

ÈSCHATON

*«Whoever is ashamed of me
and my words, the Son of Man
will be ashamed of them when he
comes in his glory and in the glory
of the Father and of the holy angels»*

Luke 9, 26

INTRODUCTION

THE DREAM AND THE TEARS

This book was born from a dream.

Not a wish, a longing, a hope.

An actual dream that I really experienced, and I chose not to narrate in my literary debut because of the possible prejudgment that it might originate, thus conditioning the context.

However, I reconsidered this choice, because the truth must never be concealed for fear of other people judging wrongly due to a misunderstanding.

And the truth is that this book, like the previous one, and all the thoughts crammed into my mind over the past decades, originate from a dream. One of those that change your life forever, because they are so real, vivid, intense, that they remain impressed like the pain you felt when a bee stung you as a child. And are so inexplicable that induce you to investigate day and night to grasp and decipher their meaning.

I was a 16-year-old young boy who a few months earlier had watched his father depart this life due to a stroke. One night I suddenly woke up in my room with a beating heart, filled with a flow of emotions that, shortly after, ended up dragging my adolescence with it. Because when I woke up, I immediately understood that something extraordinary had happened, that I was no longer alone, that someone had decided to appear to give meaning and direction to my life.

That someone was Jesus. Although he was not visually present, I

immediately understood that something exceptional had happened, because in that dream, in a context that had nothing to do with me, I spoke words I could not understand, to the point that when I woke up I wrote them down in my diary.

A majestic scene opened the dream: St. Peter's Square, in Rome, crowded with believers, Heads of States and Governments from all over the world at the center of the square, facing the Basilica, holding hands like children, drawing a cheerful semicircle.

I still recall, as if it were a photograph, the flags' sparkling colors, the coats of arms and clothes of the powerful of the world of every ethnic group, language and religion. An incredible scene, totally film-like. I was viewing it from top to bottom because I was facing the window of the Apostolic Palace, no less, where the Pontiff recites the *Angelus* prayer. And standing next to me was St. John Paul II, while I was wondering what I was doing next to the Pope on that occasion.

At one point John Paul II, facing this spectacular audience, grabbed the microphone, simply introducing my speech by means of a few words like: listen to this young boy, because he has something important to announce.

The peculiar thought that still surfaces in my memories is that I had no idea what I would say. Yet a motion pushed me without hesitation towards the microphone, the Pope hugged me affectionately and with him next to me I began to speak.

My memory stored that speech as a heartfelt appeal to conversion: stop and convert to Jesus Christ, I said, addressing the powerful of the earth, because humanity has reached a crucial crossroads. I remember perfectly well that I used a metaphor to explain what I meant, comparing the world to a train launched at maximum speed against a steel wall.

Unless you stop, I said, the world will blow up.

The polar ice caps will melt, the oceans will rise, and the heat will devour a substantial portion of the planet; wars, famines and plagues will follow, decimating humanity.

This was the meaning of that speech as I recall it.

It was a sort of warning and call to conversion of ecological inspiration, issued by a teenager who - at the end of the 80s – had no idea what the environmental crisis that would be so devastating in the following decades could be like.

I had not quite understood what I had said, but I was sure I had said it, remembering everything, every detail of that magnificent scene where I was with the Pontiff looking out of the window of his study.

That dream changed my life.

In fact, it was then that I began investigating what that vision could mean, so I would randomly open the Bible every evening to read a few verses: almost a propitiatory ritual, in search of something that could make sense of that enigmatic experience.

And then the dream was soon followed by another event that initiated my real life: I cried.

Again, I cried for real, but not out of sadness and affliction, but rather of sublime and absolute happiness. This was one of those moments of deep emotion with flowing tears that resemble blooming flowers, or opening pores releasing the divine energy that allow us to perceive the essence of earthly joy at its peak.

The exact moment of my birth to new life corresponded with this cry that broke out in my heart like a violent eruption when, for the first time in my life, I read the *Beatitudes* announced by Jesus in the *Sermon on the Mount* from the Gospel of Matthew.

