

**We have not here a lasting city**

We've been reflecting on heaven, especially the soul's face-to-face vision of God at the heart of eternal happiness. It's important to highlight this personal spiritual destiny. At the same time, we rejoice in the richness of all the aspects of the salvation Christ brings: body and soul; individual and community; in eternity, but with seeds already planted in this earthly life.

*Body and soul:* The resurrection of our bodies into glorious reunion with our souls at Christ's second coming is a doctrine especially characteristic of Christian faith. Various non-Christian belief systems recognised the immortality of the *soul*, but knowledge of our final *bodily* resurrection comes from God's revelation, as found in the Old and New Testaments. Christ's bodily resurrection was the primary proclamation of the first Christians, and his resurrection is the foundation of our own; so the Christian proclamation can never neglect this truth that our own bodies will rise again on the last day. God created us as a union of body and soul, so he redeems us in body and soul.

*Individual and community:* We also know well that God does not save us 'merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another'. (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* 9) Rather, we are saved in our communion with Christ, being part of his Body, the Church – united in faith and charity, and each desiring the salvation of all.

*This world and the next:* It's important to understand the relationship between our eternal destiny and the seeds of the kingdom planted even now on earth. St Paul warns us not to place our hearts on the things of this world: 'If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.' (*I Cor* 15:19) Still, there is legitimate concern that our faith be relevant not just for life after death but even for a certain earthly well-being, rightly understood.

Because of the primary Christian focus on the next world, there did arise in modern times the accusation that Christianity reduces our motivation to improve this world here and now. Really, history refutes the accusation, for example when we see how various advances around the world – the promotion of human rights, freedom, science, technology, development – in many ways grew from the Catholic civilisation of medieval Europe, its labours and its principles.

Indeed, many of God's commandments are precisely to do with respecting earthly goods such as bodily life and well-being: 'You shall not kill'; 'You shall not steal'; 'I was hungry and you gave me food...' Still, perhaps there have been Christians who misunderstood this world as ultimately a waste of time – at best a 'waiting room' for heaven.

Vatican II answered this objection by showing how our Christian labours to develop this world are planting *seeds* that will blossom in the life to come. Therefore our belief in eternity and its primacy, rightly understood, encourages us all the more to do the best we can for *this* world and promoting genuine earthly values, while never losing our primary focus on heaven itself.

So the Council proclaimed: 'The form of this world, distorted by sin, is passing away (cf. *I Cor* 7:31)...While we are warned that it profits a man nothing if he gain the whole world and lose himself, (cf. *Lk* 9:25) the expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one. For here grows the body of a new human family, a body that even now is able to give some kind of foreshadowing of the new age.'

‘Hence, while earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ’s kingdom, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the Kingdom of God.

‘For after we have obeyed the Lord, and in His Spirit nurtured on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom, and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise, we will find them again, but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured, when Christ hands over to the Father: “a kingdom eternal and universal, a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace.” (Preface of Christ the King) On this earth that Kingdom is already present in mystery. When the Lord returns it will be brought into full flower.’ (Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes* 39)

After Vatican II there was maybe an ‘intoxication’ for some Catholics with the affirmation of building the kingdom here and now, to the extent that the desire for eternal life was even disparaged: ‘some heaven, light years away’ as a fashionable hymn of those times put it. Fearing an excessive ‘other-worldliness’, a distorted this-worldliness neglects the supernatural; and social or political programs, rather than *expressing* our supreme commitment to God and relying on his grace, can instead subtly *replace* him. Earthly progress substitutes for eternal life.

In truth, ‘the kingdom of good will never be definitively established in this world’, because human beings always remain free to fall back towards evil. (Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* 24) Pope St Paul VI again explained the right relationship between the concern for this world and concern for the next in his *Credo of the People of God* (1968), re-affirming Vatican II’s insight that these concerns are not in opposition – they support each other.

He proclaimed: ‘We confess that the Kingdom of God begun here below in the Church of Christ is not of this world whose form is passing, (*Jn* 18:36; *I Cor* 7:31) and that its proper growth cannot be confounded with the progress of civilisation, of science or of human technology, but that it consists in an ever more profound knowledge of the unfathomable riches of Christ, an ever stronger hope in eternal blessings, an ever more ardent response to the love of God, and an ever more generous bestowal of grace and holiness among men.

‘But it is this same love that induces the Church to promote persistently the true temporal welfare of human beings. Without ceasing to warn her children that they have not here a lasting city, (*Heb* 13:14) she also urges them to contribute, each according to his vocation and his means, to the welfare of their earthly city...

‘The deep solicitude of the Church, the Spouse of Christ, for the needs of human beings, for their joys and hopes, their griefs and labours, is therefore nothing other than her intense desire to be present to them, in order to illuminate them with the light of Christ and to gather them all in Him, their only Saviour. This solicitude can never mean that the Church conform herself to the things of this world, or that she lessen the ardour of her expectation of her Lord and of His eternal Kingdom.’

So: we don’t rest from our labours while this life lasts, yet our labours themselves are above all for the eternal salvation of souls. And our eyes are fixed above all on that life to come, as St Paul tells us (*2 Cor* 4:18): ‘We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.’