

## *Our Meaning and Our End*

By Margaret I. Hughes, Ph.D.

November 14, 2021 – Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Daniel 12.1-3; Hebrews 10.11-14; Mark 13.24-32

---

On this, the Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, we are approaching the end of the liturgical year, which will culminate next week in the Feast of Christ the King. Often, it is when we are almost out of time that we are most aware of it. It is appropriate, then, that as the liturgical year comes to a close, each of the readings for today begins with a reference to time: the first reading from *Daniel* and the Gospel from *Mark* begin, “In those days,” while the second reading from the *Letter to the Hebrews* begins, “Every priest stands daily.”

### The End of Time

The course of the liturgical year calls to mind the course of each of our lives—the beginning is hopeful, looking forward to what is to come, the middle traverses through sufferings and triumphs, as well as “ordinary time,” and then there is an end. But it is also an image of the course of human history, from the Creation of man to the end of time itself. The passages from *Daniel* and *Mark* refer to the end of time.

That time will end, whether the end of a lifetime or the end of time itself, is unsettling and uncomfortable. This is clear from the ways in which we try to live without thinking about death at all, or react to death with unthinking hysteria: both are attempts to avoid facing the reality that our lives end. Likewise, we may unthinkingly dismiss the apocalypse as the fiction of fantastical doomsday movies, or we may regard it with a frenzied panic: both are attempts to avoid facing the reality that the world will end.

In short, we fear death, and we fear the apocalypse; we fear time ending. We know that time itself will end because God has revealed it. That each year and each life will end is not a surprise; reason and experience tell us to expect it. Reason does not tell us to expect the end of time, however. Without Revelation, we could easily expect time to continue forever. The ancient philosophers, in fact, relying only on reason, thought that time is eternal and that the world has no beginning and no end.

Given how uncomfortable, even frightening, it is to think about the end of time, it is curious that God reveals it. It seems that life would be so much less burdensome if we could live as though our days are unnumbered. Why does God reveal to us something so disturbing?

It is instructive, as we consider the good that comes from knowing that time will end, to reflect on why we fear the end of time. Fear is a response to the approach of an evil that will be difficult to overcome. The end of time does seem to be a real evil. Our lives, our experience, our very existence, are conditioned by time. We cannot imagine what it is to be without time, and so we cannot imagine being without time. The threat of the end of time seems to be the threat of the end of existence itself. This is truly an evil, the very worst evil.

And, it seems to be an evil that is not only difficult, but even impossible to overcome. As we consider the end of time, any illusions that we may have of being totally self-reliant and in absolute control of our own existence fall away.

That time will end calls our attention to the fact that we are powerless over the passage of time. We cannot stop time from moving towards its end, nor can we recover the time that has passed. Reflecting on the end of time suggests that we are hurtling towards the abyss of non-existence and there is no way to escape.

## Despair or Hope?

The possibility that this might all end in nothingness demands that we ask: what is it all for? If each one of us, and all of humanity, will simply cease to be, what good is our suffering, or even our joys? Why traverse the course of life and history, if it all comes to naught? And, if it all comes to nothing, what good is even this day, this hour, this moment?

We have, in response, two options: despair or hope. Despair tells us that there is no way we can avoid the abyss. In answer to the question, "What is it all for?," despair responds, "Nothing." If despair is right, then the best that we can do in this life is to live moment to moment, pursuing the fleeting but titillating pleasures that will dull the dreadful sense of meaninglessness.

But the readings from today offer a reason to live differently. Although Daniel's prophecy includes a "time unsurpassed in distress," it begins with the promise that "at that time there shall arise Michael, the great prince, a guardian of your people." Likewise, Jesus tells us, "They will see 'the Son of Man coming in the clouds' with great power and glory, and then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the end of the earth to the end of the sky." At the end of time, God comes to us and gathers in all who accept His invitation—an invitation he extends to all human beings—to be a member of His kingdom, the Church, in which we will rejoice together for eternity in His goodness. The end of time is not the annihilation of our existence. Rather, it is its fulfillment.

Although our powerlessness over time causes us fear as we consider our individual lives or the fate of mankind, this fear is a fertile ground for hope. Fear arises out of the first inclination to rely on ourselves; it dissolves into hope when we look towards God's invitation to us to depend on Him utterly. This invitation to depend on God is the joyous answer to the question, "What is it all for?" Whereas despair hisses, "Nothing," hope proclaims, "Everything."