Verse after verse, just like when you climb a mountain and the air becomes increasingly pure and pungent, those regenerating words penetrated my heart, growingly deep and sharp, until I burst into tears: tears of bliss, because in that precise moment I understood that I had found the Truth.

I felt as if my hand had touched the eternal magic of the Gospel, as if it were a prodigy, a miracle, a hidden treasure that was before me preserved in those yellowed pages of an old Bible covered in red leather.

I suddenly felt convinced that those words could not be of human origin and that the Gospel of Jesus Christ really comes from God: it is the Word of God. It is that *Logos* that is the origin and comes before

all things, transforming and transfiguring all things like a spell. And this is how I fell in love with the Gospel.

A love at first sight, a thunderbolt, like every love in my life, without reservations, passionate, jealous, proud, curious, ardently eager to last forever.

A disrupting love that makes your heart race, forcing you to rethink yourself every day, every moment.

A love that continually provokes you, that never gets tired and never tires you, because the more you tend and cultivate it, the more it renews and deepens, giving you new and unexpected graces; while the more you neglect it, after having discovered it, the more your soul longs for it, dries up and becomes full of splinters.

Anyone who has been graced with the experience of faith is aware of how you can read the Gospel and meditate on it all your life and constantly find something new and surprising to reflect on, because the Gospel is as rich in gemstones as the firmament is in stars and, above all, it is a living text: it is the voice of Jesus that looks you in the eye and says "Follow me"; it is the Spirit of Truth that blows into your soul and takes up residence in you; it is the vibration of the Eternal that resounds over the centuries and floods the world with the sacred.

That dream and that cry are the two wings that enabled the chick I was to soar through the air. I had finally found a horizon, a goal, a challenge. I had understood that the meaning of life is to seek its sense hoping to encounter it. Through those words I had also found the father I had abruptly lost some time earlier.

Since then, I have felt lost and have fallen many times, but that dream and those tears gave me back the strength to lift myself up each time with an even stronger, more generous, more enthusiastic spirit.

My whole life reflects these two events.

Today, certainly not by chance, I am still in St. Peter's square, not looking out the window of the *Angelus*, but somehow still right in there, between faith, which is the driving force of my life, and politics, which has been the context of my profession as parliamentary adviser for over twenty years.

But why, as we were saying earlier, is this book born from that

dream?

Because precisely that dream, combined with what I consider to be my first mystical experience, which took place when I read the *Beatitudes*, led me to explore the possible connections between climate change and the Word of God. And thus, first reading and studying the Gospels and the other New Testament writings, then jumping back into the Old Testament and, finally, dwelling on the book of the Apocalypse of John, I gradually realized how those connections, not only with climate change, but with everything, absolutely everything that has happened in the history of humanity up to now, were evident, even redundant!

Whoever knows me well can bear witness that already at high school my girlfriends and my closest companions called me "Father Cri", with the irony that is typical in adolescence.

When at night, perhaps coming back from a party, we talked until dawn, my favorite speeches were mostly religious, metaphysical, philosophical, obsessed with the search for the ultimate truth that hides beyond the horizon of reality and time. Those same young people who, thank goodness, are still my best friends, also know that I began drawing up, on an old and noisy typewriter, the first brief version of my first book - *Kerygma, the Gospel of the last days* - of which I keep the draft, when I was twenty.

In fact, I was actually very young when I stumbled upon some verses of the Gospel that left me stunned.

In these passages Jesus announces a colossal upheaval of the "powers of heaven" at the end of time, which is a prelude to the Parousia, his manifestation in glory to fulfill God's plan:

"There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time, they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Lk 21, 25-28).

I soon realized that an almost perfect parallel could be drawn be-

tween these words from the Gospel of Luke, which concern the *ultimate* future of history announced by Jesus in his "eschatological discourses", and the Gospels of Mark (13, 24-26) and Matthew (24, 29-30), which in all also reveal how these upheavals of the "powers of heaven", which will accompany the Parousia in the "last days", will take place suddenly and unexpectedly, as "*it was in the days of Noah*", when people "*were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all.*" (cf. Mt 24, 38-39; Lk 17, 26-27).

