

On the Intermediate State of the Soul

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THE QUESTION OF THE INTERMEDIATE STATE of the dead prior to the general resurrection has inspired numerous debates among twentieth-century theologians.¹ Here we will examine Joseph Ratzinger's understanding of the relationship between this state and the Catholic notion of justice.² After a brief review of some opinions that oppose the intermediate state, we will offer a summary of Ratzinger's position and explicate its implications.

Opposition to the Intermediate State

The contemporary critique of the intermediate state emerges from two tendencies: a desire to escape a dualistic conception of the human

¹ Catholics generally base their position upon Benedict XII's († 1342) constitution *Benedictus Deus* (1336), in which the Pope affirmed the beatific vision for the blessed prior to the general resurrection: "All these souls, immediately [*mox*] after death and, in the case of those in need of purification, after the purification [mentioned above], since the ascension of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ into heaven, already before they take up their bodies again and before the general judgment, have been, are and will be with Christ in heaven, in the heavenly kingdom and paradise, joined to the company of the holy angels" (Heinrich Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari, translated from Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 30th ed. [St Louis, MO: Herder, 1957], nos. 530–31 [pp. 197–198]). This constitution did not attempt to reconcile the individual's experience of beatitude with the Christian belief in a last judgment and general resurrection. It thereby leaves the question of the intermediate state open to further speculation.

² This essay does not treat the significance of hell and purgatory. The intermediate state, as pertaining to the dead prior to the general resurrection, applies to the deceased in these states and in heaven.

person and the need to maintain a strict distinction between time and eternity. The concern for the deleterious effects of a dualistic notion of the human person did not originate in the twentieth century. We can find, for instance, a similar debate among the contemporaries of Aquinas, many of whom reacted strongly against a Platonic anthropology attributed to Augustine. The rediscovered works of Aristotle gave them a more holistic view of the person that, with some essential adjustments, could better account for the unity of body and spirit. This vibrant discussion among the Scholastics, however, did not dispense with the notion of the soul altogether, since they understood it to be the essential component of the human person.³ Rather, this debate found its most influential resolution in Aquinas's notion of the soul as the body's substantial form (*Summa theologiae* [hereafter, *ST*] I, q. 76, a. 1). Nonetheless, although Aquinas maintained the essential union of the soul and body, we can perceive tensions in his explanation of the disembodied soul prior to the general resurrection (*ST* I, q. 89⁴).

The modern critique of the intermediate state leads to a rejection of the very idea of the soul, which it posits as antithetical to Christianity. Support for this rejection comes from a supposed return to the authentic biblical position regarding the unity of the human person, as well as from a desire to reconcile Christianity with developments in the cognitive sciences. On the one hand, the Bible, as some claim, does not resort to the dualistic concepts of soul and body, since it generally describes the human person as a unified, embodied identity.⁵ Accordingly, an intermediate state in which soul

³ For a summary of this debate between Plato and Aristotle in Christianity, see Anton C. Pegis, *St. Thomas and the Problem of the Soul in the Thirteenth Century* (Toronto: Institute of Medieval Studies, 1934), 13–25.

⁴ Q. 89, a. 1 discusses the mode by which the separated soul knows. It notes the difficulties in reconciling the soul's natural union with the body and the soul's disembodied state. Although it acknowledges that the separated soul may know through participated species in the divine light—not through innate species, like the angels—nevertheless, the soul is still naturally ordered toward the body. One can therefore ask: If the disembodied soul can understand through the divine light, why would it require the body for its fulfillment? Is this not a return to a Platonic conception?

⁵ For a summary of scriptural terms for body, soul, and spirit, and for their treatment in biblical theology, see John Cooper, *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 38–43; Nancey Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 6–11, 16–22. For one of the earliest treatments of *soma* (body) as defining “the whole person” in New

explains a person's continuity during a period apart from the body represents, they would assert, a Greek import that falsifies human identity. Furthermore, contemporary theories of the conscious mind no longer require an unverifiable entity such as the soul to account for the person's higher cognitive functions. Christianity, with its belief in bodily resurrection, should, many therefore argue, embrace these findings and so restore a sound biblical anthropology. Nancey Murphy, for instance, defends the compatibility of a physicalist understanding of the human person with Christian beliefs:

