

Particular Judgment

Dogma of particular judgment

The Catholic doctrine of the particular judgment is this: that immediately after death the eternal destiny of each separated soul is decided by the just judgment of God. Although there has been no formal definition on this point, the dogma is clearly implied in the Union Decree of Eugene IV (1439), which declares that souls leaving their bodies in a state of grace, but in need of purification are cleansed in Purgatory, whereas souls that are perfectly pure are at once admitted to the beatific vision of the Godhead (*ipsum Deum unum et trinum*) and those who depart in actual mortal sin, or merely with original sin, are at once consigned to eternal punishment, the quality of which corresponds to their sin (*paenis tamen disparibus*). The doctrine is also in the profession of faith of Michael Palaeologus in 1274, in the Bull "Benedictus Deus" of Benedict XII, in 1336, and in the professions of faith of Gregory XIII and Benedict XIV.

Existence of particular judgment proved from Scripture

Ecclesiastes 11:9; 12:1 sq.; and Hebrews 9:27, are sometimes quoted in proof of the particular judgment, but though these passages speak of a judgment after death, neither the context nor the force of the words proves that the sacred writer had in mind a judgment distinct from that at the end of the world. The Scriptural arguments in defence of the particular judgment must be indirect. There is no text of which we can certainly say that it expressly affirms this dogma but there are several which teach an immediate retribution after death and thereby clearly imply a particular judgment. Christ represents Lazarus and Dives as receiving their respective rewards immediately after death. They have always been regarded as types of the just man and the sinner. To the penitent thief it was promised that his soul instantly on leaving the body would be in the state of the blessed: "This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). St. Paul (2 Corinthians 5) longs to be absent from the body that he may be present to the Lord, evidently understanding death to be the entrance into his reward (cf. Philemon 1:21 sq.). Ecclesiasticus 11:28-29 speaks of a retribution at the hour of death, but it may refer to a temporal punishment, such as sudden death in the midst of prosperity, the evil remembrance that survives the wicked or the misfortunes of their children. However, the other texts that have been quoted are sufficient to establish the strict conformity of the doctrine with Scripture teaching. (Cf. Acts 1:25; Apocalypse 20:4-6, 12-14)

Patristic testimony regarding particular judgment

St. Augustine witnesses clearly and emphatically to this faith of the early Church. Writing to the presbyter Peter, he criticizes the works of Vincentius Victor on the soul, pointing out that they contain nothing except what is vain or erroneous or mere commonplace, familiar to all Catholics. As an instance of the last, he cites Victor's interpretation of the parable of Lazarus and Dives. He writes:

For with respect to that which he [Victor] most correctly and very soundly holds, namely, that souls are judged when they depart from the body, before they come to that judgment which must be passed on them when reunited to the body and are tormented or glorified in that same flesh which they here inhabited — was that a matter of which you [Peter] were unaware? Who is so obstinate against the Gospel as not to perceive those things in the parable of that poor man carried after death to Abraham's bosom and of the rich man whose torments are set before us? (*De anima et ejus origine*, 11, n.8.)

Heresies

Lactantius is one of the few Catholic writers who disputed this doctrine (*Divine Institutes* VII:21). Among heretics the particular judgment was denied by Tatian and Vigilantius. The Hypnopsychites and the Thnetopsychites believed that at death the soul passed away, according to the former into a state of unconsciousness, according to the latter into temporary destruction. They believed that souls would arise at the resurrection of the body for judgment. This theory of "soul slumber" was defended by the Nestorians and Copts, and later by the Anabaptists, Socinians, and Arminians. Calvin (*Inst.* III, 25) holds that the final destiny is not decided till the last day.

