTY OF JESUS OF NAZARETH

We will now treat the eschatology emerging from the life and the preaching of Jesus of Nazareth. All the preaching of Jesus on this topic is concentrated in the *leitmotif* of the Kingdom of God.

2.1. The herald of God's Kingdom

The Kingdom of God is not a static category, but a dynamic one. God's Kingdom is something that happens and therefore cannot be de-fined (you can't put limits [Spanish *fines*] on it). It can be spoken of only by explaining what happens when we allow ourselves to be led by its dynamic: The Kingdom of God is like ... Jesus speaks of the Kingdom in parables. The content of these parables is extremely instructive: what they show us is a merciful God who goes in search of what is lost, of what is despised by the civil and religious *establishment*. The message of the parables is an inclusive one: nobody is outside the all-embracing love of God-Abba.

2.2. Not only «saying», but «doing»

The language of Jesus is performative: it is not limited only to speaking, but also acts. Apart from his parables, Jesus performs gestures that are aimed at making the Kingdom visible –for example, his banquets. He was called «a glutton and a drunk, a friend of publicans and sinners». His compatriots were scandalized when they saw Jesus adopting a style of life so far removed

from that of, say, John the Baptist and his disciples or so different from the ascetical, world-despising manner of «religious» people more generally. However, Jesus understood the practice of «table fellowship» to be a marvelous gesture, not only of human communion, but also of interhuman communion before God. For Jesus nobody could be excluded from the «common table» to which the Father of all invites us. And it was precisely the ones who were rejected for social, political, and religious reasons, who were the guests of honor at his table. This praxis of Jesus would, in his last days, find expression in the institution of the eucharist, the celebration of which was to become for his followers a commemoration of him and of what he dearest to his heart. «Do this in memory of me ...»

Secondly, we can cite the healings that Jesus performed. All of them are done with a view to struggling against exclusion. The sicknesses he cured were those, like leprosy, that made normal dealings with other people difficult or impossible. What is more, they were sicknesses that for religious reasons (impurity) made those who suffered them feel estranged from God. In curing these sick people, Jesus was reintegrating them back into the life of the people and making them experience the nearness of God. Many of his cures took place on the Sabbath, the chosen people's holy day of rest, when no work activity could be carried on. Jesus performed these healings on the Sabbath, not out of any

urge to provoke people, but because the Sabbath was the «eschatological day» par excellence, the day when there could no longer be any sickness or pain. It was the day when God rested and enjoyed his creation, a creation that was «very good».

2.3. «Lord, to whom shall we go...?»

In the beginning, Jesus stirred up the people's enthusiasm by his words and actions and, in so doing, brought on himself mounting opposition from the authorities. Even though the people were at first eager to follow Jesus, the rulers succeeded in «infecting» them with their own antagonism (cf. John 6,60 ff.). The end result of their opposition was the tragedy: the cross and the subsequent scattering of all the disciples. Everything went in the opposite direction from what Jesus had hoped for when he was preaching: for his followers the cross was the sign that God had discredited Jesus (Galatians 3,13; cf. Deuteronomy 21,23), and the scattering of the disciples undid the communion that Jesus had sought to create by his words and his life.

2.4. The incursion of the new

However, on the third day (the day of God's eschatological action: cf. Hosea 6,2) a dramatic shift took place among the disciples: instead of «everyone on his own», it was now «all of us together». The news ran like wildfire among the disciples: Jesus had risen and had been seen by some of his followers. Jesus had been raised to the right hand of God the Father, thus proving that he had been right, in his life and in his «messianic pretension». Among the disciples and

followers of Jesus there again began to bloom the conviction that the Kingdom announced by him had already arrived, that the messianic hopes had already been fulfilled, and that they were living in the «last days».

2.5. The delay of the parousia

These «last days», however, did not approach as speedily as was hoped. To the contrary, despite the common conviction of the members of the early Christian community that they were going to be eyewitnesses of the glorious coming of Jesus as Messiah, that coming kept getting delayed, to the point that the *marana tha* («come, Lord» or «the Lord comes»), with which the New Testament ends, was running the risk of becoming a «pious relic» from an ever more irrelevant past. The disciples began to talk about the «delay of the parousia»: why was it taking so long for the Lord to return?

To this pressing question the following answers were given: first of all, it was argued that time itself is relative (2 Peter 3). We shouldn't «put a date» on the «last day». Many groups of visionaries have succumbed to such a temptation in the course of history. Nevertheless, the nearness (or remoteness) of the Kingdom –like the nearness (or remoteness) of God, from another perspective– gives rise to a curious dialectic: the closer it is, the further away it seems to be.

This is precisely the lesson we learn from the mystics: John of the Cross tells us that «God is always dark night for the soul» (Ascent to Mount Carmel). The most we can hope for is to gain, in a while, a glimpse of «the easterly dawn».

Another answer given was that this time of waiting was the «time of the Church», that is, the time for the Church's mission, the time during which the Church was obliged to carry the gospel to all the world's peoples. The temptation involved in this interpretation is that of Constantinianism, which involves an excessive «installation» of the Church in history. Unfortunately, anyone who reads many pages of Church history realizes that this has been more than a temptation... Under the influence of this perspective, the Church lost the beneficial «eschatological stimulus» that had previously allowed it both to criticize itself and to pass judgment on the powers of the world. As a result, the *marana tha* was transformed into the dreadful *dies*

irae of the Middle Ages: instead of the eschatological Judge who was coming to save his people, especially the poor and the oppressed, now the God coming in judgment was a dreaded visitor for those in power (many of them ecclesiastics). And as to his own people, his visit was postponed to a distant, indefinite future, with the result that they were frightened into living in submissive resignation to the powerful until such time.

