

Research Article

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How to Reasonably Wait for the End of the World: Aquinas and Heidegger on the Letters to the Thessalonians

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Abstract: For Christians, coping with a crisis requires a proper expectation of the end of the world. This article will discuss the experience of Thessalonians' persecuted community, who receive solace and orientation from Saint Paul's eschatological teaching. I will focus on Aquinas' and Heidegger's reading of Saint Paul's letters to the Thessalonians. Their interpretation reveals two opposite ways of waiting for the end of the world, which pertain to two different modes of human rationality: (1) the calculative reasoning of those who claim to know when the end will happen, and (2) the lucidity and sobriety of the true believers, who accept that nobody can know the day of the second coming of Christ and thus we have to continually prepare and be ready for it. Which way is the most suited to handle a crisis like the current pandemic? The calculative reason is necessary for fields like medicine, which are crucial in defeating the pandemic. However, when dealing with a crisis that brings us unexpected and unknown circumstances, we also need the virtuous, sober, and awakened attitude promoted by Saint Paul in his letters and highlighted by Aquinas and Heidegger.

Keywords: crisis, eschatology, rationality, Saint Paul, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Heidegger

What can religion do when a crisis like the current COVID pandemic strikes? I propose to look at the experience of early Christian communities. At the dawn of Christianity, Saint Paul situated the tribulations of the Thessalonians into an eschatological perspective. The Thessalonians were a Christian community founded by Saint Paul in Thessalonica (now in northern Greece) and faced persecution for their faith. To comfort and orient them in their tribulations, Saint Paul inserts their affliction within the history of salvation. According to the Christian message, the world as we know it will end at the second coming of Jesus Christ, the son of God. At the same time, this end will be a new beginning: the world will be cleansed and renewed, the dead will resurrect and face the final judgment, the elected ones will be saved, the others will be damned. In his letters to the Thessalonians, Saint Paul characterized the Christian life through the modality in which we wait for that moment. How we wait for the end of the world partly depends on the fact that we do not know when Christ will come again. In his view, the uncertainty of that moment is a significant part of the authentic Christian life. Those claiming to know the final date err dogmatically and stray away from the original *modus vivendi* of the Gospel. Those who accept the uncertainty prepare for this moment incessantly through work and sobriety. Thus, Christians can prepare for a crisis and face it when it arrives by adopting the right attitude toward the world's end.

Like Thessalonians' tribulations, the COVID crisis posed an existential threat to those affected by it. People died, economies collapsed, children lost school education and social interaction, and political

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liberties declined. Some of these disasters could have been avoided, others not. But for the disasters that could have been avoided, one can ask: What have we done wrong? Looking at the current pandemic through the lens of *Thessalonians*, I think that the West has made the same mistakes that Saint Paul highlighted in his letters. Indeed, the first problem that we faced during the COVID pandemic was unpreparedness. The crisis caught us by surprise, as many institutional tools needed for a pandemic did not work. The second problem, even more grievous, was the mishandling of the pandemic, ranging from initial underestimation to subsequent panic. The slogan “It is just the flu” recalls those blasted by Saint Paul for their false eschatological certitude. This underestimation (either sincere opinion or political calculation) reveals an incapacity to seize the moment’s gravity and behave accordingly. The subsequent political instrumentalizing of the crisis preyed upon an equally pernicious panic.

As we will see, both negligence and panic stem from a deficient eschatological attitude. For Saint Paul, the authentic eschatological waiting entails lucidity (an opposite of negligence) and sobriety (an opposite of panic). His warning about the wrong attitude toward the end of the world matches some failures we witnessed during the pandemic. However, the eschatological attitude is relevant not only in the retrospective analysis of what went wrong at the outset of the pandemic. The COVID crisis is also a new historical threshold that reminds believers about the coming end, the fragility of this world, and the promise of salvation. That end could happen now or later, and we must always be ready. Since the pandemic’s beginning, many studies (monographs and articles) have offered eschatological interpretations in the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions.¹ These interpretations situated the crisis within divine Providence (some seeing it as a punishment of God for our sins, others rejecting this scenario) and called for a renewal of faith. My aim is not to explain why the crisis happened (although this is a crucial religious question) but rather to describe the eschatological experience and differentiate between opposing attitudes in a crisis as Saint Paul discussed them in his conversation with the Thessalonians.

Saint Paul’s distinction between authentic and inauthentic waiting for the end of the world captured the interest of philosophers, Saint Thomas Aquinas and Martin Heidegger, among others. This article will discuss Aquinas’ and Heidegger’s reading of Saint Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians, highlighting issues relevant to our current situation. Their interpretation puts in balance two opposite ways of waiting for the end of the world: the calculative reasoning of those who claim to know when the end will happen; and the lucidity and sobriety of the true believers, who accept that nobody can know the day of the second coming of Christ and thus we have to continually prepare and be ready for it. These two ways pertain, I believe, to different modes of human rationality. Which way is the most suited to handle a crisis like the current pandemic? The calculative reason is necessary for fields like medicine, which are crucial in defeating the pandemic. However, when dealing with a crisis that brings us unexpected and unknown circumstances, we also need the virtuous, sober, and awakened attitude promoted by Saint Paul in his letters and highlighted by Aquinas and Heidegger. The eschatological expectation is neither despair nor apathy, neither panic nor indifference. It entails a fine-tuning of the anxiety for the end of the world and joy for the promised salvation. In light of this expectation, solving the current pandemic crisis cannot be limited to punctual resolutions, like medical and institutional measures, although they are necessary. The solution is also a comprehensive and radical transformation of one’s life.

