LUMEN GENTIUM CHAPTER 7
The Eschatological Nature of the Pilgrim Church and Its Union with the Church in Heaven

THE FOUR LAST THINGS, THE HOLY SOULS, AND THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

Our previous reading considered religious life and the witness it gives to the world to come. We now consider the end toward which every Christian life is directed and the bonds that unite the Church on earth with the faithful departed and the saints in heaven.

Today we read Chapter VII, "The Eschatological Nature of the Pilgrim Church and Its Union with the Church in Heaven," Sections 48-51. The chapter concerns what the Church traditionally calls the Four Last Things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. It also teaches us why we pray for the Holy Souls and seek the intercession of the saints.

We will continue reading alongside Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, and the Church's perennial teaching. In this chapter, several phrases need the precision of earlier definitions, especially where the Council speaks of the restoration of all things and of purification after death.

Our question is concrete: Does the hope we profess lead us to prepare for judgment, pray for the departed, and seek the help of the saints?

I. READ

Read Chapter VII, Sections 48-51.

YOU WILL FIND THE COMPLETE CHAPTER READING AT THE END OF THIS DOCUMENT.

The section headings below identify the subjects of the Council's text. The explanations that follow are our commentary.

Section 48 – The Church awaits her perfection in glory

Christ has already begun the work whose fulfillment the Church awaits. He acts through the Holy Ghost, draws men to Himself through His Church, and nourishes the faithful with His

own Body and Blood. The Church's consummation comes at His return, with the resurrection of the dead and the renewal of creation.

The opening expression "restoration of all things" needs particular care. Taken by itself, the further statement about the restoration of the human race could suggest that every person will be saved. The same section expressly warns of "eternal fire" and speaks of the resurrection of the just and of those who have done evil. The renewal of creation and the resurrection of all are compatible with the eternal loss of those who die in unrepented mortal sin. A reading that promises salvation to every soul contradicts the warnings Christ gives and the chapter itself repeats.

The title "universal sacrament of salvation" uses *sacrament* in a broad sense. Christ makes His Church a sign and instrument of salvation for mankind. The seven sacraments have their own precise meaning. The universal scope of the Church's mission gives reason to preach the Gospel to everyone and to call each person to conversion.

The description of the Church's holiness on earth as "real although imperfect" also calls for precision. The Church already possesses true holiness from Christ in her doctrine, sacraments, and saints. Her members must still grow in holiness, and the whole Church awaits her consummation in glory. The imperfection of our earthly pilgrimage gives no warrant for attributing error to the faith handed down by the Church or a defect to the grace Christ gives through her sacraments.

The English text speaks of finishing "the course of our earthly life." The Latin makes the point sharper with *unico*, meaning one or single. We have one earthly life in which to repent, receive grace, and persevere. The chapter urges vigilance because the hour of death is hidden from us. When it speaks of meriting entrance into the marriage feast, Trent supplies the doctrinal precision. The good works of the justified truly merit through Christ because His grace makes those works possible and fruitful.

Section 49 – The Church militant, suffering, and triumphant

The chapter describes Christ's disciples on earth, those undergoing purification after death, and those who behold God in heaven. These are the three conditions traditionally called the Church militant, the Church suffering, and the Church triumphant. Their communion in Christ endures across death. The saints in heaven intercede for us through Him.

The phrase “are purified” states a truth but leaves its nature largely unexplained. Florence and Trent supply the precision. The souls in purgatory died in God’s grace and are assured of heaven. They undergo purification before entering the beatific vision, and the suffrages of the faithful can aid them. Temporal punishment can remain after the guilt of sin has been forgiven. Purgatory therefore has a place in preaching about penance, reparation, and prayer for the dead.

The three conditions concern those who belong to Christ. The damned share neither the charity of the blessed nor the hope of the soul in purgatory. Their absence from this account of the communion of saints follows from its subject. Christ’s warning concerning their fate stands in section 48.