The notion of the Kingdom of God persisted in the early millenarian movements (Apocalypse 20) and later on was taken up and secularized in utopian thought. Even though the millenarian spirit is inclined to risks and exaggerations, a healthy «dose of millenarianism» continues to be essential for Christian faith.

3. GIVE REASONS FOR YOUR HOPE

When we speak of eschatology, the first topic that emerges is death and what is beyond death, as if that were the only topic eschatology deals with. We have a tendency to forget that with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we are already living in the «last times». When we call these times we live in the «last times», we are not referring simply to chronology (the last in a succession of things), but to «axiology», in the sense of «what is ultimate», what is of ultimate importance to us (Tillich).

1. DEATH

1.1. Clearing up misunderstandings...

When we speak of eschatology, the first topic that emerges is death and what is beyond death, as if that were the only topic eschatology deals with. We have a tendency to forget that with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we are already living in the «last times». When we call these times we live in the «last times», we are not referring simply to chronology (the last in a succession of things), but to «axiology», in the sense of «what is ultimate», what is of ultimate importance to us (Tillich). «Living in the last times» means affirming that, in the raising up of Jesus, God's love for all creatures has been manifested in a victorious, irrevoc-

able way, so that all of us may live, starting right now, from the fruits of salvation. «Now is the favorable time; now is the day of salvation» (2 Corinthians 6,2). Colossians 3,1 drives the point home with this exhortation: «Now that you have risen with Christ, seek the things that are above».

Here there is no postponement of the resurrection to some indistinct future (mostly likely after death); instead, the future becomes real here and now, in the present moment. History becomes meaningfully related to the eschatological and is not a mere parenthesis without value. Rather, history is seen as the realm within which the fullness of the eschatological is to be lived out, even if

this must be done in the fragility of human flesh (that is, in the contingency, limitation, and also dreadful ambiguity of the human condition) and therefore with all the pangs of giving birth (cf. Romans 8,22).

Even so, while it is true that eschatology deals with much more than the afterlife, there is no doubt that the topic of death cannot be avoided in pages dedicated to eschatology.

1.2. The taboo of our times

Death is the taboo of our times, in the same way that sex was, for example, not so long ago. For death keeps us unpleasantly mindful of the fact that we are contingent and limited. For a society so proud of the progress it has made, death is a humiliating slap in the face. Ever since death «crept» into us in the garden of paradise, we have not been able to «expel» it. Rather death was precisely what has expelled us from paradise.

For that reason we fool ourselves into thinking that we can «get back» at death by driving it from our lives (personal and public). We «punish» death by silencing it and placing it under a «taboo». In this way death deprives us of what is most our own: the word. But this solution really doesn't work, because only by accepting the presence of death in life will we be able to gain access to the presence of Life in death....

Besides, is it true that death and life are two hopelessly irreconcilable antagonists? The fact is that, as soon as we are born, we are all given a «date of expiry».

1.3. The veil of death

An image we commonly use is that of the «veil of death». Death awakens our curiosity: what comes after it? It is more than a puzzle: it is a total mystery, and mystery demands from us abandonment and letting go. Karl Rahner used to speak of the «hidden character of death», but how are we to characterize such «hiddenness»? Perhaps, instead of «hiddenness» we might speak of the ambivalence of death.

1.4. Death and freedom

A first step toward characterizing this ambivalence is takes us into anthropology: it consists in relating death and freedom. What does one have to do with the other? We are faced, to start off, with an incontrovertible fact: we all want to be free. But what is freedom? Freedom is not simply the ability to choose this or that. If freedom were only that, it would end up producing enormous frustration, because we would always be in a state of permanent revision. The successive character of our free acts implies that any one of them, taken in itself, cancels out the preceding one and is destined in turn to be canceled out by the one that follows it. And thus it goes on *ad infinitum*...

Now, every free act pursues a certain «definitive» character. Not only do we choose this or that, but in making any choice, without directly intending it or even raising the question, we make an affirmation of ourselves, even if only in the concrete act of choosing this or that. This is so because our ultimate goal in all our partial choices is a affirmation of self

that prescind from all concreteness. We aim at the total fulfillment of our own being. In that sense, for us *being is freedom*.

But such total fulfillment will be possible only at the moment of death. In fact, while we are alive, all our free decisions are subject to a permanent «revocability». Only death allows us to glimpse the possibility that there exists a free act which makes our total personal fulfillment possible. Now paradoxically, this peculiar act of freedom, seen as possible only at the moment of death, appears to us shrouded in extreme impotence –the impotence of death. Furthermore, this total fulfillment to which we aspire cannot be an object of our striving; it will always be a gift that comes to us from without. And insofar as it is gift, this total fulfillment, which is the fruit of our freedom, can be experienced only as the gift we make of ourselves to others and to God. Thus, the ambivalence of death becomes manifest in this strange, paradoxical conjunction of supreme freedom and impotence. On the basis of faith can we find a certain fecundity in this paradox, to the extent that we live life as gift, that is, to the extent that we learn to be lived as gift and to make of our own reality a gift to God and to others.

1.5. Death and sin

Another, more theological, way to approach this ambivalence of death consists in seeing in it either as a

punishment for sin or as the opening up to us of the possibility of dying with Christ.

If we pay heed to the «phenomenology of dying», we realize that death, as a general rule, constitutes the most undesirable event of human existence. It is an event before which our whole being rises up in vehement protest (as impotent as such protest is in the end). But in so doing we become aware of all the possible reactions of human beings in the face of death. At times death can also be seen as liberation from suffering that lacks meaning and affords no escape. There exist, then, ways to die and ways to die...