The authentic Christian life in expectation of the second coming of Christ (*parousia*) represents the common ground of Aquinas’ and Heidegger’s reading of *Thessalonians*.² This common ground comes not from Aquinas’ brilliant deductive reasoning, but from a different kind of demonstration that he borrows

¹ See Wright, *God and the Pandemic*; Brueggemann, *Virus as a Summons to Faith*; Hampton (ed.), *Pandemic, Ecology and Theology*; Tolmie and Venter, “Making Sense of the COVID-19 Pandemic from the Bible – Some Perspectives”; Sabih, “God is Telling us Something. Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak’s Peshar and Socio-Political Pantheism of Coronavirus”; Thomas and Barbato, “Positive Religious Coping and Mental Health among Christians and Muslims in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic”; Isiko, “Religious Construction of Disease.”

² On Heidegger’s eschatology, see especially Wolfe, *Heidegger’s Eschatology*; Camilleri, *Heidegger et les grandes lignes d’une phénoménologie herméneutique du christianisme primitif*. On Aquinas’ eschatology, see Levering, *Jesus and the Demise of Death*; and Levering, *Aquinas’s Eschatological Ethics and the Virtue of Temperance*; Leget, *Living with God*.

from Saint Paul: the “demonstration of the Spirit and power” (1 *Corinthians*, 2:4), namely the manifestation of Christian faith in Paul’s relationship with the Thessalonians. I will highlight this experiential demonstration against the backdrop of Heidegger’s phenomenology of the Christian life. For this reason, I will proceed not in chronological but in methodological order, starting with Heidegger then moving to Aquinas.

1 Heidegger’s reading of the Letters to the Thessalonians

In *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, Heidegger analyzes the early Christian life depicted by Saint Paul and Saint Augustine. For him, the Christian life is the paradigm of human factual life and substantially informs his analytic of human existence in *Being and Time*. The historical is the main feature of this paradigm that will carry on in Heidegger’s later work. Human life belongs to a history of salvation in which Jesus’ Incarnation and Resurrection are the basis for His second coming and the world’s end. These historical dynamics influence even the later phase of his ontology when he is mostly concerned with Being and the history of Being. This article will not engage with Heidegger’s later eschatology of Being,³ but will focus on his early commentary on *Thessalonians*. The matter at hand here is Heidegger’s insight into what an authentic Christian life looks like in expectation of the *parousia*. His critique of the inauthentic eschatological attitude reveals some issues that we see in the current pandemic.

What does a crisis⁴ have to do with the end of the world? In Heidegger’s reading of the *Thessalonians*, human tribulations are a foretaste of the apocalypse. The enduring of affliction and the preparedness for the end of the world are intertwined:

The awaiting of the *παρουσία* of the Lord is decisive. The Thessalonians are hope for him not in a human sense, but rather in the sense of the experience of the *παρουσία*. The experience is an absolute distress (*θλίψις*) which belongs to the life of the Christian himself. The acceptance (*δεχέσθαι*) is an entering-oneself-into anguish. This distress is a fundamental characteristic, it is an absolute concern in the horizon of the *παρουσία*, of the second coming at the end of time.⁵

To clarify this intertwining, Heidegger presents the Christian proclamation, the *kerygma*, as a phenomenon described according to the phenomenological method: “The content proclaimed, and its material and conceptual character, is then to be analyzed from out of the basic phenomenon of proclamation.”⁶ Heidegger distinguishes three directions of sense in a phenomenon: (1) the content-sense (*Gehaltssinn*), what is experienced in it; (2) the relational sense (*Bezugssinn*) that regards the person who experiences it; and (3) the enactment-sense (*Vollzugssinn*), namely how the relational meaning is enacted.⁷ Thus for Heidegger, the *kerygma*’s content can only make sense in its enactment in the everyday lives of Christians. In his eyes, Paul condemns the laziness of some Thessalonians because it breaks these directions of sense. These Thessalonians withdraw from enactment and detach themselves from what is calling them to transform their lives. They lose themselves in speculations about the end’s date and behave as if they would be observers, not players in the history of salvation.⁸

Enactment has the value of proof understood in a phenomenological-religious sense. In such a sense, the proof is not a syllogism that conduces to theoretical ideas, like the idea of God’s existence or the justification of evil. The proof that Heidegger aims at should, on the contrary, regain the existential basis of Christianity constituted by the Gospel’s message as the early communities live it. Such proof is not a

³ See Cavalcante Schuback, “Apocalypse and the History of Being”; McNeill, *The Time of Life*; Sacchi, *The Apocalypse of Being*.

⁴ In Christianity, the term “crisis” (in Greek *krisis*) has initially signified, in the Greek translation of the Bible, God’s final judgment at the end of the world. See Koselleck and Richter, “Crisis,” 359. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for drawing my attention to this article.