When I first dwelt on these prophecies, straightaway I tried talking to some priests, whom I had met at the Villa Flaminia Lasallian high school in Rome, asking them to explain the meaning of those words, but I their answers did not seem convincing.

They said the Gospel should not always be taken literally: you need to study theology, exegesis, hermeneutics, reconstruct the original context in which those words were spoken, and then you will understand.

Obviously, I thought, it is true that if all sinners were to scrupulously follow the words of Jesus, they would gouge their eyes out and cut their hands off because of the disgrace they had caused, with tragic consequences, since the people of God would be mutilated. Likewise, we would be led to assume that whoever loves this extraordinary earthly life and wants to "save" it, will "lose" it or will think that in the Kingdom of Heaven there would even be standing room for the rich, since 'camels' cannot go through the eye of a needle.

Obviously, the meaning of parables in the Gospels goes beyond the individual words that form them.

However, this is true when Jesus expresses himself in the narrative language typical of parables, through metaphors, allegories, paradoxes, but not when he addresses his disciples directly, announcing the "last things", like when, shortly before his Passion, he answers their questions by pronouncing the eschatological discourses that include the verses I quoted.

And anyhow, I thought, nothing can be accidental in the Revelation and, in any case, each of its words must have a meaning that cannot blatantly contradict its semantic significance, nor always and only be

intended as symbolic and metaphorical.

Since then, with doubts that matched my curiosity and insatiable eagerness to understand, I began to delve into the Sacred Scriptures, exploring their darkest meanders, comparing them later with the texts of the Tradition and the Magisterium, and then again with the diverse apocryphal literature and the historical-critical exegesis, finally concluding that today, as never before in the history of humanity, we have arrived to the crossroads evoked in the dream: we can either choose to embrace Jesus Christ, opening our doors to him as stated by Saint John Paul II, or plunge the world into the abyss by denying or not welcoming him.

The crossroads between truth and lies, between life and death, between regeneration and destruction, is before us, as never before our time.

Many people increasingly believe and hope that humanity can overcome on their own the tremendous ecological, pandemic, geopolitical, anthropological and spiritual crisis in which they are immersed, recurring to the prodigies of technoscience, the spread of a new secular humanism and the advent of a renewed global governance structure, perhaps also supported by the foundation of a sort of redesigned "universal religion". Nonetheless, I still believe there is no "other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12) and that no one can come to the Father except through Jesus Christ (cf. *Jn* 14: 6).

Though I sincerely respect other religious cults, which - as stated by the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra aetate* - not infrequently reflect a ray of the ultimate truth that enlightens every man, I am growingly convinced that the true face of God was revealed only in Jesus Christ: only Jesus is "the way, the truth and the life" (*Jn* 14: 6); he alone is the "Mediator between God and mankind" (*1Tm* 2,5) and only in Him is the Grace that allows the human spirit to be purified and raised towards the Absolute. Only Christ has "overcome the world" (*Jn* 16, 33) and the terrifying evil it is forced to bear, and without him, with our miserable means, we can "do nothing" (*Jn* 15:5).

I am perfectly aware that my belief has become almost alien to contemporary spirituality, assuming that it is still possible to identify any that is dominant.

And most of all, I am perfectly aware that it collides with some post-modern leading paradigms: Technology, whose magic designs the "new earth" and promises the "new heavens" of divine powers that aspire to free men from their mortal finiteness; Relativism, in its various religious, ethical, cultural, gnoseological forms, which shapes the erratic "weak thought" of today's pluralist societies; and the inter-religious ecumenical movement, which in the name of peace and the search for a universal ethics seems inclined to renounce "all Truth" (*Jn* 16, 13).

In this book I will try to explain the reasons for my belief and to make people understand why, despite scientists' catastrophic predictions and the evident signs of a spiritual and moral collapse of humanity, the world is destined to be saved, once again.