Toward the middle of the last century, people often compared the death of Socrates with that of Jesus, but between the two deaths there are significant differences. Socrates died surrounded by his disciples, speaking of the immortality of the soul, considering death to be a liberation and even a healing... In contrast, Jesus died alone, or surrounded by enemies, crying out loudly, feeling abandoned by the Father and experiencing his death as an inexplicable absurdity, in the face of which the only possible response was trusting surrender into God's hands. All the same, upon witnessing this death, a Roman centurion had no alternative but to confess: This truly is the Son of God (Mark 15,39). Thus, in Jesus' dying (and in our co-dying with him) death experienced as scandal is transfigured into death experienced as an act of trusting surrender and abandonment into the loving hands of the Father.

2. HE WILL COME IN GLORY TO JUDGE THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

The image of judgment (particular and universal) has given rise to a kind of «spiritual terrorism» hardly a Christian stance. The customary sermons about the «*day of wrath*» are a far cry from the «*marana tha*» (come, Lord Jesus) with which the New Testament ends.

2.1. He will come...

God is defined as «he who is, he who was, and he who is to come» (Ap, 1,4); that is, God is not just the one who will be, but the one who is to come. Who (or what) God will be alludes to what lies hidden in what he already is. The phrase «he who comes» implies the intrusion of someone who breaks in from outside, arriving as unexpected surprise. In other words, the future is not the same as an advent. The future (the word comes from *futurum*, the future participle of the Latin verb *esse*, «to be») betokens the manifestation (at some moment) of that which already is (though in latent form). Advent, however, speaks to us of something coming (*ventus*, from the Latin verb *venire*, to come) into (*ad*) our reality from outside. And of course all of this means newness, gratuitousness, grace... And who is it that is «coming»? On the basis of our faith we can say: the one coming is the Crucified One who is Risen. Thus are we reminded that the Crucified One is the Risen One, and the Risen One is the Crucified One. This is not a simple tautology. At stake here is an identity that is highly relevant: the

Risen One presents himself to us with his «wounds», the wounds of the crucifixion (John 20,19 ff.). These wounds insert him completely into our history and manifest his solidarity with our destiny. The wounds do not shut Jesus up within himself, in a self-protective gesture (cf. John 20,27); rather, they open him up to others and make him a compassionate and merciful priest (cf. the Letter to the Hebrews).

The attitude of the disciple Thomas is quite remarkable: his refusal to accept the testimony of the others about the Risen Jesus without seeing the marks left by the crucifixion (John 20,25) is not a simple act of unbelief, as we tend to think at first. What Thomas is really refusing to do is to «file away» a story of suffering, and thus does he vindicate, so to speak, the fact of the suffering. In this case, however, the vindication will have to point toward a suffering that has been transfigured and redeemed, since it is a question of the wounds of the Risen One.

In conclusion, the coming of the Crucified and Risen One reminds us that the consummation of history is not contained within history, but comes to it from without. There are no «invisible hands» (Adam Smith) that finally impose order on the disorders of history, nor are there any «unsociable sociabilities» (Kant) that apply healing balms on history's unending conflicts. Experience makes us aware that history, abandoned to inertia, does not move toward fulfillment; rather, the victims keep on

being victims, and the tyrants keep on being tyrants. The ultimate meaning of history is not to be found in those who are presumably «make» history, but in those who «suffer» it, that is, in the victims, all of whom are recapitulated in the Crucified and Risen One.

2.2. ...with glory

Our traditional interpretation speaks of a first coming of the Son of man. Because this first coming took place under the sign of *kenosis* (Philippians 2,6-11), the human reality of Jesus of Nazareth was bound to incite strong allegiances and rejections: people were not spared the need to make an act of faith in grasping the full extent of Jesus' mission and person. For its part, the resurrection involves a first glorious manifestation, but this manifestation is perceptible only with the «eyes of faith» (Rousselot) and is therefore accessible only to believers. There will be, however, a final glorious manifestation of the Son of man, and it will be of universal scope, such that it will be seen by everybody, both believers and non-believers. In this case, thought, the glory manifested will be the glory of One who is seeking to give life to men and women, not the glory of someone seeking to confound his adversary –just as the divinity of Jesus does not take the form of a conquest (cf. Philippians 2,6), but is rather the door through which we gain access to the Father (cf. John 10,7.9). Irenaeus of Lyon was fond of declaring: the glory of God is a human being fully alive. This coming in glory is, then, for the sake of «giving people life» (John 10,10). The

coming of God is not to convince the world of its sin or to punish it ...

2.3. ...to judge

Normally judgment is understood in a purely extrinsic way, as if someone were coming from outside to judge us, that is, to pass a verdict of guilt or innocence on our actions. This manner of understanding judgment explains why we feel the need for many mediators in order to get through our encounter with the God who judges the living and the dead. And who are the mediators? They are Christ himself, Mary, the saints, our own good works... However, this multiplication of mediators in the long run turns out to be useless since, as the psalmist says, «if you take account of our iniquities, Lord, who can stand?» (Psalm 130). This way of understanding judgment corresponds to a certain way we have of perceiving human reality, for we often experience a yawning gap between what we are and what we want to be, between our reality and our ideals.

But there is another, different way of understanding judgment. I would describe it as a lucid exercise of self-knowledge, by virtue of which we are able to discern where our heart is and to decide where it should be, whether for or against God. But is this possible? Isn't that counsel of the Delphi oracle, «Know thyself», an ideal that is only asymptotically attainable? There is no person who sufficiently knows herself. Nor is there any person who can hold his own life in his hands. This would amount to a sort of self-fulfillment (both personal and collective), something far

removed from the Christian conception of humanity and history, although it has at times been fashionable, thanks to so many purely intra-historical projects and liberation utopias. History (personal and collective) will find its consummation only as something received, and it will be received from the victims of history. It will reach its fulfillment only if it is capable of «looking upon the one they have pierced» (Zachariah 12,10).