⁵ Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 67.

⁶ Ibid., 56.

⁷ Ibid., 43.

⁸ Nicholson, “The End of Time,” 230.

Beweis, a proof in the theoretical sense, which offers ideas captured in insight, but rather an *Erweis*, a showing that takes place in the enactment of faith. Heidegger uses the term proof (*Beweis*) in quotation signs to indicate that he does not understand proof in the theoretical mode: “the ‘proof’ [*Beweis*] and the showing [*Erweis*] of what is proclaimed lie not in having-had insight; rather, the proclamation is ‘showing’ (*apodeixis*) of the ‘spirit,’ ‘force.’ /.../ Communication of existence; and the apostle is tool of this showing.”⁹ Heidegger refers here to Paul’s first letter to Corinthians, where Paul distinguishes between words of wisdom and demonstration of the Spirit and power:

When I came to you, brothers, proclaiming the mystery of God, I did not come with sublimity of words or of wisdom. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear and much trembling, and my message and my proclamation were not with persuasive [words of] wisdom, but with a demonstration of spirit and power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God (*I Corinthians*, 2:1–5).

The contents of the Christian *kerygma* are thus not separated from the experience of faith. It is not because the experience creates the contents but because the contents do not make sense outside this experience. The letters of Saint Paul are significant in this regard because their doctrinal content does not stand apart from Paul’s concrete experiential situation with the Thessalonians. The epistolary style is indeed the expression of their writer and his situation.¹⁰ Such a situation is neither a static complex of conditions (for example, Paul’s age, the time, space, etc.), nor a flow of events, but reflects the common experience of Paul and the Thessalonians: “How does Paul, in the situation of a letter-writer, stand to the Thessalonians? How are they experienced by him? How is his communal world given to him in the situation of writing the letter?”¹¹ Although Paul’s environment is foreign to us today, we can still empathize with his situation, which Heidegger analyzes in existential terms, detached from its material character. This kind of approach is what he calls formal indication – not formal in an abstract sense, but in the sense of pointing in the direction of something that each personal life must enact. In the case of formally indicative concepts, Heidegger shows, “the meaning-content of these concepts does not directly intend or express what they refer to, but only gives an indication, a pointer to the fact that anyone who seeks to understand is called upon by this conceptual context to undertake a transformation of themselves into their *Dasein*.”¹² The formal indication opens access to the Christian message from the standpoint of religious experience.¹³

Paul’s situation lies beyond the distinction static-dynamic and is a having-become (in Greek *genestai*) that transforms Paul and the Thessalonians. Paul’s arrival transforms the life of the Thessalonians. At the same time, Paul’s faith is transformed and uplifted by their having-become: “[...] for Paul the Thessalonians are there because he and they are linked to each other in their having-become.”¹⁴ Heidegger stresses that this having-become is not accidental but is incessantly co-experienced, such that their Being (*Sein*) now is their having-become (*Gewordensein*). The having-become also triggers the self-awareness of Paul and the Thessalonians. Heidegger remarks that the frequent use of the word *genestai* together with words such as “you remember” and “you know” indicates that the knowledge of the Thessalonians arises from the situational context of their Christian life experience.

Paul and the Thessalonians’ having-become is an acceptance of the *kerygma* both in distress and joy: the anguish over a cataclysm that will end the world and the joy of renewal and resurrection. Their acceptance triggers an absolute turning-around, turning toward God in two directions: serving God and waiting for the end of the world. The distress and the joy pertain to the very contents of the proclamation and make up the horizon within which one can understand the end of the world. The obstacles and suffering that Paul and the Thessalonians have endured are part of this distress. Paul speaks indeed out

⁹ Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 97.

¹⁰ Ibid., 57.

¹¹ Ibid., 61.

¹² Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 297. See also Dahlstrom, “Heidegger’s Method,” 782.

¹³ Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 47.

¹⁴ Ibid., 65.

of weakness and distress: “You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition.” (*I Thessalonians*, 2: 1)

The awaiting of the second coming of Christ is thus entering into anguish. One cannot grasp the concept “end of the world” without entering into life’s anguish and eliminating all false securities and illusions. In our COVID time, we must avoid a passive acceptance of merely reassuring explanations, like “The virus is a punishment for our sins,” or “God will turn this for good.” The British theologian N. T. Wright thinks that our first reaction to the COVID crisis must be deeply personal and engage our relationship with Jesus. Instead of rushing into edifying explanations, the Christian must, first of all, acknowledge the frailty of human beings and the hardship of earthly life. Praying and lamenting about the present situation are human reactions that stem from the faith in the God who suffered and sacrificed Himself on the Cross: “It means that, when the world is going through great convulsions, the followers of Jesus are called to be people of prayer at the place where the world is in pain.”¹⁵ Like Heidegger, Wright places the experience of distress at the heart of Christian life. He observes that one-third of Psalms lament the sorrow of earthly life, and we should thus not be ashamed to lament about COVID.