The concept of the soul was first introduced to explain humans' remarkable capacities for reason, morality, spirituality and free will. If we discard the concept of the soul as unnecessary, this is not to discard higher human capacities, but rather to open ourselves to wonder at the fact that creatures made of the dust of the ground have been raised so high.⁶

In line with Murphy, Paul Althaus, whose work on eschatology influenced Ratzinger, offers a harsh critique of Christian dualism and the intermediate state: "The traditional idea, coming from late Judaism, of the intermediate state was and remains the hiding place for Platonism, for the dualism and individualism of Hellenistic eschatology."⁷ Hans Küng speaks similarly:

When the New Testament speaks of resurrection, it does not refer to the natural continuance of a spirit-soul independent of our bodily functions. What it means—following the tradition of Jewish theology—is the new creation, the transformation of the whole person by God's life-creating Spirit. Man is not released then—platonically—from his corporeality. He is

Testament theology, see Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament I* (New York: Scribner's, 1951), 192–203. Oscar Cullman also contrasts the Greek notion of the soul with the Christian position that emerges from the New Testament: "The contrast with the Greek soul is clear: it is precisely apart from the body that the Greek soul attains to full development of its life. According to the Christian view, however, it is the inner man's very nature, which demands the body" (*The Immortality of the Soul or the Resurrection of the Dead? The Witness of the New Testament* [London: Epworth, 1958], 33).

⁶ Murphy, *Bodies and Souls*, 146.

⁷ Paul Althaus, *Die letzten Dinge: Entwurf einer christlichen Eschatologie* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1926), 157 (translation mine).

released with and in his—now glorified, spiritualized—corporeality: a new creation, a new man.⁸

It is of course true that the intermediate state possesses a decided advantage. The soul, as the continuing identity of the human person, reconciles the traditional teachings of the salvation of the individual and the communal nature of the resurrection at the end of history. A person experiences beatitude first as a soul and later, after the general resurrection, as a whole person consisting of body and soul. Yet, how exactly can we designate a “before” or “later” when speaking of two different states of existence—the progressive experience of time, on the one hand, and the nearly indescribable state of eternity on the other? Karl Rahner probes this problem:

The idea of the intermediate state also comes up against considerable intellectual difficulties, even if we ignore for a moment the problems which could not even be entirely suppressed in classical theology. These difficulties are above all those which are related to the question of “time” “after” death. The assumption of an intermediate state raises new, difficult problems here, which do not crop up at all if the one and total person is removed from empirical time through his death.⁹

One solution suggested by Rahner and others would establish a radical distinction between the states of time and eternity. The individual, as a unified corporeal identity, does not pass into an intermediate state after death—a quasi-temporal state of existence—but passes out of history itself directly into the resurrection. Crossing from the temporal to the eternal, the soul is immediately united with the resurrected body. The resurrection, as revealed in Christ, is therefore a now for us, since its reality exists in its fullness outside the strictures of progressive time. In the words of Jürgen Moltmann: “If with God there is no earthly time in which human beings succeed

⁸ Hans Kung, *Eternal Life?* trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 111. For a discussion of other theologians who sought to escape the dualism implied by a bipartite anthropology, see Paul O’Callaghan, *Christ Our Hope: An Introduction to Eschatology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011) 19–23.

⁹ Karl Rahner, “Intermediate State,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 17, *Jesus, Man, and the Church*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 114–24, at 118.

one another, then all human beings, at whatever earthly time they may have died, encounter God at the same time—in God’s time, the presence of eternity.”¹⁰

By resorting to the radical distinction between time and eternity, adherents of the “immediate resurrection” of the dead maintain both the reality of the beatific vision for the blessed (or the immediate experience of hell) and the embodied identity of the person. They even account for the general resurrection by transferring it from history to an ahistorical eternity. Rahner comments further:

No one is in danger of defending a heresy if he maintains the view that the single and total perfecting of man in “body” and “soul” takes place immediately after death; that the resurrection of the flesh and the general judgment take place “parallel” to the temporal history of the world; and that both coincide with the sum of the particular judgments of individual men and women.¹¹