2.4. Judgment in the Bible

What is the biblical starting point for understanding the meaning of judgment? Let us begin with a linguistic clarification: the Hebrew verb *safat*, which means the action of judging, designates not only this specific action, but also that of governing; it has the further connotation of taking special care of those being governed. To put it another way, the judge is also governor and as such must be concerned about the welfare and the concerns of his subjects.

In Judges 2,11-19 we find a summary presentation of the key theme of that book. The people are guilty of corrupt practices, so that God's indignation is provoked and the people consequently end up suffering terribly, falling again and again into the hands of their enemies. The surrounding nations oppress the Israelites, who cry out to God for salvation. So God sends them judges to free them. That is to say, the judges were not sent by God to «certify» that the suffering of the people was just punishment, since they had gone astray; rather, they were sent to free and to save the

people. Thus, understood biblically, judgment is the saving act of God.

All this should be understood in the light of God's involvement in history. For example, in 1 Samuel 4,1-11 we see how Israel's defeat resulted in the loss of the ark of the covenant, which was the symbol of God's presence in the midst of his people. When the ark of the covenant was taken away, it seemed as if God himself were suffering the same fate as the people: both the people and the ark had fallen into enemy hands... Along the same line, in Ezekiel (20,9.14.22.44; 36,22 ff.) we read God's declaration: I do not do it for your sake, but so that my Name will not be despised among the nations... And the same idea can be discerned in Romans 8,31 ff.: If God is with us, who can be against us?

2.5. On what we will be judged

The content of the judgment consists in nothing but our posture before Jesus. Its orientation is clearly Christological (cf. John 3,36; 5,24; 8,16; 9,39). Furthermore, the orientation «is made historical» on the basis of our attitude toward the poor people of this world, with whom Jesus identifies. That is the meaning of the famous gospel pericope of the final judgment (Matthew 25,31-46), which explains how the eschatological Judge «separates» the sheep from the goats. This gesture of «separating» reminds us of the Creator's gesture in Genesis, by which he «separates» the waters from the dry land, the light from the darkness (cf. Genesis 1,4.6f.14.18). Such a coincidence of gestures may be suggesting to us that the final judgment

is really an «act of re-creation»; it is the creation of that new world which comes to birth precisely when food is given to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, when the naked are clothed, when the sick and the imprisoned are visited, when the stranger is given a welcome, this new world comes into being when we finally discover in the faces of these brothers and sisters of ours the Face of the One who has identified with them. To the extent that the consummation to which we aspire makes manifest the ultimate aim of the original creative work, eschatology can be said to join hands with the doctrine of creation. The story of creation is more like a «futuristic sketch» than it is a chronicle of something lost in the darkness of past ages, and the elucidation of our hope is the elucidation of that which already was in the beginning, that is, in the loving design of a God who desires us as his «sons and daughters in the Son» and who has an overweening love for those who are the last to be embraced.

2.6. ...the living and the dead

The primitive Christian community was expecting the judgment to come «soon». They lived immersed in a strong eschatological tension. It is not for nothing that the New Testament ends with the cry, *marana tha* (come, Lord Jesus). The great judgment was to affect both the living and the dead, since some Christians expected still to be alive when it took place. That was the view of Paul (1 Thessalonians 4,15; 5,10), who, for his part, felt obliged to issue reprimands to the community of Thessalonica because some of its members, expecting

the imminent return of the Lord and the final judgment, thought they were dispensed from the hard work of daily life (2 Thessalonians 3,10-12). However, the long delay of the parousia made it necessary to rethink everything. The imminence of the judgment was no longer taken to be chronological (something that will take place soon, from one moment to another). Rather, it was understood in an axiological sense, meaning that everything is seen as penultimate in relation to the absolute ultimate that is God. God is the only absolute, and by virtue of such absoluteness his judgment not only takes place *in* history, but is also a judgment *of* history. Only thus is it possible to speak of the history of salvation.

Now, since the judgment is a judgment of history, God can manifest his justice in the victims of history, that is, he can vindicate their struggles and their sufferings. God can do justice to those who have fallen by the wayside. God's (saving) judicial act is total. It redeems the past and rescues it from oblivion. The «dictatorship of the factual» no longer holds for the past. The wounds of history can be transfigured and changed into the «wounds of the Risen One» (cf. John 20,19-29).

2.7. Rescuing from oblivion

All this presupposes a certain conception of time. Called into question is any purely linear concept of time, that is, a notion of time in which each instant swallows the one before it, *sine fine*. Moreover, what is demanded here is a resounding, categorical «No!» to oblivion. Or to put it an-

other way: there is a clear refusal to minimize the pain of the past. Such minimization would result in a minimization also of history: the only things really important would be those that took place *sub specie aeternitatis*. Consequently, history, with its accumulation of misfortunes and sufferings and, above all, with the radical ambiguity and incompleteness that characterizes it, would be nothing but «disposable rubbish». However, God does not

minimize history: in Jesus, God has submerged himself into the depths of human history. He has suffered it. And this history, with all its agonies, has become definitively embedded in God's heart.

Finally, all this implies that we cannot postpone the reality of the judgment until the end of everything: already in history we can find evidence of incipient judgment (pointing in the direction toward which we are heading).

3. I BELIEVE IN THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD...

... and not in the immortality of the soul! Let us start off by saying that resurrection (of the dead or of the flesh) is not the same thing as immortality of the soul. What is the difference between one affirmation and the other? The soul's immortality is a postulate of reason, which follows necessarily from a strictly philosophical consideration of the essence of the human soul, whereas resurrection is an affirmation of faith that confesses the gratuitous and non-deducible action of God upon the whole of our personal reality. The appraisal we make of the whole of our personal reality is far removed from the appraisal God makes: God's will is to save everything, whereas we want to save only those aspects of our reality that we like best or that we feel proudest of. Furthermore, God sees us all as forming part of one, single body, whereas we insist on building barriers around ourselves in our isolating individualities.