To do this, first I will try to take a closer look - within reasonable limits - into the totally impenetrable mystery of the person of Jesus Christ. It is in fact from here, from that young Man of flesh and blood who lit the fuse that disrupted the history of the world two thousand years ago, that we must start to imagine the *èschaton*, the ultimate future that awaits us.

In the first part of the book I will therefore focus on the figure of Jesus of Nazareth, certainly not to experiment for the umpteenth time with a biography, but rather to intensify his message starting from the Gospels and thus demonstrate how all the desperate attempts made by the rationalist exegesis over the last centuries to separate the "Jesus of history" from the "Christ of faith" have failed resoundingly faced with the impossibility to reduce his figure to fit any historical, ethical, political, social or anthropological category.

In this first part we will therefore ask ourselves the question that enlightens all the others, the only one that for centuries has been common to kings and subjects, rich and poor, men and women and still fascinates theologians, historians, writers, directors and artists of all kinds: who was Jesus the Nazarene and what did he really intend to

announce to his disciples?

Was he perhaps an agitator of crowds, a social reformer or charismatic revolutionary, whose aim was to overthrow the existing political and religious order to create a more just and equitable one in his image and likeness? Or was he rather a wise man, a philosopher, a moral teacher, a brilliant spiritual leader who wanted to impart his original sapiential doctrine to ascend the spirit to the heights of the heavens and achieve happiness, here on earth and elsewhere? Or was he a mystique, an ascetic or a seducer with the magical powers of a thaumaturge, as described in the Babylonian Talmud, convinced that he had a preferential and exclusive relationship with the divine, which he wanted to share with a small circle of 'the elected'?

Or, again, was he an 'apocalyptic' prophet of Essene origin who invoked a new Aeon after the imminent 'end' of the world or, more simply, an observant Jew, an enlightened *rabbi* who wanted to renew radical Judaism, thus bringing human dignity and equality between human beings back to the center of Israel's religious, political and cultural conception?

In fact, the immense figure of Jesus of Nazareth cannot be enclosed in any of these categories. For to try to grasp it, one must first understand the true meaning of the Kingdom of God that he announced. Only then one can ask additional questions.

Is this Kingdom Christ himself in his human and divine person, who defeats demons, forgives sins, heals the sick and promises heaven to the good thief crucified with him?

Is this Kingdom already present, totally or partly, in the light of the Spirit of the Risen One, or is it only in the future, or both?

Can glimpses of the beginning of this Kingdom be seen in the Church and will it reach full maturity through the work of the Holy Spirit, or will it suddenly irrupt from above as a final cosmic event? And in the latter case, will it involve a total rupture in history, or will it be a supernatural reality that will complete the history of the world and of humanity following the last coming of Christ on earth, "the day" or "the time" of which are unknown? And finally: does the 'real Jesus' of history, delivered to us by centuries of investigations based

on the historical critical method, fully coincide with the 'Christ of faith' professed by Tradition and Doctrine of the Church?

Over a quarter of the planet's eight billion inhabitants profess to be Christian, but a large part of believers who attend Mass on Sundays, and especially those who do not practice, probably never ask themselves all these questions: Jesus is a "good Man", the Son of God, who promises to grant abundant graces and be merciful to whoever follows his commandments or at least tries to do so, and this is all they need to know.

In the second part of this book, I will try to propose answers for those who do not want to sidestep all these questions.

I will therefore examine the meaning of the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, the Parousia and the final fulfillment, exploring defining moments in the powerful awakening of twentieth century Christian eschatological thought. The new framing of the decisive 'last things' occurring at the end or after the end of personal or universal history (death, resurrection, judgment, second coming of Christ, new creation, purgatory, heaven, hell, etc.), initiated in evangelical theology. It then rapidly blew across Catholic theology, to the point that it transformed the whole structure of the traditional treatise on the "novissimi", also influencing the outcome of the Second Vatican Council and paving the way for new currents of thought, such as the theology of hope and the theology of liberation, which still play a leading role in the reflection on God.

