Don’t Worry about being “Left Behind.” Have a Holy Fear of being taken up to Judgment.

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In certain (but not all) Protestant circles, and especially among the Evangelicals, there is a strong and often vivid preoccupation with signs of the Second Coming of Christ. Many of the notions that get expressed are either erroneous or extreme. Some of these erroneous notions are rooted in a misunderstanding of the various scriptural genres. Some are rooted in reading certain Scriptures in isolation from the wider context of the whole of Scripture. And some are rooted in reading one text and disregarding others that balance it.

The Catholic approach to the end times (eschatology) is perhaps less thrilling and provocative. It does not generate “Left Behind” movie series or cause people to sell their houses and gather on hillsides waiting for the announced end. It is more methodical and seeks to balance a lot of notions that often hold certain truths in tension.

I thought it perhaps a worthy goal to set forth certain principles of eschatology from a Catholic point of view, since the movie “Left Behind” is bound to generate questions among fellow Catholics. Most of the teachings offered in this post are drawn straight from the Catechism and the Scriptures. What I offer here I do not propose to call a complete eschatology, only a sketch of basic principles rooted right in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

While we cannot know the exact time of His Coming, nevertheless we can be watchful for things that both remind us and signal us to His approach. These signs give indications only. The presence of such texts cannot be seen to overrule that He will come “on a sudden” and that many will be caught unawares.

Here are some notes from the Catechism (the blue and red texts are my own). I have made the Scripture quotes live by way of hypertext so you can click right over and read them.

1. “Soon + Sudden” – Since the Ascension, Christ’s coming in glory has been imminent (Rev 22:20), even though “it is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority” (Acts 1:7). This eschatological coming could be accomplished at any moment, even if both it and the final trial that will precede it are “delayed” (Mat 24:44; 1 Thes 5:2; 2 Thes 2:3-12). (CCC #673).

Of all the points the Catechism makes, this one sets the tone of balance that must, most surely, be maintained. On the one hand, Christ says, “I am coming soon” and that His coming could be both sudden and without warning. Yet this truth must be held in tension with other truths that set forth certain signs and things that must be accomplished first. And these things are not easily or quickly accomplished. This is further developed in point # 2, which follows.
2. Suspended - The glorious Messiah's coming is suspended at every moment of history until his recognition by “all Israel” (Romans 11:20-26; Mat 23:39), for “a hardening has come upon part of Israel” in their “unbelief” (Romans 11:20-26) toward Jesus. St. Peter says to the Jews of Jerusalem after Pentecost, “Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old” (Acts 3:19-21). St. Paul echoes him, “For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?” (Rom 11:15) The “full inclusion” of the Jews in the Messiah’s salvation, in the wake of “the full number of the Gentiles” (Rom 11:12), will enable the People of God to achieve “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”, in which “God may be all in all” (Eph 4:13; 1 Cor 15:27-28). (CCC # 674)

This going forth of the Gospel to all the nations and the acceptance of Christ by the Jews would seem to be matters that would take some time.

Has the Gospel really reached all the nations? Have the full number of Gentiles come in and are they serving God and repenting in sufficient numbers? Perhaps so, one may argue. And yet, on a planet of seven billion people, fewer than one-third are Christians. But on the other hand, there are very few places in the world where there is no Christian presence.

And what is meant by the “full number” of Gentiles? That number is hidden from us and is surely debated.

And has the “hardening” that has come upon Israel been lifted? This too is debated and, despite certain movements of “Messianic Jews,” it does not seem that the hardening has been lifted in any wide sort of way or that Jesus has been recognized by “all Israel.”

3. Suffering and Sedition - Before Christ’s second coming, the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers (Luke 18:8; Mt 24:12). The persecution that accompanies her pilgrimage on earth will unveil the “mystery of iniquity” in the form of a religious deception offering men an apparent solution to their problems at the price of apostasy from the truth. The supreme religious deception is that of the Antichrist, a pseudo-messianism by which man glorifies himself in place of God and of His Messiah come in the flesh (2 Thess 2:4-12; 1 Thess 5:2-3; 1 Jn 2:18-22). (CCC # 675)

Clearly, many of these troubles have afflicted the Church in every age. There has always been persecution. Many have fallen away, sometimes in large numbers, most into schism, but some into unbelief. There have been times, too, during which it can be argued that the love of many has grown cold.