Section 50 – Prayer for the dead and the invocation of saints

The Church offers suffrages for the departed and asks the saints for their intercession. The distinction is visible in the Roman Canon. At the *Communicantes* the priest venerates the memory of Our Lady and the saints. At the *Memento* of the dead he asks God to grant rest, light, and peace to the departed. The Mass itself is offered to God.

The Council appeals to Trent in teaching that the faithful may ask the saints for their prayers and aid. All such aid comes from God through Jesus Christ, the one Mediator and Redeemer. The saints’ friendship with Christ explains why their intercession is powerful. Their example teaches us how to follow Him, and their prayers help us along the way.

Section 51 – Rightly ordered devotion

The Council expressly reaffirms the decrees of the Second Council of Nicaea, Florence, and Trent. It calls for the correction of defects as well as abuses and excesses. Neglect of the saints and neglect of prayer for the dead deserve attention under this same instruction.

The passage on the number of outward acts and the intensity of love could be read as a reason to dispense with traditional practices. The Latin points to the greater importance of active love. A novena, a procession, a pilgrimage, or a prayer before a sacred image gives that love a concrete expression. The practice must be governed by faith and free from superstition. The Council’s own appeal to Nicaea and Trent places the veneration of sacred images and relics within the doctrine it receives.

Adoration belongs to God alone. The special veneration the Church gives the Blessed Virgin Mary, traditionally called *hyperdulia,* honors her singular dignity as the Mother of God. The veneration of the other saints is traditionally called *dulia*. Keeping those distinctions clear helps the faithful see how devotion to the saints leads to the worship of God.

II. SCRIPTURE

Sacred Scripture gives us both the promises that sustain Christian hope and the warnings that teach us to watch and pray.

Hebrews 9:27 and II Corinthians 5:10 – Death and judgment

"It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgment."

Each soul answers to Christ at death. At the Last Judgment, Christ will judge all in the sight of all, and the full consequences of our works will be made manifest. St. Paul's teaching about the tribunal of Christ gives weight to the choices we make now.

Matthew 25:31-46 and John 5:28-29 – The two outcomes of judgment

"And these shall go into everlasting punishment: but the just, into life everlasting."

Our Lord uses the same word for the duration of the punishment and of the life He promises. In St. John's Gospel, those in the graves come forth to resurrection, and Christ distinguishes the resurrection of life from the resurrection of judgment. The resurrection is universal. The destiny of the risen is twofold.

Romans 8:18-23 and Philippians 3:20-21 – The redemption of the body

St. Paul speaks of creation groaning in expectation and of our awaiting the redemption of our bodies. He teaches that Christ will conform our lowly bodies to His glorious Body.

Christian hope includes the resurrection of the very bodies in which we have lived. That promise gives meaning to the care of the body in life and the reverence the Church shows it in burial.

II Machabees 12:43-46 – Prayer and sacrifice for the departed

"It is therefore a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins."

Judas Machabeus takes up a collection for sacrifice on behalf of the fallen. The sacred writer commends this act in view of the resurrection. Prayer for the dead rests on the conviction that God can apply the prayers and offerings of the living to the benefit of the departed.

I Timothy 2:1-5 and Apocalypse 5:8 – Intercession and the one Mediator

St. Paul urges prayers and intercessions for others in the same passage in which he teaches that Jesus Christ is the one Mediator between God and men. In the Apocalypse the elders before the Lamb hold golden vessels of incense, identified as the prayers of the saints.

Christ alone reconciles us to the Father by His redeeming sacrifice. Every Christian intercession draws its efficacy from Him. The Church's invocation of the saints is an exercise of that communion under Christ.

I John 3:2 and Apocalypse 21:23-27 – The holiness of the heavenly city

St. John promises that the blessed will see God as He is. In the Apocalypse, the Lamb is the lamp of the heavenly city and nothing defiled enters it.

Heaven is the vision and enjoyment of God Himself. The purity required to enter His presence helps us understand why the Church prays for those who died in His friendship and still need purification.