We should pay attention to Paul's discourse in the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17). In that Greek equivalent of Hyde Park, where the most disparate opinions and doctrines were expounded, people listened attentively to what Paul had to say ... until he started to talk about «resurrection»! If Paul had made even the slightest effort of «inculturation», he would perhaps have spoken of the «soul's immortality» so as to make his discourse more acceptable to the audience. But no... Paul made no such effort: not due to a lack of awareness or a refusal to do so, but simply because he should not have done so. To the contrary, he would have fallen into a terrible confusion, since they are two quite different matters. As a result, his discourse was a discouraging failure, but that was the price to be paid in order to avoid misunderstandings that would have weighed heavily on the proclamation of the gospel message and

would have ended up explaining away its newness.

Human language is a «vehicle» not only for words, but also for concepts, ideas, and ways of thinking... none of which are as «interchangeable» as we would like to think. Christian faith provocatively proclaims: I believe in the resurrection of the dead... And more concretely: I believe in the resurrection of the flesh... And Tertullian, more provocatively still, proclaimed: *caro cardo salutis* («flesh is the crux [literally, hinge] of salvation»). That is to say, salvation comes to us only through the flesh. What is the meaning of this word «flesh», so charged with consequence from a soteriological point of view?

3.1. Some questions of vocabulary

In the west we have become accustomed to analyzing human reality by dividing it into parts, which essentially function as airtight compartments, without any relation among them. Having made a basic division of human reality into two parts, body and soul, we have become accustomed to a binary (physical/psychic) anthropology, with all the dichotomies and dissociations that are involved in this way of viewing humanity. Not only do we consider this dualism to be ontological (that's the way things are, whether we like it or not), but we have also given it an ethical «coloring». That is to say, the soul is made the realm of what is most noble in the human person, while the body is the sphere of what is ethically ambiguous, not to say evil. In modern times, on the other hand, we are more open to a «psychosomatic» view of the human

reality; that is, we take more seriously the mutual relations between the different aspects of human reality and, concretely, between body and soul.

It will help us if we understand better what the biblical approach is to this whole problematic. The Hebrew anthropology we find expressed in the Bible is fundamentally unitary: it seeks to contemplate the whole of the reality of the human person from a particular perspective. Thus, for the Hebrews the human person was entirely flesh [*basar*, in Hebrew], insofar as two aspects of human reality were stressed: 1) its contingency, limitation, and mortality; and 2) the inter-human solidarity which these characteristics give rise to among those forming part of the human race. In this sense, we have to say that what is unheard of about the in-*carn*-ation is that means that God has become all of this: contingency and solidarity. Properly speaking, then, we should say, not that «God has become man», but that «God has become flesh». Secondly, the human person is soul [*nefesh*, in Hebrew], that is, a personality that we can understand from a psychological (*psyche*) perspective. Finally, the whole human person is also spirit [*ruah*, in Hebrew], since we are dealing with a being open to the Transcendent. In 1 Thes. 5,23 Paul gives a clear testimony of this ternary anthropology, which is ultimately unitary (since it contemplates the whole of the human reality from a particular perspective).

3.2. What we want to say

Thus, by affirming our faith in the resurrection of the dead, we affirm our faith, first, in a God who wants to save

the whole of our reality, body and soul, and who wants to save all of us together. God saves all our reality, not only the best (or what we think is «the best») of ourselves. Secondly, we affirm that, because we dealing with the resurrection of the flesh and because the word flesh implies theologically the solidarity of all human beings, the resurrection can never be a private, individual affair; it can only be a collective happening, for we will rise up as members of one single body, the body of Christ. We are not resurrected in one by one, in isolated fashion, without relating to one another. As someone has provocatively expressed it: «In heaven... either we're all there, or nobody's there!»

3.3. On the corporal condition of the human person

Our faith in the resurrection obliges us to consider the complex topic of human corporality. Here we must limit ourselves to a few brief approaches to the subject matter. First, we may attempt a purely organic approach to our corporality, saying simply that we *have a body*, that is, a head, feet, hands, extremities, etc. Two comments may be made here: first, such organic corporality finds itself in a constantly evolving process; and second, such corporality is seen by us as something other than ourselves: it is that which we can objectivize, or *that* from which we can distance ourselves... or, also, that with which we can be reconciled⁷. When we speak of our corporal condition, therefore, we are speaking of something more than merely organic corporality. In fact, as that which we can objectivize, distance our-

selves from, and be reconciled with, organic corporality is also something that is outside of us. And, being outside of us, it exteriorizes us. And because corporality exteriorizes us, it becomes our way of being in the world, our way of expressing ourselves. The fact is, not only do we have a body, but we are *our body*.

In this way our corporality becomes at once both revelation and concealment; that is, it becomes our way of drawing close to others and at the same time our way of withdrawing from them. This is true because we human beings, despite how much our bodies reveal, always remain in a realm of mystery, inaccessible to others –and often inaccessible even to ourselves. Our corporal condition is also our way of being present to what is other than us, present to other people. Our corporal condition is what interrelates us and makes it possible for us to form one body with others. It is by reason of our corporal condition that we can speak of the Church as the body of Christ, or that we can say we form one single body, etc. It is also true that this peculiar corporal existence refers not only to our condition as members of the Church: it can be applied as well to our condition as members of a single human family.

Having said as much, we can perceive the infinity of harmonics raised by the topic of corporality. Corporality can also become the transparency of God's presence in this world. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, received from God, and that you do not belong to yourselves? This is the question that Paul puts to his beloved community in Corinth (1 Cor. 6,19). Then there is the topic of the *spiritual body* of

which Paul speaks in 1 Cor. 15. In sum, when speaking of our corporal resurrection, we are referring to the resurrection of our whole reality –one that has indeed become a sign of God’s presence.