Ratzinger’s Response

Ratzinger’s interest in the intermediate state emerges, in part, from his concern for theodicy. He believes that the negation of the soul and the affirmation of an immediate resurrection fail to take proper account of the divine justice and the responsibility of persons. We must ask, he says, “whether a human being can be said to have reached his fulfillment and destiny so long as others suffer on account of him, so long as the guilt whose source he is persists on earth and brings pain to other people. . . . The guilt which goes on because of me is a part

¹⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 103. Other theologians who lean toward this theory include Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar: see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3/2, *The Doctrine of Creation, Part 2*, trans. Harold Knight et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), 432–33; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 5, *The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 348–51. For a more extensive discussion, see O’Callaghan, *Christ Our Hope*, 309–26.

¹¹ Rahner, “Intermediate State”, 115. Hans Küng also notes that: “[Death is an] assumption into ultimate reality. If we are not to talk in metaphors, raising (resurrection) and exaltation (taking up, ascension, glorification) must be seen as one identical, single happening. And indeed as a happening in connection with death in the impenetrable hiddenness of God. . . . Death is transition to God, is retreat into God’s hiddenness, is assumption into his glory” (*On Being a Christian*, trans. Edward Quinn [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976], 358).

of me.”¹² In tackling this problem, Ratzinger addresses the concept of the soul and the relationship between time and eternity. He acknowledges the inherent dangers of using a bipartite anthropology consisting of body and soul to defend the intermediate state. If *anima separata* is considered an actual continuation of the human person after death, then human embodiment is effectively denied and the teaching of the general resurrection compromised:

Individualism and spiritualism—the great and dangerous heritage of the Greek mind—have from the start distracted our attention from the universal and the whole and concentrated it on the salvation of the individual soul, which is called for immediately. The resurrection of the flesh, that is, of mankind as a whole, restored to its corporeality, could appear in comparison to be only an afterthought.¹³

He also criticizes the Lutheran solution—the sleep of the soul after death—as an unacceptable attempt to reconcile the integrity of the human person with the historical gap before the general resurrection:

Existence with Christ inaugurated by faith is the start of resurrected life and therefore outlasts death (see Phil 1:23; 2 Cor 5:8; 1 Thess 5:10). The dialogue of faith is itself already life, which can no longer be shattered by death. The idea of the sleep of death that has been continually discussed by Lutheran theologians . . . is therefore untenable on the evidence of the New Testament and not even justifiable by the frequent occurrence in the New Testament of the word “sleep.”¹⁴

¹² Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein, ed. Aidan Nichols, O.P. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988) [originally *Eschatologie, Tod und ewiges Leben*, ed. Alphonse Auer and Joseph Ratzinger, *Kleine Katholische Dogmatik* 9 (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1977); includes two appendixes written after the appearance of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s Letter on “Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology,” May 17, 1979], 187. This work will be cited parenthetically by page number in the remainder of this essay.

¹³ Joseph Ratzinger, *Dogma and Preaching: Applying Christian Doctrine to Daily Life*, trans. Michael J. Miller et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005) [originally *Dogma und Verkündigung* (Munich: Erich Wewel, 1973)], 261.

¹⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster and Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990) [originally *Einführung in das Christentum* (Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1968)], 353.

Yet, instead of an outright rejection of the soul, Ratzinger reevaluates it in light of the Scriptures and tradition. Is there a way of conceiving the soul, he wonders, without bifurcating it from the body, thus preserving their relation as form and matter? He boldly states: “It seems to me that is high time theology set about rehabilitating the taboo concepts of ‘immortality’ and the ‘soul.’”¹⁵

In fact, Christianity, he suggests, offers a way of reconciling the dualistic tendencies of Plato and the monistic tendencies of Aristotle. The early Church, in considering the afterlife, drew upon the Jewish tradition of Sheol, “the world in which the dead are kept until final judgment” and the experience of new life in Christ (120):

The doctrine of immortality in the early Church had two sides to it. First, it was determined by the Christological center, whence the indestructibility of the life gained through faith was guaranteed. Second, it linked this theological insight to the idea of Sheol, utilizing that idea as an anthropological foundation, and in this way it found anchorage in a basic belief which is, as we have seen, of a universal human kind (147).