III. REMEMBER – WHAT CAME BEFORE?

The early liturgy and earlier dogmatic definitions give substance to the brief language of Chapter VII.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem – The sacrifice offered for the departed

In the fifth *Mystagogical Catechesis,* sections 9-10, the faithful are taught that the departed are commemorated during the Eucharistic sacrifice and that this supplication brings great benefit to their souls. St. Cyril's catechesis witnesses to a Church that already understood prayer for the departed as part of her worship at the altar.

St. Augustine – St. Monica's request at the altar

In *Confessions,* Book IX, Chapters 11-13, St. Augustine recalls that his mother asked to be remembered at the Lord's altar. Augustine subsequently prays for her and asks his readers to remember her there. He had every reason to be grateful for her holy life. His gratitude took the form of prayer for her soul.

The Second Council of Nicaea – The honor given through sacred images

In 787 the Council defended the veneration of sacred images of Christ, Our Lady, the angels, and the saints. It distinguished the honor given to an image, which passes to the person represented, from the adoration due to God alone. The decree helps us understand why the visible forms of Catholic devotion deserve to be taught and preserved.

The Fourth Lateran Council and Benedict XII – Resurrection and the judgment of each soul

The Fourth Lateran Council teaches that all will rise with their own bodies and receive according to their works, the just in everlasting glory and the wicked in everlasting punishment.

In *Benedictus Deus* (1336), Benedict XII defines that the souls of the blessed see God before the resurrection of the body and the general judgment, once any necessary purification is complete. He likewise teaches that souls departing in actual mortal sin descend immediately into hell. This gives necessary precision to a reading of section 48 centered on the last day. The dead already receive their particular judgment, and the general judgment follows at Christ's return.

Florence and Trent – Purgatory, the Mass, and the saints

In *Laetentur Caeli* (1439), Florence teaches that those who die truly penitent and in God's love may still require purification after death. The sacrifice of the Mass, prayers, alms, and other works of piety offered by the living can relieve them. Florence also teaches that the purified are received into heaven and see God Himself.

Trent teaches that grace makes our good works truly meritorious through Christ, and that remission of guilt can leave a debt of temporal punishment. It also teaches that the Mass is

a propitiatory sacrifice offered for the living and for the departed in Christ who still need purification. It reaffirms purgatory, the efficacy of suffrages, and the goodness of invoking the saints and venerating their relics and sacred images. These decrees give the faithful the doctrinal grounds for what they do when they have a Mass offered for a deceased parent or ask a patron saint to pray for them.

IV. BENEDICT XVI

Judgment as a reason for hope

In *Spe Salvi,* sections 41-44, Benedict XVI recalls that the Last Judgment was a governing image of Christian life. Judgment matters to the person who has suffered an injustice no earthly authority can repair. Christ's judgment gives reason for hope precisely because God's grace and His justice are both real.

Purification in the encounter with Christ

In sections 45-48, Benedict discusses the encounter with Christ as an image of the purifying fire and affirms that the departed can be aided by the Eucharist, prayer, and almsgiving. His discussion of how purification may be understood is a theological explanation. The truths defined by Florence and Trent remain the measure of that explanation: real purification after death for souls who die in grace and need it, and real benefit from the Church's suffrages.

Praying for the faithful departed

On All Souls' Day in 2008, Benedict XVI encouraged the faithful to pray for the dead and to pause at their graves. He asked us to remember our loved ones and all who depend on the charity of our prayers.

V. PILLARS COMMENTARY

The plumb line is the truth received from Christ and handed down in His Church. On that measure, Chapter VII stands in continuity with the received faith. Its explicit teaching on eternal judgment, its affirmation of purification and suffrages, and its reception of Nicaea, Florence, and Trent give us the standards by which its broadest expressions must be read. The places that call for special attention are the breadth of the language of restoration, the brevity of the language of purgatory, and the ease with which the counsel on outward devotion can be detached from the Council's defense of veneration.