Lamenting does not entail giving up on the action. On the contrary, believers are called, amid distress, to work relentlessly, to carry on with their job. Although He lamented human death and sin, Jesus still intervened to alleviate suffering and bring redemption. In the same way, Wright thinks, Christians should remain present on the front battle against COVID and not retreat in the background. Throughout centuries of plagues, preachers and pastors remained at their posts and helped, rather than retreat in a passive consolation about the coming kingdom of God.¹⁶

For this reason, the calculation of the “When” is alienating, excluding a life transformation. The authentic waiting for the end of the world is not a mere awareness of a future event but assimilation of this proclamation into the present life. The uncertainty about the “When” is constitutive for this waiting, as it requires to be awake and sober. Christians must be aware that the day of the Lord will come like “a thief in the night” and must vigilantly prepare for that moment. Those who believe they know the moment indulge in the peace and security of their knowledge. They are absorbed by what life brings them, remaining stuck in the worldly.

There is no security for the Christian life; the constant insecurity is also characteristic for what is fundamentally significant in factual life. The uncertainty is not coincidental; rather, it is necessary. In order to see it clearly, one must reflect on one’s own life and its enactment. Those “who speak of peace and security” (5:3) spend themselves on what life brings them, occupy themselves with whatever tasks of life. They are caught up in what life offers; they are in the dark, with respect to knowledge of themselves. The believers, on the contrary, are sons of the light and the day.¹⁷

For Heidegger, as for Aquinas, those engaged in speculations about the moment of the second coming wait inauthentically for the end of the world. They see it as a “What,” not as a “How,” and do not engage in existential enactment to transform their lives. “Paul’s answer to the question of the When of the *παρουσία* is thus an urging to awaken and to be sober. Here lies a point against enthusiasm, against the incessant brooding of those who dwell upon and speculate about the “when” of the *παρουσία*. They worry only about the “When,” the “What,” the objective determination, in which they have no authentic personal interest. They remain stuck in the worldly.”¹⁸

Moreover, the “When” of the *parousia* is related to the “How” insofar as only the authentic believers will be able to recognize the Antichrist who pretends to be divine. The second letter highlights that the Antichrist will test the believers. Those who will be deceived are those who did not accept the enactment of the *kerygma*, which requires one to enter the anguish of life. They get lost “in their highest bustling activity

¹⁵ Wright, *God and the Pandemic*, 42.

¹⁶ Ibid., 62–4

¹⁷ Ibid., 72.

¹⁸ Ibid., 74.

with the ‘sensation’ of the Parousia, and fall from their original concern for the divine. /.../ The appearance of the Antichrist in godly robes facilitates the falling-tendency of life; in order not to fall prey to it, one must stand ever ready for it.”¹⁹ The deception is thus the result of this lack of enactment that undermines the reception of the proclamation.

The temporality encapsulated in the proclamation is not a linear projection of a future event but rather becoming and transformation toward God. For the Thessalonians, the enactment is a rehearsal of the end of the world and a glimpse into eternity. As Heidegger puts it: “The obstinate waiting does not wait for the significances of a future content, but for God. The meaning of temporality determines itself out of the fundamental relationship with God – however in such a way that only those who live temporality in the manner of enactment understand eternity.”²⁰ Thus the Christian experience of time is qualitative, not quantitative. Its ground is the *kairos*,²¹ the appointed time, which is not a mere display of chronological coordinates, but the irruption of God into earthly life. How do the various extreme attitudes in the current pandemic fare with this vision of time?²² Those who dismissed the gravity of the crisis rely, perhaps, on the afterlife and consider historical time irrelevant. They certainly believe in the end of the world, but they cannot fully engage themselves in the actual moment; they let it slip away. At the same time, those who have an attitude of exaggerated panic have already decided that this is the end of the world. Their panic seems to lack hope and sobriety.

Heidegger briefly mentions the difference between the first and second letters to the Thessalonians. In the first letter, Paul suggests that the second coming will happen during his lifetime, although he stresses that the day will arrive like “a thief in the night.” In the second letter, that imminence weakens, and Paul makes room for even more uncertainty regarding the time. Nevertheless, for Heidegger, this discrepancy is irrelevant. The Christian must prepare regardless of whether the end of the world arrives during his lifetime or after death. In this sense, the increase in uncertainty impacts the life comportment of the Thessalonians. Heidegger notes that the response of the Thessalonians to the proclamation intensifies after Paul’s first letter. This intensification starts from controversies over the day of the Lord, which some think is at hand. Those who work tirelessly for salvation are concerned about fulfilling their work and resisting until the final day. Paul reminds them that God calls them to holiness. He opposes them to those who, thinking that the final day has already arrived, ceased working, and are sitting idle. These comportment issues confirm the tight connection between the “When” and the “How” of the *parousia* in Heidegger’s eyes. They do not contradict the first letter but intensify, through increased uncertainty, the tension between anguish and joy that grounds Christian work and sobriety.