We see, therefore, that an anthropology had to be found that accounted for the part of humanity that perishes and the part that lives on. It found it most compellingly in Aquinas, who taught that the soul is the substantial form of the body. This means that the soul could no longer be conceived entirely as an autonomous substance, but at the same time it could not be reduced to a mere dependence on materiality. Ratzinger considers this idea to be distinctly Christian, breaking radically from the Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions: “[In Thomism] the apparently contradictory demands of the doctrine of creation and the christologically transformed belief in Sheol have been met. The soul belongs to the body as ‘form,’ but that which is the form of the body is still spirit. It makes man a person and opens him to immortality” (149).

Yet, Ratzinger finds a need to develop the Thomist insight further by understanding soul “dialogically.” Avoiding a metaphysics of substance, he moves toward a relational model whose “distinctive feature” is the human being’s capacity for the God who addresses him

¹⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, *Credo for Today: What Christians Believe*, trans. Michael J. Miller et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2009) [originally *Credo für heute: was Christian glauben* (Freiburg-im-Breisgau: Herder, 2006)], 177.

and calls upon him to respond.¹⁶ The soul's "substance," therefore, comes to mean its dynamic orientation to the divine love that establishes it. This definition still maintains the Thomist insight that our spiritual nature is naturally embodied; human relationality is possible only because it is exercised in and through the body. To speak of the soul as a substance, therefore, really means that it:

Is not an occult entity that one has, a partial substance hidden somewhere in a human being; it is the dynamism of unlimited openness, which at the same time means participation in infinity, in the eternal. Conversely, however, it is also the case that the dynamic character of human personal life, the thirst for truth and indestructible love, is not a disconnected, merely factual succession, but, most fragile as the dynamism is, it is also the most authentic and enduring reality. This dynamism is substance, and this substance is dynamism. This fundamental, enduring, and essential human reality is recalled to mind by the term "soul."¹⁷

Ratzinger argues that this definition of the human soul does justice both to the authentic biblical concept, particularly St. Paul's, and to the Greek understanding that the person abides after death's dissolution of the body.¹⁸ The soul in the Christian sense cannot be conceived as an isolated individual, but rather as obtaining in fellowship, first and foremost with God, but also with humanity. What continues after death is the person in relation, not as an isolated *anima separata*:

For "having a spiritual soul" means precisely being willed, known, and loved by God in a special way; it means being a creature called by God to an eternal dialogue and therefore capable for its own part of knowing God and of replying to him. What we call in substantialist language "having a soul"

¹⁶ Ratzinger, *Credo*, 175.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁸ Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 358: "Paul teaches, not the resurrection of physical bodies, but the resurrection of persons, and this not in the return of the 'fleshly body,' that is, the biological structure, an idea he expressly describes as impossible ('the perishable cannot become imperishable'), but in the different form of the life of the resurrection, as shown in the risen Lord."

we will describe in a more historical, actual language as “being God’s partner in a dialogue.”¹⁹

Yet, does this dialogical conception of the soul still imply that the body is only ancillary to human identity? Does the soul as “God’s partner in dialogue” divorce itself from the body after death? Ratzinger asserts that the soul does not abandon its relationship with matter. As the soul’s corporeal expression, “the body is defined not in terms of matter but in terms of soul” (179). The body exists because of the organizing and expressive power of soul, the body’s form. This principle leads Ratzinger to conclude that, even after death, the soul maintains an intimate connection with the matter that constitutes “a moment in the history of spirit.”²⁰ It must be understood, however, that this history involves a consummation that will worthily express the human person’s dialogue with God and humanity. Ratzinger writes in Teilhard-like terms:

If the cosmos is history and if matter represents a moment in the history of spirit, then there is no such thing as an eternal, neutral combination of matter and spirit; rather, there is a final “complexity” in which the world finds its omega and unity. In that case there is a final connection between matter and spirit in which the destiny of man and of the world is consummated, even if it is impossible for us today to define the nature of this connection.²¹

This attempt to express the soul–body unity in dialogical terms has some important results for an understanding of the intermediate state. First, it eliminates any possibility of reducing the intermediate state to an individualistic form of beatitude: the soul finds its identity

¹⁹ Ibid., 355. See here also: “This does not mean that talk of the soul is false (as is sometimes asserted today by a one-sided and uncritical biblical approach); in one respect it is, indeed, even necessary in order to describe the whole of what is involved here. But, on the other hand, it also needs to be complemented if we are not to fall back into a dualistic conception that cannot do justice to the dialogical and personalistic view of the Bible.”