3.4. Reincarnation

When we speak of resurrection, there inevitably arises a debate here in the West about the question of reincarnation. There is no doubt that this belief has experienced such a huge revival in our culture that we must stop to consider it.

To begin, let us say that we have to deal with two versions of reincarnation. One of them is the oriental version, according to which reincarnation is a form of punishment or progressive purification, necessary for us to become united with the *Atman* or universal soul. Understood thus, reincarnation does not necessarily imply an improvement in the *state* of a person still caught up in such a cycle: rather, it is possible for someone to descend to strata of reality that are lower than in the previous life. Such a cycle is therefore not considered «good news», or anything close to it; rather, it provokes a desire to escape from it. According to the western version of the doctrine, however, reincarnation is indeed «good news». It is based on the idea that human life is too short for us to be able to experience and enjoy all the opportunities that life offers us. Our consciousness of the brevity of life, on the one hand, and our desire to exhaust its many possibilities (ever more unattainable), on the other, demand the existence of successive reincarnations in order for us to take advantage of the

infinite human capacity for progress –progress which, in this case, would be transposed to an eschatological plane. To all this should be added the minimization of death, which reinforces the taboo character that our (post-)modern culture already confers on death. Such a process would result in nothing more than a «change of wardrobe» (changing one body for another, or one existence for another), without major relevance. From this viewpoint, corporality takes on a very different meaning: the body is cared for and corporality is given new value, but only in its most apparent aspects (in what appears and in how it appears). The body is what one has, and not what one is; it thus remains disconnected from all those aspects that relate us with other people and that make us form one body with them. Priority is given, rather, to what is ephemeral and individualizing.

In this reincarnational perspective salvation is definitely not seen as a gift to be received; rather it is the fruit of a conquest, of human achievement –all that is quite in line with the image of the self-made man so popular in contemporary culture. This (necessarily) succinct presentation of reincarnation, in its two version, allows us to see that a Christian answer needs to be carefully nuanced, depending on which version is being referred to. Here we will deal with the western version. Our Christian faith impels us toward affection (not distaste) for the «earthen vessels» (our corporality) that we are and in which we carry our «treasure» (2 Cor. 4,7). What is more, this treasure has been given to us as a gift, since Fulfillment is a Gift, not

a conquest; nor is it the fruit of endless trial-and-error attempts, which would lead us nowhere or would be basically «more of the same». Furthermore, this

Fulfillment which we receive as a gift presupposes a passage (Passover!) through death. Because if the grain of wheat does not die... (John 12,24).

4. THE «LAST THINGS»: HEAVEN, HELL, AND PURGATORY

What is the best way to talk of heaven, hell, and purgatory, the «classical» topics of eschatology? This is an area that makes us aware, sometimes painfully so, of the radical inadequacy of human language. These are topics that we cannot treat without having «anticipatory experiences» of them.

4.1. Speaking of hell...

Is hell just and necessary? Theology claims to be doxological speech about God, that is, speech which gives praise to God. But when we speak of hell, does not our speech become an irreverent and blasphemous discourse, attributing to God ways of acting that negate his love and mercy?

Is it possible? Will not speech about hell lead us into dead-end alleys and into quandaries that are difficult (if not impossible) to solve? When speaking of hell, the gospels keep repeating this expression: «...where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth». Such weeping and gnashing of teeth make it difficult for us to articulate even a minimally comprehensible discourse about this topic.

4.2. What hell is not

Nevertheless, we must talk about it. For a long time the Church in its pastoral work has placed too much (sometimes, nearly exclusive) stress on this topic, thus generating a «religion of fear and terror». Basic responsibility and honesty require us to clear up misunderstandings that have done so much harm and to put things in their proper place.

First of all, let us say that hell is not a «positive» act, in the sense of something positively desired by God. It is not a creation of God, a place established to punish the wicked. If hell were that, then it would call God's justice seriously into question. Hell would mean condemning non-eternal beings to eternal punishment for non-eternal actions. Not only would God's justice be called into question, so would his mercy. All this is so clearly evident that we need not go into further arguments: the punishments of hell would not, shall we say, be a good «letter of introduction» for divine mercy.

In the «prayer for the conversion of the gentiles» that Saint Francis Xavier composed, we read: «Eternal God, creator of all things, ... Behold, Lord, how to thy

dishonor hell is daily replenished with [the souls of the infidels]....» Hell is truly an insult to God.⁸ Like the ancient prophet of Israel, Xavier seems to be telling his God, in a final, supreme effort to convince him: «If you don't do it for us, then at least do it for the honor of Your Name» (cf. Ezekiel 36,22) –since he was convinced that, when all is said and done, the honor of God's Name (his very reality) and the good of what has been created by God are one and the same thing.

4.3. The impossible negativity

If hell is not a creation of God, and if only God can create, then we must conclude that hell can be characterized only by its negativity. Properly speaking, *hell is not...* In fact, the New Testament, in speaking of the fires of hell, gives us an image of a conflagration that consumes everything, reducing it to nothing. Hell would be that nothing. But it would have an important characteristic: the nothing of hell would not be the desirable, attractive nothing of post-modern nihilism (a sort of analgesic that saves us the unspeakable suffering of not having been able to live the life of God); rather, it would be a nothing «that hurts», as fire does. For indeed the biblical revelation is all about fostering life, not nothingness. Hell, therefore, would be an «anti-Genesis», a creation story in reverse.

All this puts us back at the original starting point of everything. And that is precisely where our language about hell gives us problems, for we simply cannot place ourselves at that starting point.

