



# The Holy See

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JOHN PAUL II

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

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### ***We look to new heavens and new earth***

1. The Second Letter of Peter uses the characteristic symbols of the apocalyptic language current in Jewish literature to describe the new creation as though it were a flower blossoming from the ashes of history and the world (cf. 3: 11-13). It is an image that seals the Book of Revelation, when John proclaims: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more" (*Rv* 21: 1). In his Letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul describes creation as groaning under the burden of evil, but destined to "be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God" (*Rom* 8: 21).

Thus Sacred Scripture weaves a golden thread, as it were, through the weaknesses, miseries, violence and injustices of human history and leads to a messianic goal of liberation and peace. On these sound biblical foundations, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that "the visible universe, then, is itself destined to be transformed, "so that the world itself, restored to its original state, facing no further obstacles, should be at the service of the just", sharing their glorification in the risen Jesus Christ" (*CCC*, n. 1047; cf. St Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, 5, 32, 1). Then at last, in a world made peaceful, "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (*Is* 11: 9).

2. This new human and cosmic creation was inaugurated with the Resurrection of Christ, the first fruits of that transfiguration to which we are all destined. Paul says so in his First Letter to the Corinthians: "Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father.... The last enemy to be destroyed is death ... that God may be everything to every one" (1 *Cor* 15: 23-24, 26, 28).

Certainly, this is a faith perspective which can sometimes be tempted by doubt in those who live in history under the weight of evil, contradictions and death. The Second Letter of Peter mentioned above had already considered this, reflecting the objections of those who are suspicious or sceptical or even "scoffers", and who ask themselves: "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation" (2 Pt 3: 3-4).

3. This is the disheartened attitude of those who renounce every effort regarding history and its transformation. They are convinced that nothing can change, that every effort is bound to be useless, that God is absent and in no way interested in this minuscule point in the universe which is the earth. In the Greek world, some thinkers had taught this viewpoint, and perhaps the Second Letter of Peter is also reacting to this fatalistic view with its obvious practical implications. If, in fact, nothing can change, what is the sense of hoping? One can only sit on the sidelines of life, letting the repetitive movement of human events complete its perennial cycle. With this attitude many men and women have already fallen on the fringes of history, without confidence, indifferent to everything, unable to struggle or hope. But the Christian vision is clearly explained by Jesus when, "asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, he answered them: "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, "Lo, here it is!" or "There!" for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you!" (Lk 17: 20-21).

4. The temptation of those who imagine apocalyptic scenes of the in-breaking of God's kingdom and who close their eyes, weighed down with the sleep of indifference, is opposed by Christ with the quiet coming of the new heavens and the new earth. This coming is similar to the hidden but vigorous growth of the seed sprouting from the ground (cf. Mk 4: 26-29).

God therefore entered the world and human history and proceeds silently, waiting patiently for humanity with its delays and conditioning. He respects its freedom, supports it when it is gripped by desperation, leads it step by step and invites it to collaborate on the project of truth, justice and peace of the kingdom. Divine action and human effort must therefore be intertwined. "There is no question, then, of the Christian message inhibiting men from building up the world or making them disinterested in the good of their fellows: on the contrary it is an incentive to do these very things" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 34).

5. Thus a theme of great importance, which has always engaged the Church's work and reflection, opens before us. Without falling into the opposite extremes of holy isolation or secularism, Christians must also express their hope within the structures of secular life. If the kingdom is divine and eternal, it is still sown in time and space: it is "in the midst of us", as Jesus says.

The Second Vatican Council forcefully stressed this close and deep connection: "The mission of the Church, consequently, is not only to bring men the message and grace of Christ but also to permeate and improve the whole range of the temporal order with the evangelical spirit"

(*Apostolicam actuositatem*, n. 5). The spiritual and temporal orders "are distinct; they are nevertheless so closely linked that God's plan is, in Christ, to take the whole world up again and make of it a new creation, in an initial way here on earth, in full realization at the end of time" (ibid.).

Heartened by this certainty, Christians walk courageously on the world's highways, seeking to follow in God's footsteps and to cooperate with him in giving birth to a horizon in which "steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other" (*Ps* 85 [84]: 11).

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I extend a special greeting to the group involved in the pastoral care of Vietnamese communities, and I assure you of my prayers for your people everywhere, who have shown such fidelity to the faith in difficult circumstances. I welcome the groups from Ireland, Denmark and the United States of America. Upon all of you and your families, I invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty God.