In the last part of his life, in his famous interview with the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, Heidegger reaffirms the Christian idea of readiness for God. This time, he assigns poetry and thinking the task to prepare for such readiness and to stimulate an awakening: “Only a god can save us. The only possibility available to us is that by thinking and poetizing, we prepare a readiness for the appearance of a god.”²³ His German fellow Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) appreciates this call for readiness as a genuine insight into eschatology’s depths. The readiness for God is transforming, especially if one is not waiting in front of a void, but “goes forth to meet the One whom it encounters in his signs such that, precisely amid the ruin of its own possibilities, it becomes certain of his closeness.”²⁴

To sum up Heidegger’s take on Paul’s eschatology, the proof of the proclamation rests on the enactment of anguish and joy, representing the two sides of the end of the world: the cataclysm, on the one hand, and the resurrection and renewal on the other hand. The uncertainty of the apocalyptic moment is paramount

¹⁹ Ibid., 81.

²⁰ Ibid., 84.

²¹ Ibid., 72, 85, 106. On Heidegger’s interpretation of the *kairos*, see Ó Murchadha, *The Time of Revolution*; Sandro, *Il Tempo Che Viene. Martin Heidegger Dal Kairós all’Ereignis*.

²² See also Sean McGrath, “Eschatology in a Time of Crisis.”

²³ Heidegger, “Only a God Can Save Us,” 55. Later Heidegger’s history of Being has been susceptible to controversial political implications marred by anti-semitism. See Cavalcante, “Apocalypse and the History of Being,” 201–5.

²⁴ Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 201.

for an authentic enactment. Those who delude themselves to know when the moment will arrive fall either into despair, false security, or idleness. We have also seen these extremes playing out during the current COVID pandemic when underestimating the danger mixed with political hyperbole.

2 Aquinas' reading of the Letters to the Thessalonians

Aquinas shares, I think, Heidegger's moderate eschatological attitude in the reading of the *Thessalonians*. For Aquinas, too, the end's uncertainty and the authenticity of faith go hand in hand. Not knowing the "When" is part of God's call to humans to renew their life and grow in their faith. Aquinas combats eschatological calculation on several occasions: in his commentaries to *Thessalonians*, in *Summa Theologiae* III, supplemental question 88, article 3, and in *De potentia*, question 5, articles 5 and 6. His insistence on the uncertainty of the second coming is motivated by the same Christian life model that also motivates Saint Paul and Heidegger.

Aquinas holds that the end of the world is a religious datum experienced in faith, not a matter that can be demonstrated by reason: "We should say that we, following the example of the saints, hold that heavenly motion will at some time cease, although one holds this by faith rather than one can demonstrate it by reason."²⁵ The impossibility of fully demonstrating eschatology aligns with Aquinas's complex conception of the soul's immortality, which blends Platonic and Aristotelian anthropology with Christian revelation. As Leo Scheffczyk shows, for Aquinas, the fate of human beings after death is the object of an indication (sign), not proof, a distinction also made by Heidegger.²⁶ When addressing the immortality of the soul, Aquinas refers to Plato's arguments but also speaks about the natural desire of the soul for God. This desire is not proof but a sign of human immortality.²⁷ Whereas the Greek arguments demonstrate the incorruptibility of the soul, humans' very future after death remains, for Aquinas, a matter of indication because it rests on their relationship with God.

Aquinas' approach in his reading of *Thessalonians* is thus experiential, not theoretical. He distinguishes between theoretical arguments and experiential demonstration, referring to the same Biblical passage quoted by Heidegger, namely 1 *Corinthians* 2:4. In that passage, as we have seen earlier, Saint Paul differentiates his preaching from the words of man's wisdom and defines it as a "demonstration of the Spirit and of power." Aquinas uses this distinction to explain a passage from 1 *Thessalonians*, 1:5: "For our gospel did not come to you in word alone, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with much conviction." This passage refers to an experiential kind of knowledge that occurs not through arguments but the power of signs, the Holy Spirit's gifts, and the example of a virtuous life. Aquinas often explains one Biblical passage through other passages from different parts of the Bible. Thus in reading this passage, he refers, besides 1 *Corinthians*, also to several other Biblical passages, building a sort of textual collage:

Powerfully, because he came not in loftiness of speech, **but in power**: and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power (1 Cor 2:4). For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power (1 Cor 4:20). Now, this may have reference either to the authentication of his preaching or to the manner of his preaching. If it is the first alternative, then Paul's preaching to them was authenticated not by arguments but by the power of signs, and so it is said: *the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it* (Mark 16:20); and by the giving of the Holy Spirit; so Paul says, **and in the Holy Spirit**. While Peter was still saying this, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word (Acts 10:44). While God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit (Heb. 2:4). /..../ But if it is the second alternative, then **in power** seems to mean *showing you a virtuous life*.

²⁵ Aquinas, *The Power of God*, 144.

²⁶ Scheffczyk, "Unsterblichkeit« bei Thomas von Aquin auf dem Hintergrund der neueren Diskussion," 34. On Heidegger's idea of immortality, see Oliva, "Immortality in Heidegger."

²⁷ Aquinas, *Quaestio Disputata de Immortalitate Animae*, 215: "Hec igitur rationes et his similes ex quibusdam immortalitatis signis sumuntur." See also Leget, *Living with God*, 216; Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 150.