Christian hope has room for the warnings of Christ

When the restoration of all things is preached, the faithful should also hear what Our Lord says about the narrow gate, the need for repentance, and the judgment to come. The existence and eternity of hell belong to the faith. A preacher who waits for a suitable occasion to speak of them already has one in the Gospel appointed for the day whenever Our Lord Himself gives such a warning.

The proper response to these truths is to seek God's grace now. A person conscious of mortal sin should seek sacramental confession. A Catholic who prays for final perseverance asks for the grace to die in God's friendship. Both practices put Christian hope to work.

The dead need the charity of the living

At a funeral we can give thanks for the good a person did, comfort those who mourn, and ask God to grant the departed eternal rest. When the language of the funeral treats heaven as a certainty about the deceased, it can obscure the need to pray for that soul. St. Monica asked her son to remember her at the altar. We can do the same for those we love, especially when the funeral has long since passed and others have ceased to remember them in prayer.

Catholic devotion needs both instruction and practice

A child who learns to ask a patron saint for help has learned something real about the Church. A family that prays the Litany of the Saints or keeps a patron's feast gives a visible form to its belief in the communion of saints. Section 51 calls for deeper charity in these practices. That call is fulfilled by teaching their meaning and by praying with greater faith.

Our conclusion

A faithful reading of Chapter VII brings the Four Last Things and the communion of saints into the same field of vision. Christ's judgment gives urgency to conversion. The doctrine of purgatory gives us a duty to the departed. The intercession of the saints gives help to those who are still on the way. In the Mass the Church gives voice to all three truths, as she worships God, honors the saints, and pleads for the living and the dead.

VI. REFLECT

1. **How does the certainty of judgment change what we are willing to leave unresolved today?**
2. **Why does the restoration of creation leave intact Our Lord's warning about eternal punishment?**
3. **What does the particular judgment tell us about the state of a soul before the Last Judgment?**
4. **Whom have we stopped praying for because many years have passed since their death?**
5. **How does the Roman Canon teach us to distinguish prayer for the dead from invocation of the saints?**
6. **How would we explain to a child why Catholics venerate saints and adore God alone?**
7. **What would change in our prayer if we asked more often for the grace of final perseverance?**

VII. DEEPER THOUGHTS TO CONCLUDE THIS DAY

St. Monica knew what to ask of those she loved when she was dying. She asked them to remember her at the altar. She had prayed for her son through the long years of his wandering. In the years that followed her death, he could answer that love with prayer for her.

Most of us can think of someone whose death once seemed impossible to bear and whose name we seldom speak now. We can remember that person at our next Mass. We can also pray for those who have no one left on earth to remember them by name. The passage of years may change the grief of the living. It need never put an end to their charity.

Our own time to prepare for death is the time God gives us today. There may be a sin we have put off confessing, a wrong we still have it in our power to repair, or someone to whom we owe a duty of charity. Let us ask for the grace to act while we can.

May Our Lady pray for us now and at the hour of our death. May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

COMPLETE CHAPTER READING

CHAPTER VII

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL NATURE OF THE PILGRIM CHURCH AND ITS UNION WITH THE CHURCH IN HEAVEN

48. The Church, to which we are all called in Christ Jesus, and in which we acquire sanctity through the grace of God, will attain its full perfection only in the glory of heaven, when there will come the time of the restoration of all things.(237) At that time the human race as well as the entire world, which is intimately related to man and attains to its end through him, will be perfectly reestablished in Christ.(238)

Christ, having been lifted up from the earth has drawn all to Himself.(239) Rising from the dead(240) He sent His life-giving Spirit upon His disciples and through Him has established His Body which is the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation. Sitting at the right hand of the Father, He is continually active in the world that He might lead men to the Church and through it join them to Himself and that He might make them partakers of His glorious life by nourishing them with His own Body and Blood. Therefore the promised restoration which we are awaiting has already begun in Christ, is carried forward in the mission of the Holy Spirit and through Him continues in the Church in which we learn the meaning of our terrestrial life through our faith, while we perform with hope in the future the work committed to us in this world by the Father, and thus work out our salvation.(241)

