**SAMPLE TEXT**

Continuity and Maintenance of Belief in the Roman Catholic Tradition: Eschatology

The human experience of death has always had a place in religious belief systems. In Roman Catholicism this topic is part of the study of eschatology (the last things). For all Christians, so for Roman Catholics, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth points to belief in the afterlife. In Roman Catholicism there has been a reinterpretation of this belief in life after death and its implications for people of faith. This development was crystalised in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and emphasised in its aftermath.

Resurrection faith is secured by the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church. The Magisterium is responsible for maintaining consistency in the Catholic Tradition. By the term, magisterium (magister is Latin for teacher) is meant the church’s official teaching office. It consists of the Pope and bishops. The role of the magisterium is to maintain the consistency between the lex orandi (law of prayer) and lex credendi (law of faith). It does this through papal teaching, documents from ecumenical councils and from synods of bishops and the Curia, the Roman Congregations at the service of the papacy. This documentation of Catholic belief includes the Roman Missal and other Liturgical Documents, the Code of Canon Law and the Catechism of the Catholic Church and its Compendium.

Belief in resurrection and eternal life has been continuously maintained across the Christian millennia. The reasons for this include honouring the past, motivation of the faith of current adherents and for the future hope of the Church.

In term of honouring the past, Roman Catholics have two thousand years of constantly acknowledging the fact and significant of resurrection faith. The record is to be found in both scripture and tradition. In Scripture Catholics find their belief in the resurrection of Christ, belief in the resurrection of the dead and belief in the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God was the central concern of Jesus. His preaching, in parables, points to a kingdom or reign of God that has entered history, a reign that offers hope and salvation for all. Parables like the mustard seed, the banquet and the sower speak in earthy terms of a hope for a better world in a return to faith. The kingdom to which Jesus refers is sought in the present for those who have eyes to see and the kingdom is also to be hoped for. The first Christians would find the greatest expression of that hope in Jesus’ resurrection. Early references to belief in the resurrection of Christ can be found in Paul’s second letter to Timothy: “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained.” 2 Tim 2:8-9. Paul also affirms resurrection faith for the Corinthian Christians “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.” 1 Cor 15: 13. The belief in the kingdom of God can be found in the gospels. Luke’s gospel for instance tells is that of all born from women John (the Baptist) is the greatest, but even the one least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

These beliefs are also acknowledged through tradition. It is a feature of Credal statements such as the Nicene Creed (resurrection of the dead and life of the world to come) and the Apostles’ creed (resurrection of the body and life everlasting). It is found in scholastic theology such as in the Summa of Thomas Aquinas, who wrote of four last things: death; judgement; heaven and hell. Dante Aligheri’s Italian epic Divino Comedia (Divine Comedy) brought imagination to Thomistic eschatology and coloured Christian imagination of the afterlife for centuries.

This resurrection faith continues to animate Christian life in prayer and practice in the present day. The liturgical focus of the paschal mystery in the sacramental life of Roman Catholics is central to the life of faith lived in the shadow of the cross with the hope of new life in Christ. The paschal mystery is a technical phrase that refers to the significance of Jesus death and resurrection and is effect in the lives of present believers, who with St Paul, claim to carry this imprint in their hearts and action. Action for social justice and the preferential option for the poor are significant elements of Catholic life. Roman Catholics see God’s kingdom is about inclusion, participation, human rights and the common good of all members of the global society.

The future hope of Roman Catholics is animated by resurrection faith. The belief in the communion of saints, that community of faith in this life and the next, continues to focus the future thinking of Roman Catholics. The Roman curia, since Vatican II and particular since the pontificate of John Paul II, has been used the cult of the saints to strengthen resurrection hope. With many beatifications and canonizations in recent times, the Church is constantly reminding the faithful that a life lived in Christ has its reward in heaven. It is a focus on the eschatological future of the individual that is never removed from a community of belonging and the fellowship of worship.