Prompt fulfilment of sentence

The prompt fulfilment of the sentence is part of the dogma of particular judgment, but until the question was settled by the decision of Benedict XII, in 1332, there was much uncertainty regarding the fate of the departed in the period between death and the general resurrection. There was never any doubt that the penalty of loss (*poena damni*), the temporal or eternal forfeiture of the joys of Heaven, began from the moment of death. Likewise it was admitted from the earliest times that the punishment following death included other sufferings (*poena sensus*) than the penalty of loss (Justin, Dialogue with Trypho 5). But whether the torment of fire was to be included among these sufferings, or whether it began only after the final judgment, was a question that gave rise to many divergent opinions. It was a common belief among the early Fathers that the devils will not suffer from the flames of hell until the end of the world. Regarding the reprobate souls there was a similar belief. Some of the Fathers contended that these souls do not suffer the torment of fire until reunited with their bodies in the resurrection, while others hesitated (cf. Tert., "De Test. an.", iv). Many, on the contrary, clearly taught that the punishment of hell fire followed speedily upon the particular judgment (Hilary, In Ps. cxxxviii, 22). This is evident from the words of Gregory the Great: "just as happiness rejoices the elect, so it must be believed that from the day of their death fire burns the reprobate" (Dial., IV, 28). Early Christian writers also refer to a purgatorial fire in which souls not perfectly just are purified after death.

Some of the early Fathers, misled by Millenarian errors, believed that the essential beatitude of Heaven is not enjoyed until the end of time. They supposed that during the interval between death and the resurrection the souls of the just dwell happily in a delightful abode, awaiting their final glorification. This was apparently the opinion of Sts. Justin and Irenaeus, Tertullian, St. Clement of Alexandria, and St. Ambrose. According to others, only the martyrs and some other classes of saints are admitted at once to the supreme joys of heaven. It cannot, however, be inferred from these passages that all of the Fathers quoted believed that the vision of God is in most cases delayed till the day of judgment. Many of them in other parts of their works profess the Catholic doctrine either expressly or by implication through the acknowledgment of other dogmas in which it is contained, for instance, in that of the descent of Christ into Limbo, an article of the Creed which loses all significance unless it be admitted that the saints of the Old Testament were thereby liberated from this temporal penalty of loss and admitted to the vision of God. As to the passages which state that the supreme happiness of Heaven is not enjoyed till after the resurrection, they refer in many instances to an increase in the accidental joy of the blessed through the union of the soul with its glorified body, and do not signify that the essential happiness of heaven is not enjoyed till then. Notwithstanding the aberrations of some writers and the hesitation of others, the belief that since the death of Christ souls which are free from sin enter at once into the vision of God was always firmly held by the great body of Christians (cf. St. Cyprian, De exhort. mart.). As the earliest Acts of the Martyrs and Liturgies attest, the martyrs were persuaded of the prompt reward of their devotion. This belief is also evidenced by the ancient practice of honouring and invoking the saints, even those who were not martyrs. But the opposite error found adherents from time to time, and in the Middle Ages was warmly defended. The Second Council of Lyons (1274) declared that souls free from sin are at once received into heaven (*mox in caelum recipi*), but did not decide in what their state of beatitude consisted. A number of theologians maintained the opinion that until the resurrection the just do not enjoy the intuitive or facial vision of God, but are under the protection and consolation of the Humanity of Jesus Christ. Pope John XXII (1316-1334) at Avignon, as a private theologian, seems to have supported this view, but that he gave it any official sanction is a fable invented by the Fallibilists. His successor, Benedict XII, ended the controversy by the Bull "Benedictus Deus".

Circumstances of particular judgment according to theologians

Theologians suppose that the particular judgment will be instantaneous, that in the moment of death the separated soul is internally illuminated as to its own guilt or innocence and of its own initiation takes its course either to hell, or to purgatory, or to heaven (*Summa Theologica*, Supplement 69:2, 88:2). In confirmation of this opinion the text of St. Paul is cited: "Who shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness to them, and their thoughts between themselves accusing, or also defending one another, in the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ (Romans 2:15-16). The "Book of Judgment", in which all the deeds of men are written (Apocalypse 20:12), and the appearance of angels and demons to bear witness before the judgment seat are regarded as allegorical descriptions (St. Augustine, City of God XX.14). The common opinion is that the particular judgment will occur at the place of death (Suarez in III, Q, lix. a. 6, disp. 52).