Already the final age of the world has come upon us (242) and the renovation of the world is irrevocably decreed and is already anticipated in some kind of a real way; for the Church already on this earth is signed with a sanctity which is real although imperfect. However, until there shall be new heavens and a new earth in which justice dwells,(243) the pilgrim Church in her sacraments and institutions, which pertain to this present time, has the appearance of this world which is passing and she herself dwells among creatures who groan and travail in pain until now and await the revelation of the sons of God.(244)

Joined with Christ in the Church and signed with the Holy Spirit "who is the pledge of our inheritance",(245) truly we are called and we are sons of God(246) but we have not yet appeared with Christ in glory,(247) in which we shall be like to God, since we shall see Him as He is.(248) And therefore "while we are in the body, we are exiled from the Lord (249) and having the first-fruits of the Spirit we groan within ourselves(250) and we desire to be with Christ"'.(251) By that same charity however, we are urged to live more for Him, who died for us and rose again.(252) We strive therefore to please God in all things(253) and we put on the armor of God, that we may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil and resist in the evil day.(254) Since however we know not the day nor the hour, on Our Lord's advice we must be constantly vigilant so that, having finished the course of our earthly life,(255) we may merit to enter into the marriage feast with Him and to be numbered among the blessed(256) and that we may not be ordered to go into eternal fire(257) like the wicked and slothful servant,(258) into the exterior darkness where "there will be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth".(259) For before we reign with Christ in glory, all of us will be made manifest "before the tribunal of Christ, so that each one may receive what he has won through the body, according to his works, whether good or evil"(260) and at the end of the world "they who have done good shall come forth unto resurrection of life; but those who have done evil unto resurrection of judgment".(261) Reckoning therefore that "the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come that will be revealed in us",(262) strong in faith we look for the "blessed hope and the glorious coming of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ"(263) "who will refashion the body of our lowliness,

conforming it to the body of His glory(264), and who will come "to be glorified in His saints and to be marveled at in all those who have believed"(265).

49. Until the Lord shall come in His majesty, and all the angels with Him (266) and death being destroyed, all things are subject to Him,(277) some of His disciples are exiles on earth, some having died are purified, and others are in glory beholding "clearly God Himself triune and one, as He is";(1*) but all in various ways and degrees are in communion in the same charity of God and neighbor and all sing the same hymn of glory to our God. For all who are in Christ, having His Spirit, form one Church and cleave together in Him.(268) Therefore the union of the wayfarers with the brethren who have gone to sleep in the peace of Christ is not in the least weakened or interrupted, but on the contrary, according to the perpetual faith of the Church, is strengthened by communication of spiritual goods.(2*) For by reason of the fact that those in heaven are more closely united with Christ, they establish the whole Church more firmly in holiness, lend nobility to the worship which the Church offers to God here on earth and in many ways contribute to its greater edification.(269)(3*) For after they have been received into their heavenly home and are present to the Lord,(270) through Him and with Him and in Him they do not cease to intercede with the Father for us,(4*) showing forth the merits which they won on earth through the one Mediator between God and man,(271) serving God in all things and filling up in their flesh those things which are lacking of the sufferings of Christ for His Body which is the Church.(272)(5*) Thus by their brotherly interest our weakness is greatly strengthened.