But how did Roman Catholics understand resurrection faith prior to the Second Vatican Council. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Roman church had become a fundamentalist organisation; its way of operating was centralised and inwardly focused. There was a ghetto mentality about the church. It was separate, enclosed and largely removed from and critical of the outside world. With a static world view, Catholic Church struggled with the many modern concepts including Darwinian and cosmic evolution and their implications for beliefs like divine creation and original sin. It was sectarian and suspicious of not just the world of science and modern ideas but other Christian denominations and other religious traditions, professing to its members that there was no salvation outside the Church. It saw itself as the victimised Kingdom of God on earth and the concept of a delayed – not yet - salvation was emphasised. Life was seen as a trial to be judged when we die; if good enough then the soul would spend less time in purgatory to pay the price of sin. There were explicit teachings about heaven and hell. Hell was taught to be a place of punishment, of eternal damnation and suffering in fire and brimstone; whereas heaven was the joy of the beatific vision that followed the time of purgation. Dualism (from Platonic thought) or imagining all things in apparent opposites was central to these teachings: Sacred against the Secular, the Church against the World, Saved verses the Unsaved, earthly body containing a divine soul, heaven above and hell below are examples of this emphasis. The thoughts and actions in the life of individuals only gained their meaning in the light of personalised salvation beyond the grave. It was echoed in the funeral prayers of the Latin Rite (Ritual Romanum) focused of the saving of the soul of an individual person after death. The invocation: “Deliver me, O Lord, from everlasting death in that day of dread …” was lead by the priest wearing Black Vestments. The prayer from the Rosary sequence “O My Jesus, forgive us our sins and save us from the fires of hell” was typical of Catholic piety.

There were significant internal factors that led to action to maintain the continuity of this resurrection faith at the second Vatican Council. Pope Leo XIII in his 1891 document “Rerum Novarum” paved the way for a socially conscious Roman Catholicism. As Rome spoke against unbridled Capitalism and all forms of Communism, Catholic Action is its various forms around the globe, became a significant influence for the change. Catholics had a role in the world. Mission was becoming much more than proselytising (making converts). The importance of social justice and the development of people in “this life” were changing in the minds of Roman Catholics. There had been a resurgence of biblical scholarship caused by Pope Pius XII’s Divino Afflante in 1943. This allowed for the historical critical interpretation of the sacred text and the council would return to scripture for its views on eschatology. Throughout the twentieth century the movement for liturgical reform in the church had been at work. Pope Pius XII in 1950 also had started to reform the Easter ceremonies so that the focus was more clearly on the Paschal character of Easter faith. The first council document was the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy calling for liturgical renewal with particular emphasis on the paschal mystery. Pope John XXII, (Gueseppi Roncalli) also became perhaps the most significant internal factor when he called for “aggorniamento” or updating of the church. The idea of ecumenism and inter faith dialogue was already a feature of his pastoral ministry and became a part of his encyclical program. Roncalli was clear that he wanted the council to reaffirm the ancient faith as well as address the concerns of the modern age, the new circumstances.

There were also external factors that contributed to Vatican II. The static view of the world by the church was in question and theologians, like the Jesuit palaeontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, had developed new proposals for an evolutionary Christianity. While not published in his lifetime for fear of theological oppression that revolutionary thinking can know, Teilhardt had reimagined and reinterpreted Christian faith and Christian living to account for evolution, which he called the *Divine Milieu*. Another factor was the impact of the World Wars of 1914-1918 and 1939-1945. These were not religious wars (other than Hilter’s final solution against the Jews) and Protestants and Catholics and Orthodox Christians were able to recognize a deeper humanity in the inhumanity of the massive destruction of human life. Ronacalli was intimately connected with the implications of this emerging sense of the human condition that grew from the European war.

The process of the council of 1962-65 reinterpreted many Roman Catholic Traditions. In attendance were the Popes, John XXIII then Paul VI, bishops from around the world, with their periti (theological experts). John XXII’s opening address was clear: *The greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council is this: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be guarded and taught more efficaciously.*

They debated a number of documents that related to eschatology such as *Sacrosanctum Concilium, Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*. And there were commissions established to consider the ramifications of the documents and to create the Church emerging from Vatican II.