Jesus began to do and teach (Acts 1:1). **And in the Holy Spirit** who bring things to mind; *for it is not you who speak but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you* (Matt 10:20).²⁸

The similarity between Aquinas's experiential approach and Heidegger's phenomenological method is striking if we consider Heidegger's controversial critique of Aquinas and Christian Scholastics in general.²⁹ This critique has two main points. First, the Scholastics, especially Aquinas, are guilty of what Heidegger calls onto-theology, namely a type of conceptual system that obliterates the difference between Being and entities, confusing the very event of Being with an entity. Second, they have reduced the Christian message to theoretical thinking elaborated with Aristotelian metaphysical concepts. These concepts, however, cannot capture the novelty of the Christian Revelation and the concreteness of the religious experience. Matters like Jesus' Incarnation or salvation cannot be grasped through Aristotle's naturalistic theoretical metaphysics. "Scholasticism, within the totality of the medieval Christian world of experience, severely endangered precisely the immediacy of religious life, and forgot religion in favor of theology and dogma."³⁰ For several decades, Heidegger and Aquinas scholars have analyzed this critique, often trying to defend Aquinas against Heidegger's accusations.³¹ No matter where one stands in the Heidegger–Aquinas debate, it is evident that in the commentary on the *Thessalonians*, Aquinas does not employ the reductive theoretical thinking attributed to him by Heidegger. Indeed, his main focus is the experience of the Thessalonians in light of Saint Paul's message of salvation in the life to come.

Aquinas starts from the tribulations that Thessalonians undergo because of their faith. The commentary opens with a prologue about the story of Noah's ark in *Genesis*, which he compares with Thessalonians' tribulations: "And the flood was forty days upon the earth, and the waters increased, and lifted up the ark on high from the earth" (*Genesis* 7:17). For Aquinas, this story is an allegory in which the ark signifies the Church, and the flooding waters signify tribulations. As the ark is lifted up by the raising waters, so too the Church raises through human tribulations:

Therefore, the Church is not destroyed but uplifted: first, by lifting the mind to God, as is clear from Gregory: *the evil things which bear down upon us here compel us to go to God. And in their distress they seek me* (Hos 6:1). Second, the Church is raised up through spiritual consolation: *when the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul* (Ps 94:19); *for as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort, too* (2 Cor 1:5). Third, the Church is upraised by increasing the number of the faithful; for God has spread the Church in time of persecution; *but the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad* (Exod 1:12).³²

Noah's ark is an appropriate allegory for the Thessalonians' situation because they stood firm through (and despite) many tribulations.

In his commentary, Aquinas highlights Paul's comforting of the Thessalonians. Like Paul, he probably intended to comfort his contemporaries about the grace of Christ in a Church facing present and future hardships.³³ As Randall Smith observes, Aquinas' Biblical commentaries are not merely exegetical exercises but grow from the practice of preaching.³⁴ Showing that Paul sends Timothy to encourage the Thessalonians

²⁸ Aquinas, "Commentary on the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians," 154. The bold cursives are citations from the *Thessalonians*. The other cursives are citations from other Biblical passages.

²⁹ Heidegger, *Introduction to Phenomenological Research*; Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*; Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*; Heidegger, *Geschichte der Philosophie von Thomas von Aquin bis Kant*.

³⁰ Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 238.

³¹ On Heidegger's critique of Aquinas see: Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*; Deely, *The Tradition via Heidegger*; Smith Gilson, *Metaphysical Presuppositions of Being-in-the-World*; Courtine, "Heidegger et Thomas d'Aquin"; Pöltner, "Heideggers Umgang mit Thomas von Aquin"; Filippi, "La metafísica medieval y la crítica de Heidegger a la ontoteología"; Trabbic, "Aquinas and Ontotheology Again." Oliva, "Trinity and Difference."

³² Aquinas, "Commentary on the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians", 150.

³³ Murphy, "Thomas' Commentaries on Philemon, 1 and 2 Thessalonians and Philippians," in Weinandy et al. (eds.), *Aquinas on Scripture. An Introduction to His Biblical Commentaries*, 167–9.

³⁴ Smith, *Aquinas, Bonaventure, and the Scholastic Culture of Medieval Paris. Preaching, Prologues, and Biblical Commentary*, 199.

and strengthen them in their tribulations, Aquinas interprets his comforting in two directions. First, it shows that their tribulations are part of a divine plan aiming at salvation: “God ordained that you shall enter into heaven through tribulations.”³⁵ Second, it entails predictions concerning the future because anticipated difficulties are less harmful. Paul has already predicted that Thessalonians will undergo tribulations: “for even when we were with you, we foretold you that we should suffer tribulations.” (I *Thessalonians*, 3:4) The advice of Paul is to treat prophecies with discernment: “Do not despise prophecies but prove all things: hold fast that which is good. From all appearance of evil, refrain yourselves” (I *Thessalonians*, 5:20). Prophecy is, for Aquinas, a divine gift that one must exercise if one has it or follow if one hears it from somebody else. However, in the latter case, we need prudence, as we should carefully discern between good and evil. Aquinas includes here a reference to *Romans*, where Paul calls this kind of discernment “reasonable service:”

Then when he says, **but prove all things**, he shows how they ought to behave towards everything; and one piece of advice is that they should make use of discretion in all matters. *Your reasonable service* (Rom 12:1). In this matter there should be a careful examination of the election of the good, and the rejection of the evil.³⁶