50. Fully conscious of this communion of the whole Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, the pilgrim Church from the very first ages of the Christian religion has cultivated with great piety the memory of the dead,(6*) and "because it is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins",(273) also offers suffrages for them. The Church has always believed that the apostles and Christ's martyrs who had given the supreme witness of faith and charity by the shedding of their blood, are closely joined with us in Christ, and she has always venerated them with special devotion, together with the Blessed Virgin Mary and the holy angels.(7*) The Church has piously implored the aid of their intercession. To these were soon added also those who had more closely imitated Christ's virginity and poverty,(8*) and finally others whom the outstanding practice of the Christian virtues (9*) and the divine charisms recommended to the pious devotion and imitation of the faithful.(10*)

When we look at the lives of those who have faithfully followed Christ, we are inspired with a new reason for seeking the City that is to come (274) and at the same time we are shown a most safe path by which among the vicissitudes of this world, in keeping with the state in life and condition proper to each of us, we will be able to arrive at perfect union with Christ, that is, perfect holiness. (11*) In the lives of those who, sharing in our humanity, are however more perfectly transformed into the image of Christ,(275) God vividly manifests His presence and His face to men. He speaks to us in them, and gives us a sign of His Kingdom,(12*) to which we are strongly drawn, having so great a cloud of witnesses over us (276) and such a witness to the truth of the Gospel.

Nor is it by the title of example only that we cherish the memory of those in heaven, but still more in order that the union of the whole Church may be strengthened in the Spirit by the practice of fraternal charity.(277) For just as Christian communion among wayfarers brings us closer to Christ, so our companionship with the saints joins us to Christ, from Whom as from its Fountain and Head issues every grace and the very life of the people of God.(13*) It is supremely fitting,

therefore, that we love those friends and coheirs of Jesus Christ, who are also our brothers and extraordinary benefactors, that we render due thanks to God for them (14*) and "suppliantly invoke them and have recourse to their prayers, their power and help in obtaining benefits from God through His Son, Jesus Christ, who is our Redeemer and Saviour."(15*) For every genuine testimony of love shown by us to those in heaven, by its very nature tends toward and terminates in Christ who is the "crown of all saints,"(16*) and through Him, in God Who is wonderful in his saints and is magnified in them.(17*)

Our union with the Church in heaven is put into effect in its noblest manner especially in the sacred Liturgy, wherein the power of the Holy Spirit acts upon us through sacramental signs. Then, with combined rejoicing we celebrate together the praise of the divine majesty;(18*) then all those from every tribe and tongue and people and nation (278) who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ and gathered together into one Church, with one song of praise magnify the one and triune God. Celebrating the Eucharistic sacrifice therefore, we are most closely united to the Church in heaven in communion with and venerating the memory first of all of the glorious ever-Virgin Mary, of Blessed Joseph and the blessed apostles and martyrs and of all the saints.(19*)

51. This Sacred Council accepts with great devotion this venerable faith of our ancestors regarding this vital fellowship with our brethren who are in heavenly glory or who having died are still being purified; and it proposes again the decrees of the Second Council of Nicea,(20*) the Council of Florence (21*) and the Council of Trent.(22*) And at the same time, in conformity with our own pastoral interests, we urge all concerned, if any abuses, excesses or defects have crept in here or there, to do what is in their power to remove or correct them, and to restore all things to a fuller praise of Christ and of God. Let them therefore teach the faithful that the authentic cult of the saints consists not so much in the multiplying of external acts, but rather in the greater intensity of our love, whereby, for our own greater good and that of the whole Church, we seek from the saints "example in their way of life, fellowship in their communion, and aid by their intercession."(23*) On the other hand, let them teach the faithful that our communion with those in heaven, provided that it is understood in the fuller light of faith according to its genuine nature, in no way weakens, but conversely, more thoroughly enriches the latreutic worship we give to God the Father, through Christ, in the Spirit.(24*)

For all of us, who are sons of God and constitute one family in Christ,(279) as long as we remain in communion with one another in mutual charity and in one praise of the most holy Trinity, are corresponding with the intimate vocation of the Church and partaking in foretaste the liturgy of consummate glory.(25*) For when Christ shall appear and the glorious resurrection of the dead will take place, the glory of God will light up the heavenly City and the Lamb will be the lamp thereof.(280) Then the whole Church of the saints in the supreme happiness of charity will adore God and "the Lamb who was slain",(281) proclaiming with one voice: "To Him who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb blessing, and honor, and glory, and dominion forever and ever".(282)