²⁰ Ibid., 358.

²¹ Ibid. Ratzinger discusses Teilhard’s notion of the “infinitely complex” earlier in *ibid.*, 236–237. For Ratzinger’s caveats regarding Teilhard de Chardin’s positions, see Aidan Nichols, O.P., *The Thought of Benedict XVI: An Introduction to the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger* (New York: Burns and Oates, 2005), 261.

in a relationship with God and neighbor. The soul's abiding between death and the general resurrection means its continuing existence in and for this communion. After death, the soul may live in the eternal joy of the blessed, but in a mysterious way, it still finds itself rooted in history through its union with others. As God's partner in dialogue, the soul bridges the seemingly insurmountable gap between the now of eternity and the not-yet of history.²²

Second, the dialogical soul shapes our understanding of justice. The soul's union with history as both personal dialogue and corporeal form demands a consummation of history and a reunion with the body in a general resurrection:

Man is by nature always "fellowman" at the same time, and if man as man is to be brought into salvation, this must happen in community with his fellow men, who together with him build up the full totality of humanity. . . . And it goes without saying that the definitive fulfillment of this Body, which is accomplished at the end of the ages in the Last Judgment, does not merely signify an external addition to a blessedness that has long since been completed, but, rather, creates its real, final perfection for the first time.²³

The fulfillment of justice coincides with the consummation of the history of matter and spirit. Before drawing further conclusions, let us address the relation between history and eternity in more detail.

Connection Between History and Eternity

As we see, Ratzinger does not accept an immediate resurrection.²⁴ This position, he claims, implies a "beginning" to eternity: a person ceases to live in history and starts a resurrected state "for him." In other words: "An eternity with a beginning is no eternity at all. Someone who has

²² The soul's "principle of individuation" in the intermediate state might be described as its unique and ongoing history, a history that embraces both time and eternity.

²³ Ratzinger, *Dogma and Preaching*, 269.

²⁴ Ratzinger highlights the position of Ernst Troeltsch, mediated by the early works of Karl Barth, as the primary source for the contemporary debate: "Troeltsch had expressed the idea that the Last Things really stand in no relation to time. To say that they will come 'at the end of time,' 'after our time' is, he claims, merely a makeshift way of speaking in such terms as our time-bound minds can find" (*Credo*, 166).

lived during a definite period of time, and died at a definite point in time, cannot simply move across from the condition 'time' into the condition 'eternity,' timelessness" (182).²⁵

Furthermore, an immediate resurrection fails to take history and time seriously. As long as history really continues, "it remains a reality, even from the vantage point beyond death, and therefore to declare that history is already cancelled and lifted up into an eternal Last Day after death is impossible" (188).²⁶ We cannot so distinguish the reality of history, particularly salvation history, from eternity so as to reduce history to a passing illusion that simply dissolves at death into eternity. Such a distinction "would also mean that, viewed from the other side, history would be an empty spectacle in which people think they are striving and struggling, whereas simultaneously in 'eternity,' in the already ever present Now, everything is long since decided."²⁷ In short, as Ratzinger stresses, history cannot be severed from eternity because the divine relationship expresses itself in the unfolding of the economy of salvation:

Salvation comes through history, which therefore, represents the immediate form of religious experience. History is thus a shelter; it gives existence its true character not its alienation, because this history is divinely established and it is precisely in the reception of the historical that that which transcends history—the eternal—becomes present."²⁸

²⁵ Ratzinger also rejects the idea of a "quasi-temporal" existence, the medieval proposal of the *aeviternity*, since this concept was meant to describe the state of the angels, beings of pure spirit.

²⁶ For a fuller exploration, see Joseph Ratzinger, *Theology of History in Saint Bonaventure* (Habilitationsschrift), trans. Zachary Hayes (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1971) [originally *Die Geschichtstheologie des heiligen Bonaventura* (Munich: Schnell and Steiner, 1959)], 16: "On the one hand, Bonaventure recognizes the full heavenly glory of the souls of those who have died and have been purified; on the other hand, it remains clear that this heavenly condition is not the final state, but that it is still a part of world-history; it also stands in expectation of that part of world-history; it also stands in expectation of that which is to come."