At the same time, although he supports prophecies, Aquinas explains why human beings cannot know when the end of time will arrive. We can foreknow something either through natural knowledge or by revelation. In the first case, we foreknow future things through knowledge of natural causes. By knowing the cause, we can foreknow its effect. However, the world’s end will come by no created cause but exclusively through a divine action. This is because heavenly motion, unlike the motion of elementary material substance, has its active source outside of itself, namely a separate substance: “But a heavenly body by its movement does not arrive at a place toward which it inclines by its nature, since any place is the starting point and end of its motion.”³⁷ Furthermore, God moves the heavens as an instrument. Thus the end of the heavenly motion is something outside of itself, not the perfection of itself. The natural thing nobler than the heavenly body is the rational soul. It follows that the heavenly motion is not for its sake but for the sake of filling up the fixed multiplicity of rational souls. Once this number obtains, the heavenly motion will cease. In conclusion, only God can know when the end of the world will come because He causes the heavenly bodies to move, and He decides the number of rational souls – in particular of the elect.

In the second case, although he grants the possibility of knowing the “When” of the apocalypse through revelation, Aquinas thinks it does not fit humans to receive such revelation. First, since the world will end when the number of the elect is complete, this moment is only known by the one who fulfills the divine predestination of humans, namely Jesus Christ. Second, we should distinguish between the temporal expectation of the first coming and that of the second coming of Christ. At His first coming, Christ came secretly. Thus, believers needed to know beforehand the time of His arrival so that they could recognize Him. In contrast, at the second coming, He will come openly so that there will be no error in recognizing Him.

Aquinas admits that there are several indications about the end of the world in the Bible, but he denies that they point to a precise moment. For instance, the syntagms “last days” and “last hour” that appear in the Scripture indicate only the last state of the world, but they do not offer a temporal datum. Indeed, we are now in the last state of the world regarding the progressive succession of laws. Following the Old Law stage, the New Law stage began at Jesus’ Incarnation and will last until the end of the world. There will be no other law because no stage of the present life can be more perfect than the New Law stage. The New Law pertains to Jesus the Redeemer, by whom we will all be saved.³⁸ However, although we know that the New Law is the last stage, and we live in it, we do not know precisely when this stage will end.

³⁵ Ibid., 173.

³⁶ Ibid., 199.

³⁷ Aquinas, *The Power of God*, 144.

³⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1107.

Moreover, the signs that indicate that the world will end do not manifest the fixed time of the moment. Intense calamities will precede the second coming, but it is difficult to decide how many of them and what intensity will point to the precise moment. Even in the early Church, the number and amplitude of calamities were extremely high, making some believe that the end of the world was near. Thus, the measure of signs indicating the final moment is not revealed to us: “But it cannot be manifest to us what is the measure of these signs about the end of the world.”³⁹

Finally, and most relevant to our discussion, Aquinas shows that it does not fit humans to foreknow the final moment by revelation because that would negatively affect their waiting. First, the belief that the day of the Lord is at hand can encourage deception. It allows liars to claim that they are Christ. It also makes men vulnerable to demons who pretend to be Christ.

Second, the temporal stretching of the expectation can harm the authenticity of faith. If we believe that Christ will come later, we can fall prey to self-indulgence. Therefore, the expectation should have a certain sense of urgency so that Christians do not linger too much on worldly affairs and prepare for the end. In this sense, Aquinas quotes *1 Corinthians* 7:31: “Let those who enjoy this world be as if they do not enjoy it, since the form of this world is passing away.” At the same time, if we believe that Christ will come quickly, we can fall into despair. As time passes by and nothing happens, people might doubt the Scripture. This second belief in the imminent arrival is for Aquinas the most dangerous: “But of two who say they know, the statement of the one who says that Christ will come shortly, or that the end of the world is imminent, is more dangerous since this can be an occasion to lose all hope that it will come if it will not occur at the time when it is predicted to happen.”⁴⁰ Aquinas’ concerns about the authenticity of faith match Heidegger’s concerns. In his description of the inauthentic waiting for the end of the world, we can recognize, I believe, the harmful attitudes frequent in the current pandemic, ranging from self-assured negligence to destructive panic. The way Thessalonians cope with their tribulations and the comfort that Saint Paul gives them, to encourage them to persist in their enduring faith, oppose these attitudes.