We know that God creates freely. And we know that this freedom of God is the

freedom of One who gives himself in Love. In God, freedom (as absolute as it may claim to be) and love (as weak and limited as it may seem) embrace one another. Our own freedom, in contrast, is a freedom «in the making»: it is not absolute; it is not capable of opting between being and not being. And when it tries to do so, that is, when it tries to become absolute and closes itself off, then human liberty is capable of «creating hells» in this history of ours: a world of victims and villains, separated by a unbreachable abyss (Luke 16,26). Contrary to what Sartre says, hell is not other people; rather, it is oneself, closed off to others. Indeed, other people are the possibility of my reaching heaven.

This is what grounds the «legitimacy» of our discourse about hell: it shows us that ours is a «graced freedom» and that, when that is forgotten, it can «create hells», which are translated into the suffering and pain of innocent people. Such discourse also gains legitimacy by reminding us that the much desired reconciliation of opposed principles (between justice and mercy, for example, or between God's universal will to save and our freedom to frustrate that will) is a permanent task which, when all is said and done, we can receive only as Gift.

4.4. He descended into hell

Despite all we have said so far, Christians proclaim faith in a God who does not abandon any of his creatures, a God so wildly in love that he goes in search of the «lost sheep», leaving the others behind in the fold (Luke 15,3-7). Our God is not a wrathful deity, who takes pleasure in

discharging his rage upon the sinner; he is rather the Lamb who bears and, by bearing, takes away the sin of the world⁹. Ours is a God who descended into hell... For this reason, his love always wins out.

4.5 ... But speaking especially of heaven

If there is anyplace where we feel particularly pained at the incapacity of human language to communicate what «eye has not seen nor ear heard» and «what God has prepared for those he loves», it is in trying to speak of heaven. Does not even our colloquial speech, when it wants to discredit a topic, typically claim that it's a matter of «heavenly music»? It is impossible to say all about the All.

The fact is that we are reduced to an inarticulate state that leaves us forever dissatisfied. We can represent heaven only by means of images, as Jesus did, hoping that such images awaken a «desire for heaven» rather than quench it. This is no doubt a venture condemned to failure from the start, but we have to make an attempt.

4.6. Heaven as a «wedding feast»

Jesus often spoke of wedding feasts. The simple image of people sitting down together around a table, sharing an abundance of what is offered to us (lots of everything, and plenty for everybody) reveals to us a God who exceeds all our expectations. It was not in vain that the early Christians saw in the eucharist a pretaste of this messianic banquet. Furthermore, if the banquet is a wedding feast, then we are inspired to imagine the

love and mutual donation of bride and bridegroom and their excitement about beginning to share a future together.

4.7. Finally becoming oneself

In Ap. 2,17 we read: To those who conquer I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give them a white stone, with new names written on the stone, which no one knows except those who receive it.

We should not forget the importance of names in the Bible: the name designates the essence, the inner identity, of the one named. Heaven means reaching our most authentic selfhood, our most authentic identity.¹⁰

Nevertheless, it is an identity given as gift. In this does our «victory» consist –in gaining our true selves.

4.8. The heavenly Jerusalem

The Bible also speaks to us of a «celestial city», the heavenly Jerusalem. In Hebrew the name «Jerusalem» is actually dual in number (*Yerushalayim*), as if wanting to indicate both a heavenly and an earthly Jerusalem. The new Jerusalem comes down from heaven, as opposed to what the builders of the tower of Babel were attempting, to reach up to heaven (Genesis 11), with the result they became unintelligible to one another and were scattered. Furthermore, the new Jerusalem comes down «adorned as a bride» (Apocalypse 21,2) in an invincible fusion of the «civic» (social) and the «nuptial», which thus unites the spirituality of «commitment for the sake of the Kingdom» with the «nuptial spirituality» of classical mysticism.

4.9. Seeing God

Heaven has also been described as a vision of God, which is the beatific vision, but we should not be fooled by the intellectual tenor of this latter expression. To understand what lies behind it we need to refer back to the complicated ceremonial of ancient oriental courts, in which the king could be seen directly only by the most intimate and most trusted persons, those who were of similar rank. For the Hebrews, therefore, seeing God would be tantamount to becoming divine, becoming Christ, being of the same rank as God. It is for that reason that we read in 1 John 3,2: We will be like him because we shall see him as he is. What human beings sought to «achieve» at the dawn of history, becoming like God (Genesis 3,5), finally becomes a reality, but as pure gift¹¹.

Furthermore, speaking of heaven as a «vision of God» has practical consequences for here and now. In Matthew's gospel we read, «Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God» (5,8). Later on we are told: «As you did to one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it to me» (Mt. 25,40). Therefore the God whom no one can see (Jhn 1,18) can in reality be seen by the «pure of heart», who are the persons who know how to «see God in everything and everything in God» (Ignatius of Loyola). More concretely, the «pure of heart» are those who know how to discover the beloved face of God in the faces (so often disfigured) of the people considered to be «last» in history. For the «pure of heart», the dis-figured faces of these «least» brethren assume a *figure* (that is, a name is given to their suffering and pain) until they are *trans*-figured into the beloved face of the Lord.

The way to «see God» is contemplation, the goal of which is the process of reflectir [reflecting] that Ignatius recommends in the *Spiritual Exercises*; it is something very different from the trite practice of «drawing a moral» from the contemplation of a scene. Being contemplative means identifying oneself with the One whom we contemplate, to the point of resembling him (seeing God = being like him). And by extension, it means identifying ourselves with, making ours, the cause of those with whom God has identified himself (Matthew 25,31-46).