²⁷ Ratzinger, *Credo*, 170.

²⁸ See Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard and Sister Elizabeth Englund, O.C.D. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 141: "For if the salvation offered by God is in fact the salvation of the human race, since this human race lives and develops in time, any account of this salvation will naturally take a historical form—it will be the history of the penetration of humanity by Christ."

Finally, the immediate resurrection cannot respond to the problem of justice mentioned earlier. Because true justice requires a state in which the impressions of sin embedded in history cease to exist, we cannot reconcile the ongoing suffering and injustice of the world with the immediate consummation of history for those who have died. This final objection lies at the heart of Ratzinger's critique of the immediate resurrection: resurrection cannot take place until the consummation of history when God will "be all in all" (1 Cor 15:28).²⁹ Nonetheless, how can we unite eternity and time without making eternity simply an extension of history? In answer, it is misleading, says Ratzinger, to limit our conception of time to a corporeal or physical succession of events. He discusses Augustine's meditation on memory in *Confessions* in order to show that the human experience of time is not simply the measure of the earth's revolution around the sun that inscribes itself in a person's being like the rings in the trunk of a tree.³⁰ He argues:

While it is true that even human processes of intellectual decision are connected with the body and to that extent, as we have said, can be dated indirectly, in themselves they are something different from corporeal movement and to that extent transcend the measures of physical time. What is "present" for each human being is determined, not solely by the calendar, but much more by his mental attention, the section of reality he grasps as present, as effectively Now.³¹

Ratzinger called this interior experience of time "*memoria*-time." According to it, human beings are temporal "in a different, and deeper, way than material bodies" (183). *Memoria* time, although shaped by a relationship with the material world, transforms this relationship into an experience of the past as effectively "Now." This present consciousness, "which is able to summon what is past into the present of recollection, thus makes possible some notion of what 'eternity' is: pure *memoria* bearing the whole changing movement of the world in the all-inclusive present of the creative mind, yet

²⁹ Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 187. On the effects of personal sin in history, see Henri de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*, trans. Br. Richard Arnandez, F.S.C. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1980), 136–37.

³⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, esp. bk. 10.

³¹ Ratzinger, *Credo*, 169.

comprehending each detail exactly as it is at its own chronological point.”³² Memory interiorizes, and even spiritualizes, the exterior, corporeal progression of events. History, therefore, transcends its physical, temporal limits through the human experience of it. Through humanity, history finds a bridge to eternity. After death, *memoria*-time allows us who have spiritualized the past to sustain a link with time and history.³³ Even if a soul should enjoy the beatific vision, still it will experience a “not yet” in its memory. It will, in other words, desire a greater communal fulfillment that will only be realized with the consummation of history. The intermediate state, as a result, is no solipsistic vision of God, but an eternal-temporal relationship with God and all persons.

Conclusion

Ratzinger’s understanding of the intermediate state gives a much needed perspective on justice in a world enamored with material progress and human perfectibility. In a speech in 1974, he criticized the contemporary obsession, prevalent even among many Christians, with the “makeable future.” “Hope for some definitive progress in history and for a definitively sound society within history is nowhere part of Christian expectation.”³⁴ After demonstrating how belief in the construction of a worldly utopia leads to fanaticism and cynicism, Ratzinger asserts that only faith in the resurrection, in the coming kingdom, shapes a just society:

What kind of salvation does faith offer? For what does it hope? Once again we must first say: It does not expect a politico-economic paradise—for faith, such an expectation is a farce staged by the Evil One, with which he deceives and enslaves

³² Ibid., 170.

³³ Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 184: “This *memoria*-time is shaped by man’s relation to the corporeal world, but it is not wholly tied to that world nor can it be dissolved into it. This means that, when a human being steps out of the world of *bios*, *memoria*-time separates itself from physical time, yet, though left sheerly to its own devices does not for all that become eternity. Herein lies the reason for the definitiveness of what we have done in this life, as well as of the possibility of a purification and fulfillment in a final destiny which will relate us to matter in a new way.”

³⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, “The Salvation of Man—This-Worldly and Christian,” in *Fundamental Speeches from Five Decades*, trans. Michael J. Miller et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012) [originally “Das Heil des Menschen,” in *Grundsatz-Reden als fünf Jahrzehnten* (Regensburg: Pustat, 2005)], 81–110, at 93.

man. . . . From an earthly perspective, faith expects a world that will always be full of hardships; a world in which it will always be almost unbearably difficult to be a man; a world that never has a firm grasp on humanity but rather again and again requires men to become men. But because faith at the same time believes in and expects the world to come, it knows that it is nevertheless worthwhile and beautiful to toil in this world for justice and truth. Because it expects the next world, it can make man happy even now in the struggle for what he recognizes as lasting. The kingdom that “is not of this world,” and it alone, makes even this world livable and worth living.³⁵

Thus we see that Ratzinger’s understanding of the intermediate state establishes a notion of Christian justice that embraces both time and eternity. When we restrict justice to the temporal order alone, we usually grapple with a variety of issues like the equitable distribution of resources, the protection of human rights, the responsibilities and limitations of civil government, and the nature of the common good. When, however, we consider the connection between the temporal order and the intermediate state, we see that justice involves something far greater than human attempts to “give each one his due.” Justice, in light of time and eternity, requires the liberation from sin, the restoration and elevation of creation itself. Salvific happiness for both the living and the dead cannot be the product of human progress, but must come from God’s own action. Human beings, therefore, cannot realize justice in its truest sense for themselves or for the dead, because only Christ, the merciful judge of creation, heals all wounds of sin in the consummation of history. The groaning of a creation yearning for eternity will find just resolution only when Christ subjects all to the Father (1 Cor 15:28).

Ratzinger’s perspective does not exempt humanity from seeking the practical realization of justice in the world, but it does force humanity to approach any temporal enterprise with a great degree of humility, cognizant of its limitations. Attempts to realize a just society can anticipate the definitive peace that Christ will ultimately bring, but they can never bring about that liberation from sin that time and eternity desire. Victories in the social order that allow for greater human flourishing certainly preach the breaking in of the Kingdom, but only Jesus fulfills the Kingdom by uniting heaven and

³⁵ Ratzinger, “Salvation of Man,” 106.

earth in himself. Ratzinger cautions against any delusions of establishing perfect justice on earth, stating that temporal justice is a problem of “practical reason; but if reason is to be exercised properly, it must undergo constant purification, since it can never be completely free of the danger of a certain ethical blindness caused by the dazzling effect of power and special interests.”³⁶ Ratzinger’s position on the intermediate state purifies practical reasoning and gives a healthy sense of humanity’s absolute dependence on Christ for justice in time and eternity.

In sum, the immediate resurrection so divides time and eternity that humanly conceived conceptions of justice are divorced from the final end of the human person.³⁷ By contrast, because Ratzinger does not permit a hiatus between our temporal and eternal existence, justice in its true sense must involve the consummation of history, the cancellation of all traces of sin, and the elevation of creation in Christ. “The unfolding history of the world,” he says, “and its definitive theological future most certainly stand in a real relation to one another, that the activity of the one is not at all a matter of no account to the genesis of the other.”³⁸ Any effort to realize full justice in history must defer to the divine gift alone that will accomplish it. Ratzinger’s reflections on the intermediate state finally return us to this fundamental truth: “The Resurrection of Jesus tells us that that victory is really possible, that death did not form a part in its very principle and in an irreversible manner of the structure of what is created, that is, of matter. . . . Such a victory exists only through the creative power of the Word and love.”³⁹

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³⁶ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est* (2005), §28, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 98 (2006): 217–52.

³⁷ Perhaps we may see something analogous to de Lubac’s critique of the concept of “pure nature”: the gap between nature and grace allows for the insertion of atheism.

³⁸ Ratzinger, *Credo*, 171.

³⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, *The God of Jesus Christ: Meditations on God in the Trinity*, trans. Robert J. Cunningham (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1979) [originally *Der Gott Jesu Christ: Betrachtungen über der Dreieinigen Gott* (Munich: Kösel, 1976)], 94. See also Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), §34, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 101 (2009): 641–709.