After having reviewed this evolution of theological thought, I will draw my conclusions, exposing my thesis on what was the true nerve center of the announcement of Jesus, the spark from which everything originates and the *èschaton*, the *ultimate* future in God towards which humanity, history and the whole universe converge.

When I will describe what - based on evangelical sources - I consider to be the most realistic portrait of Jesus of Nazareth as the regal and priestly Messiah and Prophet of the *èschaton*, I will go far beyond by trying to demonstrate how his preaching, which managed to illuminate the entire history of humanity, takes on presently, and only presently, a significance that could not really have been understood before

and that greatly affects the recent past, the historical present and our future, as well as that of our children.

In the light of the prophetic revelation, in the third part I will therefore try to penetrate the mysterious Christian sense of history, with the aim of framing the main historical events of Israel, of the Church and of all the People of God in the complex web of Jesus' eschatological discourses and verifying how everything that He predicted invariably occurred or is on the verge of occurring.

In this perspective, I will deal with some of the thorniest and still unresolved issues that contemporary theology is called to unravel: the mystery of absolute Evil that exploded in the trauma of the Shoah, the relationship between Christ and other religious faiths, in particular Islam, the crisis of the Church and its relations with secularized culture. In this part, I will also address the issue of how to preserve human nature from an anthropological drift that is destroying its foundations and how to stop the 'demon' of the single 'politically correct' mode of thought - which wants to eclipse the truth of the Gospel by magnifying a false conception of freedom - from prevailing.

Finally, in its fourth part the book will analyze other major and unprecedented challenges facing humanity and the Christian faith, trying to make sense of Jesus' many 'forgotten' prophetic words. The latter speak to the modern man, bewitched by science and searching for the code to access the tree of life, while feeling confused and dismayed by the re-emerging barbarism of a civilization he cannot dominate and terrified by the destruction of the planet he has disfigured.

I will first address the matter of the increasingly seductive power that is being gained by the ideology of "transhumanism", that is, the promise of a profane *èschaton* that will take place by exceeding human limits and the slavery concerning the corruption of the body through the unlimited potential of Technology: genetic design, biotechnologies, nanotechnologies, robotics and quantum computing, which claim to build, regardless of God, a new humanity allowing men to cross the threshold of immortality on their own, possibly through a sort of cybernetic "resurrection" to be achieved through the digital storage of

states of consciousness. The challenge facing the Christian faith consists in fighting this new deadly 21st century utopia, transforming the fascination exerted by the Adamic temptation of man to become "god" into the eschatological hope of a "new" humanity, freed from death and reconciled *with* Christ and *in* Christ, where God can truly be "all in all" (1 *Cor* 15:28).

Secondly, I will focus on safeguarding the "common home", the planet that hosts us and runs the real risk of catching fire like a match, with the environmental catastrophe sweeping the poor of the earth, who are the main victims of the ecological crisis. In this case, the challenge for the Christian faith consists in transforming the fear of the "apocalyptic" disaster into the eschatological hope of a "new earth", stirring consciences to question themselves on the mystery of Creation and to act "in the name of God" and His Revelation, and not for the sake of yet another pan-environmental ideology, a pagan cult devoid of any authentic reference to the transcendent.

Finally, I will turn to the connection between science and faith, Reason and Revelation, casting a glance on the umpteenth pseudo-religion, after scientism, transhumanism and ecology, whose intent is to 'challenge' the Christian faith: the belief in UFOs and extraterrestrial intelligent life, which raises questions that are by no means trivial, to which theology has so far replied in a completely ambiguous and misleading manner, without grasping its inconceivable transcendent value.

All these challenges for the Christian faith can only be overcome by fully understanding God's plan for the whole of Creation that "is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now" (*Rom* 8:22).

There is only one way to understand this magnificent plan made of love: listening to the voice of the prophets and of He who fulfilled the biblical prophecies by validating God's promises through words and deeds and who will therefore fulfill also the most sublime and mysterious of these promises: an ultimate and final irruption in the space and time of the history of humanity, to eradicate evil from the world and make "all things new" (*Rev* 21, 5).