Our inability to control time and yet our complete dependence on time make clear that we are dependent beings; we are creatures. To be a creature is to be created. A creature depends for its existence on its creator; if there is no creator, there is no creature. This is true of things that human beings create; for buildings, artworks, governments, cities to exist, human beings must create them. Human creations, however, can continue to exist, at least for a time, without their human creator. We know from experience, however, that no human creation or institution lasts forever. All human creations eventually perish.

Humans, who are creations, however, do not ultimately perish. Even when time comes to an end, when heaven and earth pass away, human beings will not pass away. God will continue to exist, and he will continue to cause us to exist.

This means that not just at the beginning of time and at the end of time, but even now, at this moment, God causes us to exist. Simply that we exist right now shows that God is with us and at work in us in this and every moment.

That God sustains us, even now, demonstrates that life does have meaning. That meaning is to be loved by God. Our lives are for growing in the capacity to receive that love, so that at the end of our lives, and at the end of time, we will be prepared to rejoice in God's goodness.

## Depending on God

Our capacity to receive love and to rejoice in God's goodness, however, is inhibited by sin. And, as St. Paul tells us, "Every priest stands daily at his ministry, offering frequently those same sacrifices that can never take away sins." We cannot, on our own, remove our sins that prevent us from living meaningful lives. Jesus, in his Sacrifice on the Cross, does this for us. He is, in the words of St. Paul, the "one [who] offered one sacrifice for sins" and "by one offering he has made perfect forever those who are being consecrated." When we participate in Mass, we participate in that single Sacrifice that happened at one time, and yet in its effects suffuses all time.

We hope for forgiveness and fulfillment, not only individually, but altogether. While we each, individually, aim to grow in our capacity to depend on and receive the love of God and rejoice in that love, we are not alone in that aim. It is the aim of the whole Church, the body of Christ which includes all human beings across history who choose to

receive and respond to Christ's invitation to membership in His kingdom. When we, individually, pursue our purpose, we strengthen the whole Church in her purpose; and, when the Church is strengthened in her purpose, we are individually strengthened in ours. The revelation of the end of time shows us that life has meaning and that we pursue that meaning together.

This is why the Church commands that we attend Mass each Sunday and Holy Day of Obligation; it is integral to our living out the purpose of our lives. When we come to Mass, we rejoice in our dependence on God altogether, and are strengthened together to continue to look forward expectantly to growing in receiving the goodness of God in this life. This is a preparation for receiving His goodness individually after death, and altogether in the final consummation of time.

The revelation that time will end, therefore, is the revelation that life and history is meaningful. Our lives that we live in time matter and can reach what is good because it is God, not man, who sustains us and gives life meaning. That meaning is to give ourselves over completely to dependence on God in gratitude for his forgiveness, goodness, and generosity, so that we will meet Him with joy when He comes again. In doing so, we manifest His goodness and so participate in glorifying Him. We live out the Psalm that we prayed today:

My heart is glad and my soul rejoices,  
my body, too, abides in confidence;  
because you will not abandon my soul to the netherworld,  
nor will you suffer your faithful one to undergo corruption.  
You will show me the path to life,  
fullness of joys in your presence,  
the delights at your right hand forever.

*Margaret I. Hughes, Ph.D., is a tutor at Thomas Aquinas College, New England.*

### *For Further Reading*

- *Mortimer Adler, [The Time of Our Lives](#)*
- *Benedict XVI, [Spe salvi](#)*
- *Josef Pieper, [The End of Time](#)*
- *Josef Pieper, "Hope" [in Faith, Hope, Love](#)*

### *In Short . . .*

- *We fear time ending, whether our lifetime or time itself, because the end of the time may seem like the end of existence.*
- *The revelation that time will end, therefore, demands that we ask what life, and all human existence, is for.*
- *That time will end shows us that we must depend on God for our time and our existence, and this reveals the purpose of life, which is to accept that dependence joyfully and in doing so to manifest God's goodness.*
- *We depend on God, not just for our existence, but also for the forgiveness of our sins, which is accomplished through Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross in which we participate at every Mass.*
- *The Church commands that we attend Mass every Sunday and Holy Day of Obligation because the Mass is so integral to the fulfillment of the meaning of our lives individually and together as the Church that spans all time.*