4.10. Eternal life

We also speak of heaven in terms of eternal life. Eternity is not the same thing as an indefinite period of time. It is not a quantitative notion, but a qualitative one. Eternal life is life which has no «date of expiration». Or better said, it is life that is in no way threatened by death. Thus it is Life, with a capital «L». That is what Jesus was referring to when he said, «I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly» (John 10,10). This is something we should keep in mind in case the idea of «eternity» suggests to us an interminable boredom. In his encyclical on hope Benedict XVI quotes Saint Ambrose: immortality is more a burden than a benefit if grace doesn't enter the scene.¹²

4.11. Returning to paradise

Finally, heaven is paradise. We were «expelled» from paradise at the dawn of history, condemned to wander aimlessly along the dusty roads of life, always longing to return «home» (a longing like

that of the prodigal son: Luke 15,17)¹³ At times we can get a few glimpses of that home, but we aren't sure whether these console us, or rather increase the pain of the «wound» that was opened up in the human heart after the eviction from paradise.

Nevertheless, the fact that the goal is still paradise corroborates a truth that we have tried to emphasize several times in the course of these reflections: eschatology speaks to us of the consummation of what was glimpsed at the very beginning. For that reason hope ends in doxology: «Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit / As it was in the beginning, / is now / and ever shall be, / world without end. / Amen».

Appendix: purgatory

Properly speaking, the final things will be only heaven and hell –the former as salvation and the latter as the possibility of refusing salvation. What is more: we have stated –and we still state– that Christian eschatology is not a «doctrine of two ways» since the only possibility it considers is that of salvation (heaven).

Furthermore, we should be mindful that we can speak of the last things only on the basis of human experiences we have here and now, experiences which our faith and our hope transpose to the great beyond, thus giving them, so to speak, «eschatological approval» that is, conferring on them a certain definitive character.

In light of this, what can be said of purgatory? The first thing that this name

may evoke in us is the troubling image of a «god» who makes us pay right down to the last cent. Or at best the image makes us think of a «waiting room» through which most mortals will have to pass in order to be able to reach celestial beatitude. If we add to those images certain liturgical practices of dubious quality, we have more than enough reasons to ignore the topic.

Nevertheless, we cannot deny a certain plausibility to purgatory, first because our access to celestial beatitude will always be a creaturely access. Heaven does not mean that we fuse into God and disappear into him, but rather that we become united with him while preserving our own identity, an identity which, in its likeness to God's, becomes supremely relational.

We know, of course, from experience that making our very own the love God gives us inevitably presupposes a process, or better: a way.

Every forward movement on the way is a source of joy, but progress in the journey can sometimes also be very painful. John of the Cross points out quite correctly that the real misery of the human condition consists in this: what is most helpful and beneficial for us becomes harsh and difficult to absorb.

We are blinded by the excess of light.

Possibly this is what purgatory is all about: knowing that we are utterly saved and nevertheless still on the way to taking full possession of that salvation.

In other words: purgatory is heaven, but seen «from this upward slope».

- * Reference to the famous *Song to Liberty* of José Antonio Labordeta. [Translator's note.]
1. And thereby the afterlife ceases to be a place and becomes a Person
 2. These are the expressions used by Ignacio Ellacuría in the city hall of Barcelona, during his speech of acknowledgment after receiving the Alfonso Carlos Comín prize. This speech was given a few days before he was killed in the Universidad Centroamericana of El Salvador (November 1989), along with his fellow community members, their cook and her daughter.
 3. Here we are referring to the *shekinah*, God's dwelling among men and women, the sign of his companionship and his solidarity with the human journey in history. «He has set up his tent among us» we read in the prologue of Jn 1,14.
 4. It is as if that well-known saying from the gospel of John, «the poor you will always have with you» (John 12,8), which is always in danger of being taken as an alienating «invitation to give alms», were to be changed into the following assertion: since every intrahistorical project, as perfect as it may be, always runs the risk of leaving somebody out, every intrahistorical utopian project must keep itself in a permanent state of «examining its conscience».
 5. «Praise is the most proper form of human existence. Praising and not praising are as opposed to one another as life and death» (cf. G. von Rad, *Theologie des AT*, I, 381). In German the words «life» (*Leben*) and «praise» (*Loben*) have a great phonetic similarity, as can be seen. We do not know if they come from a common root.
 6. It was not for nothing that the Sadducees denied the resurrection (cf. Mark 12,18-27 and parallels). It is usually argued that they denied the resurrection because of their adherence to the Pentateuch, which of course offers no testimony about resurrection. However, we should not forget that the Sadducees formed part of the class that ruled over the people. They therefore had to defend their privileges, which would have been called into question by a God who took the side of the victims, as belief in the resurrection makes plain to us.
 7. Our corporal condition is a call to acceptance and reconciliation. Actually, we state that corporality is the other part of ourselves. Naturally, what is other sometimes arouses our suspicion or distrust, but not only that: it can also become a challenge to our capacity for reconciliation and acceptance. Only thus will we be able to commune with the mystery of our existence.
 8. Cf. the González Faus article in: J. I. GONZÁLEZ FAUS, sj. / Josep GIMÉNEZ, sj., *El mal y la misericordia. Aproximación a la Primera Semana de los Ejercicios*, Barcelona, Cristianisme i Justícia, EIDES, Colección Ayudar, nº 52.
 9. In Greek the word, *aireô* means both 'bear' or 'carry' and 'take away'.
 10. Observe, in the apparition of the Risen One to Mary Magdalene, how Jesus finally calls her by her name, whereas the two angels call her simply, "Woman" (John 20,13.15.16).
 11. We had formerly believed that God compulsively held onto his divinity, as if it were booty from war (Philippians 2) - perhaps to wield it against us - but then we become aware, with both surprise and gratitude, that it really is a gift which he wishes to give entirely to us. As Ignatius says in his Exercises (234): «The same Lord desires to give me himself as much as he can» (= if we let him).
 12. *Spe salvi*, 10.
 13. A peculiar longing: we long for something of which we have never had any full experience! Even if the longing speaks of the past, the consummation to which we aspire points us toward the future. Is this the reason why John of the Cross seeks to purify the memory (which refers us back to the past) with the virtue of hope (which orients us to the future)? «Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?» (Is. 43,18-19).