The "dream" of a land that is redeemed, regenerated and purified by the Love of Christ and the "tears" of joy for a humanity full of

celestial "beatitudes" will therefore be the guiding stars of this essay, in which I will try to demonstrate how those who radically "demythify" and "decosmologize" the Holy Scriptures, interpreting Jesus' eschatological discourses as mere allegories, metaphors and symbolic images of Christian hope, have not yet understood the true message of salvation for humanity and for the planet, that they hold.

And above all, they have not yet understood that those discourses, by which Jesus Christ claims to have "foretold everything" (*Mk* 13:23) that will happen on earth before he returns in glory, were pronounced precisely for us today, so that human beings can hope and experience the ultimate future that is expected and promised: the *èschaton*.

Only in the light of this future, coming from God, can the present be understood and rightly lived and only in it can the Christian faith release all its creative and transformative energy, remaining plausible and attractive to the bewildered gaze of the 21st century man.

NOTICE TO SURFERS

This book has a uniform thread, which is Jesus' gaze on the *ultimate* future of humanity, of the world and of the entire universe. However, the text is divided into four parts addressing intimately connected but quite different issues.

I could have written at least two separate essays: the first, comprising the two initial parts divided into thirteen chapters, whose object is the historical and theological framing of the figure and message of Jesus of Nazareth; the second, with the remaining two parts in ten chapters, focusing on the tangible actualization in universal history of what He announced to his disciples.

Although I am aware that ponderous books are currently disadvantaged in terms of publishing appeal, I chose to present one text. This way the reader can make a single "journey" from beginning to end, surfing on the waves of history and biblical revelation, though he might occasionally need to return to previously covered points, or to choose which topics to address and in what order.

In fact, each of the four parts that make up the book has its own conceptual autonomy. Therefore, following in the footsteps of Pico della Mirandola, who was said to be capable of reading and even reciting the Divine Comedy backwards, starting from the last verse, you can also read this essay starting from the end.

If you are passionate about science, technology, geopolitics, ecology or ufology and you want to know if, according to the Holy Scriptures, one day man will discover the molecule or the gene of eternal youth, if the Earth can end up buried in a climatic or nuclear massacre or if we will ever meet a Martian, you can start reading from Part IV, in which I deal, from an eschatological point of view, with matters of current importance such as transhumanism, the ecological crisis, the "new world disorder" and whether extraterrestrial intelligent life is possible.

Whereas if you are a devout Christian, maybe interested in the biblical conception of history, or a simple lay observer wanting to better understand the occurrences within the Catholic Church, the roots of its crisis and of the related spiritual and moral crisis of the West, you might start from Part III. Here I tackle, without pretense, the issues of

doctrinal confusion, sexual - not only clergy-related – scandals, religious pluralism and the increasingly incestuous relationship between Christianity and frivolous and apostate post-modernity.

At the beginning of this part, dealing with the *ultimate* future of the People of God, I felt compelled to devote a long chapter to events in Israel, from the fall of the second Temple to the return of the Jews to their homeland after the Shoah. Also in this case, sacred and profane history ostensibly intertwine, and this is a fitting chapter for those who do not resign themselves to the stalemate in which the reflection on the God of the history of biblical tradition has remained mired in after the horror of Auschwitz.

If you love theology or, in any case, want to acquire information or gain a novel approach on how the great thinkers interpreted the enigmatic meaning of the evangelical announcement of the Kingdom of God, then Part II suits you best. Here I recalled three centuries of heated theological disputes before summarizing, in chapter XIII, my thesis on the eschatological-apocalyptic conception of Jesus of Nazareth.

Finally, if you are madly in love with the Risen One or are conversely distant from faith and want to immerse yourself in the varied and fascinating environment of first century Palestine, learn more about the earthly story of the extraordinary historical figure who revolutionized the destinies of the world, you should continue reading by browsing this page. I would not hesitate to do so!

Enjoy the reading!

Cristiano Ceresani
 Rome, June 5th. 2022
 Whit Sunday