

My Brothers and Sisters,

Each year, as the Church year draws to a close, the readings present us with a vision of the end times, the times leading up to the Second Coming of Christ. In the pre-Vatican II Liturgy, both the final Sunday of the Church year and the First Sunday of Advent had apocalyptic Gospels like today's Gospel.

As a child, I was frightened by those Gospels and the homilies that accompanied them. Today we know that apocalyptic is a literary genre that uses dramatic images that are not intended to be taken literally. The point of these dramatic images is to make sure we understand that when Christ returns in glory, there will be no mistaking his coming. When Christ came 2000 years ago, many, if not most, people did not recognize him even with his teaching and his miracles. On the other hand, when Christ returns, when he comes in glory, all will recognize him. As I have mentioned before, Christologist Fr. Jean Galot has suggested that when Christ returns in glory, the great revelation will be that he has been with us all along.

When I learned catechism, we were taught the four last things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell.

In recent years, we Catholics have gotten way from talking about hell and purgatory for several reasons. First, our images of hell and purgatory have been too fanciful. Second, we find it difficult to reconcile hell or purgatory with an all loving, all merciful, all forgiving God. Third, and I really think this is the biggest reason of all, we live in a time when few people are willing to accept responsibility before God for their lives and their choices.

To understand hell, we have to understand heaven. In the Gospels, Jesus' most frequent image for heaven or the kingdom of God is a banquet. For the Jews of Jesus' time, meals were sacred times of intimacy with God and with others. Heaven, then, is intimacy with God and others. Hell, on the contrary, represents total isolation from God and others. Our four greatest personal needs are to know and to be known and to love and to be loved. In a word, our greatest personal need is intimacy. The punishment of hell will be the complete absence of intimacy with God and others.

In his November 4th column, Fr. Ron Rolheiser suggests that "many Protestants and Evangelicals reject the very concept of purgatory on the grounds that, biblically, there are only two eternal places, heaven and hell." When I named the four last things, purgatory was not mentioned. When we die, we are either saved or not saved. However, as Catholics, we believe that even though we may be saved, our love may still need to be purified before we can enjoy the fulness of God's life. What purgatory is not is a mini-hell. According to Fr. Rolheiser, "true purgation happens only through love because it is only when we experience love's true embrace that we can see our sin and drink in, for the first time, the power to move beyond it. Only light dispels darkness and only love casts out sin."¹

My brothers and sisters, we must never forget Paul's words to the Romans: "*It is to God, then, that each of us will have to give an account of himself*" [14:12].

¹Ronald Rolheiser, "Purgatory as Seeing Fully for the First Time," 2012-11-04,
<http://www.ronrolheiser.com/columnarchive/?id=1199>.