And yet, clearly, in the times in which we live, these are very severe problems and they have grown to envelop most of the planet. But God only knows when these signs will be present in a definitive way rather than merely present prefiguratively. However, there is no real basis for a rapture of the Church prior to the final crisis. Indeed, the biblical narrative seems quite clear that the end of times will be a time of test and purification for the Church, not something from which we are exempt.

4. Secular Utopianism Rejected – The Antichrist’s deception already begins to take shape in the world every time the attempt is made to realize within history that messianic hope which can only be realized beyond history through the eschatological judgment. The Church has rejected even
modified forms of this falsification of the kingdom under the name of millenarianism, especially the “intrinsically perverse” political form of a secular messianism (CCC # 676).

Yes many in human history, but especially in modern times, have advanced the notion that a secular utopia could be ushered in by human effort, and by submitting oneself to a government, worldly power, or charismatic figure to do so.

Many repressive regimes and movements (often typified by powerful or charismatic leaders) of the last century claimed the power to usher in such a utopia. The sad legacy of the 20th Century shows how tragic, bloody, and repressive such attempts have been.

The Church also rejects religious forms of this, which hold that prior to the Second Coming of Christ a period of 1000 years is set aside during which Christ will reign on earth or in which the Church will somehow attain a total victory prior to Christ’s Second Coming. This will be developed more in the final point below.

5. Second Coming follows a final unleashing of evil - The Church will enter the glory of the kingdom only through this final Passover, when she will follow her Lord in his death and Resurrection (Rev 19:1-9). The kingdom will be fulfilled, then, not by a historic triumph of the Church through a progressive ascendancy, but only by God’s victory over the final unleashing of evil, which will cause his Bride to come down from heaven (Rev 13:1ff; Rev 20:7-9; Rev 21:2-4). God’s triumph over the revolt of evil will take the form of the Last Judgment after the final cosmic upheaval of this passing world (CCC # 677).

Hence, Scripture and the Church envisage a final and intense unleashing. And this final and cosmic conflict will usher in the great triumph and the Last Judgment. This unleashing of the full power of the Devil in the very end is mysterious and difficult to understand, but it is clearly set forth in Scripture, perhaps as a final test for the Church, perhaps as a definitive demonstration of the power of God. Notice again that there is no teaching of “rapture” wherein the Church is spared this final trial. Just as Christ was not spared his crucifixion, neither is His mystical body, the Church, spared a final passover into glory.

Balance! Now please note that while we may wish to focus on one or two points above, each of the five points must be held in balance. In one sense all these signs have been present in the Church’s history, yet not in the definitive and final sense.

Thus, while these are signs that do in fact signal and accompany and usher in the last things, exactly when and how they come together in a definitive sense cannot be known by us. Were that the case, Christ’s clear words that He will come at an hour we do not expect (cf Mat 24:44) and that no one knows the day or hour (cf Matt 24:36), would be violated.

The key point is to hold all five principles in balance, and to accept the tension of knowing signs but not the knowing the definitive time or fulfillment of them.

Most errors in eschatology proceed from a lack of balance and a failure to appreciate that the final age in which we live is steeped in mysteries and meanings known fully only by God. Time itself is mysterious, as are the deeper meanings of events and human history. The Lord, while giving us a framework that reminds of us His coming and signaling us in a merciful way to remember, has insisted that it is not for us to know the times or the seasons fixed by the Father, let alone the day or hour.

Humility, prayerful vigilance, readiness through obedience and the gift of holiness, along with an eager,
longing heart for the Kingdom in all its glory are our best posture.

Avoid doing lots of mathematical calculations here. The Catholic approach may not be the stuff of movies and bestsellers, but it is the balanced and trusting faith to which we are summoned.

He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you all. Amen. (Rev 22:20-21). And again, For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men; but what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience (2 Cor 5:10-11).

At the end of the day, the true “preoccupation” we have ought to be with our judgment, wherein nothing will be hidden and all the masks we like to wear are stripped away. Even our most idle words will be part of that judgment. Here is something that should concern us and which is both certain and near: our own particular judgment, of which scripture says, It is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment (Heb 9:27).

Just for some fun, and also for a creative reminder, here is a little video I put together over a year ago.