

CATHOLIC

Q & A

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What is the “Rapture”? How and why did this idea develop? How does it contrast with the teaching of the Church?

The Rapture is an idea rooted in fundamentalist Protestant teaching that claims that Jesus is coming back, not once more, but twice. One of those times, this teaching asserts, He will come secretly to snatch away true believers from their troubles on earth. This event has been dubbed the “Rapture” which comes from a Latin verb that means, “caught up” or “snatched”.

The doctrine of the Rapture as it is currently taught in fundamentalist circles seems to have evolved from the 19th century. John Nelson Darby, a leader of a Protestant sect called the Plymouth Brethren, traveled extensively in the United States and Canada between 1859 and 1874 preaching his ideas about the end times. His ideas began to gain acceptance and several popular evangelical Protestant leaders in America came under his influence. The dispersion of these ideas resulted in shaping the beliefs of tens of thousands of American Protestants.

At the time of Darby’s preaching, American society and culture was undergoing a significant change because of the industrial revolution and the increase in immigration. Prior to the Civil War, evangelical Protestants were a dominant force in social and political arenas because of their optimism that they could improve the world according to the Gospel mandates. After the Civil War, with the societal and cultural changes that were taking place, evangelical Protestants saw their influence begin to diminish and this led to a more pessimistic view of the world and their view of the end times.

Sharply disenchanted with all organized forms of religion, Darby was hostile toward the Catholic Church and Protestant denominations as well – a hostility that deeply shaped a new system of Scriptural interpretation called dispensationalism.

Darby’s dispensational scheme holds that God unfolds revelation to humanity in progressive stages and that there are two divine plans for history, one for the “earthly people” (the Jews) and one for a “heavenly people” (the Church). God’s plan for the Jewish people points to the establishment of an earthly kingdom by the Messiah. Once Christ returns to earth a final time, He will reign for a thousand years as ruler of an earthly kingdom of Israel, with its capital Jerusalem. The true Christians will be taken up “raptured” to heaven and the great tribulation will proceed with Israel at the center stage once more in God’s dealing with the world.

After the re-establishment of Israel as an independent nation in 1948 – an event many fundamentalists saw as a sign of the end times – interest in biblical prophecy intensified. This interest has spawned several books on the end times and the rapture. Not surprisingly, these books contain quite a bit of anti-Catholic bias and propaganda, calling the future Pope the anti-Christ and the Catholic Church the whore of Babylon.

In addition to fostering anti-Catholicism, these theological speculations have produced a political movement called Christian Zionism, which has a lengthy history of opposition to any proposal that will not result in what it calls a “one-state solution” for the crisis between the Palestinians and Jews. Christian Zionists believe that all of Old Testament Israel belongs to the Jews and that until Israel is in tact, Christ won’t come back to earth.

Our Holy Father has continually reminded all political parties that all men are created in the image and likeness of God and therefore have certain inalienable rights. These same rights extend to the Palestinians when it comes to self-government and land ownership.

Furthermore, in his Apostolic Letter on the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering, John Paul II has reiterated the consistent teaching of the Church that our Redemption was accomplished through the Cross of Christ, that is, through his suffering. Human suffering itself has been redeemed and therefore every person has his own share in the Redemption. Human suffering then has a redemptive value and is part of our sojourn through this life to eternal life.

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SOURCES: The Rapture Trap by Paul Thigpen