Much of what the council did with regard to the last things might be characterised as a restatement of the traditional belief statements, particularly with regard to the last things. On one hand, there no new teaching about the Kingdom of God or about resurrection or about Christian hope beyond this life, or about the content of salvation. On the other hand, the eschatological emphases of the early twentieth century catholic piety, described earlier, are not so evident in the council. There is a change of accent. Death, judgement and heaven are no longer couched solely, or even mainly, in terms of individual salvation and some traditional categories are barely spoken of or not mentioned (hell, purgatory, limbo).  
  
The Council may be represented as restatement of the traditional faith in a new circumstance. On one hand, there can be no doubt that the kingdom of God is highlighted at the council. This is in terms familiar in scriptures and in the writings of the fathers of the Church.  This occurred in response to a broadening of the Church’s scriptural (divino afflante) and patristic agenda (ressourcement).  These ancient approaches to the mystery of resurrection faith have indeed been brought to bear in a new historical circumstance. On the other hand, the eschatological emphasis is so distinctively a redirection away from a fortress mentality of salvation, to an openness to the goodness in all persons, that only the more conservative commentators take this view.

Most commentators understand the council to be more radical and would make that case that Vatican II represented a reinterpretation of resurrection faith, if not a reformulation. A number of significant texts associated with eschatology can be drawn into the debate.

*Sacrosanctum Concilium* stated that the funeral rites now needed to emphasis the Paschal Mystery and could also include traditions and rituals important to the region.

*The rite for the burial of the dead should evidence more clearly the paschal character of Christian death, and should correspond more closely to the circumstances and traditions found in various regions, SC 81*

As already noted, the Council returned to the bible for teaching on the Kingdom of God and particularly the parables of Jesus, like the mustard seed and the ten bridesmaids. The emphasis was now on the Kingdom of God being present and the central feature of the contemporary mission of the Church as well as a future hope - yet to come. By re-emphasising an ancient biblical tradition the council balanced the medieval doom language surrounding death. The Council opened the way for the rites to be in the vernacular (the language of the people) and in the case funeral rites the colour of priest’s vestments was to be white, not black to better symbolise Christian hope. Council Fathers wanted funerals to regain something of the joyful character which they had had in the early centuries when the connection between Christian death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ was uppermost in people’s minds. These rites were the result of a rewrite of the Ritual Roman by Commissions established by Paul VI that were not published in an English translation until 1970.

The spirit of ecumenism and openness was evident in *Lumen Gentium*. The Roman church was not the only expression of the Christian faith.

*the church of Christ … subsists in the catholic church, LG 8*

The God’s kingdom was greater that the Catholic Church alone and more than some future reality to be known in death but God’s kingdom is any place where God’s values are at stake.

...*a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace, LG 36*

The final document of the council, *Gaudium et spes,* highlighted the eschatological turn.

*The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ, GS 1*

After the Council there were differences of opinion within the Church which had potential to lead to polarisation. On the right wing there were the conservatives who felt that some important traditions may have been lost or disregarded. On the left wing were the reformers who were great supports for change in the church. Both sides were generally happy with the council documents but had different perceptions. The conservative side was content that the changes allowed the church be offer better witness in its quest to be Christ for the world. Progressives were happy with the churches push to update its approach to the modern world, especially the approach of *Gaudium et spes*.

The church that emerged after the council had a renewed sense of social responsibility and more inclusive theology. That the Kingdom is present now (as well as yet to come) implies that social justice is also a practical face of eschatology. The call to preach social justice necessarily involves Christians in political struggles that create awkward tension. Saving souls includes saving persons and societies from unjust systems in under-developed nations. Ecumenical openness and a balanced eschatology open the possibility of dialogue with the world. The decline in sectarian rivalry between Catholic and Protestant can be traced to these new ways of thinking about the last things.

Today's Roman Catholic sees evidence of the Kingdom of God in the world in many ways and the world generally notes that fundamentalism is not the dominant feature that it was. Roman Catholicism became of household interest during the Council and its aftermath. Gradual is the change: Catholic fundamentalism is not far beneath the surface of some groups and some magisterial teaching has returned to medieval forms of language and thinking with regard to the end times. Media presentations of Catholic belief concerning eschatology easily focuses on the dualism more evident in the pre-Vatican II era. On the other hand, Pope Francis’ focus on hope has had positive media attention. The world's view of the church has altered for the better but if Roman eschatology over states its claims the old fears soon reappear.