In his commentaries on *Thessalonians*, Aquinas associates the growth in faith of Saint Paul and the Thessalonians with the expectation of the *parousia*, whose day is and must remain uncertain. Like Heidegger, Aquinas highlights Paul and the Thessalonians’ tribulations, which make their endurance in faith even more remarkable. For him, too, Paul and the Thessalonians are a model for how to wait for the end of the world. Like Heidegger’s phenomenological description, Aquinas shows that the Thessalonians enact the *kerygma*. Their strength of faith, their joy in the Holy Spirit, and their resilience through tribulations are intimations of the world’s renewal, expected with anxiety and hope. Their preparation for the end of the world starts with awareness of uncertainty and amounts to perseverance in work. For Aquinas, even more than for Heidegger, the core of Paul’s letters is the Thessalonians’ state of grace. While Heidegger insists on the anguish of life,⁴¹ Aquinas focuses on the virtues and gifts of the Thessalonians, which are signs of their divine election. His commentary highlights their blessed life as a mirror of the coming, new life. This approach attests to the crucial role of beatitude, virtues, and gifts in Aquinas’ eschatology.⁴² Beatitude is the fulfillment of the human desire to be united with God. Humans can only attain the vision of God in the afterlife, but their faith, work, and virtue grow from a relationship with Christ in this earthly life. The eschatological calculation bypasses this relationship. Those placing the end at hand are either looking for a quick fix or cheering for the annihilation of evil humanity. Neither version is the right way of waiting for the end of the world. The door into the afterlife is a relationship with Christ, who already came once and sacrificed Himself for humanity’s redemption. “I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.” (*John*, 10: 9–10)

³⁹ Aquinas, *The Power of God*, 150.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ See Wolfe, *Heidegger’s Eschatology*, 65. Wolfe claims that Heidegger misidentifies Paul’s basic eschatological mood, which is not affliction but hope.

⁴² See Levering, *Aquinas’ Eschatological Ethics and the Virtue of Temperance*; Lamb, “The Eschatology of St. Thomas Aquinas,” 225.

Aquinas evaluates the proofs that the Thessalonians are elected by God against the backdrop of Paul's preaching of the *kerygma*. Both issues are related, as the contents of Paul's preaching emerge in their enactment in the life of Paul and the Thessalonians. Aquinas analyzes two types of proof: the evidence in preaching and the evidence in faith.⁴³ As in Heidegger, these proofs pertain not to a deductive demonstration but a demonstration of spirit and power. They are indications and signs.

Paul's preaching relies on his relationship with the Thessalonians,⁴⁴ which is grounded in faith. For this reason, Aquinas stresses that the success of Paul's preaching is proof that the Thessalonians are elected. He explains Paul's claims speaking in his voice: "And I know this because God granted me abundant evidence of this in preaching, that is, that those to whom I preach are chosen by God. For God gives them the grace to listen profitably to the word preached to them; or else, God gives me the grace to preach rewardingly to them."⁴⁵ Paul's faith and virtue practiced while he lived among the Thessalonians represent the enactment of his message. This faithful and virtuous preaching is all the more significant as it persevered against the suffering and shame that afflicted Paul before he met the Thessalonians: "But having suffered many things before and having been shamefully treated, (as you know) at Philippi, we had confidence in our God, to speak unto you the Gospel of God in much carefulness." (*I Thessalonians* 2:2). The term "carefulness" signals for Aquinas the doctrinal soundness of Paul's preaching. This soundness is not tainted by errors or deceit. Indeed, Paul's preaching does not bring any pleasant promises nor any flattery. It does not pursue his glory or personal favors, as was the case with those who preached heretically to the Thessalonians. On the contrary, Paul acknowledges that he might have been burdensome and became little, that is, humble.

The second evidence for the election of the Thessalonians regards their authentic faith. Just like Paul, the Thessalonians were virtuous and faithful despite tribulations. Their misfortune did not preclude them from receiving the joy of the Holy Spirit. This blend of suffering and joy, also highlighted by Heidegger, is vital for the eschatological experience. The Thessalonians follow Paul's life testimony by imitating him. However, as Aquinas points out, they did not imitate him in his human failings, but in his fellowship of Christ: "And you became followers of us and of the Lord." (*I Thessalonians* 1:6) Aquinas associates this passage with another passage from Paul's first letter to Corinthians: "be imitators of me as I also am of Christ." (*I Corinthians* 4:16) Faith, labor, charity, and hope are the pillars of this experience, which becomes exemplary to all believers. Those from Macedonia and Achaia have imitated the Thessalonians, and their faith has gone forth well beyond their neighbors' confines.

Aquinas warns though that the exemplary life of the Thessalonians is not a finished task: "Paul remarks: although you are good, nevertheless you shall grow markedly and improve through the repeated practice of the precepts and counsels. /.../ For charity is so encompassing that there will always be something left through which one might improve himself."⁴⁶ In this sense, Aquinas explains the temporality of the Christian life in terms of the overflowing character of spiritual goods. Such goods have an abundance that calls for progress in virtue, not because every step is imperfect, but because spiritual fullness is never exhausted in a given state:

Why? Because spiritual goods grow exceedingly. For such goods are not safely guarded unless a man progresses in them. Now among these gifts of God the first is faith, through which God dwells in us, and our progress in faith is in connection with the understanding. /.../ And so a man progresses through knowledge, devotion, and adherence. The second is charity, through which God is present in us by his effect. /.../ And for this reason he says, and the charity of every one of you towards each other abounds.⁴⁷

⁴³ Aquinas, "Commentary on the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians," 154.

⁴⁴ Matthew Levering notes that in Aquinas the historical character of eschatology attaches to its communitarian dimension. See Levering, *Jesus and the Demise of Death*, 35.

⁴⁵ Aquinas, "Commentary on the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians," 154.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁴⁷ Aquinas, "Commentary on the Second Letter of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians," 208.

The progress in the faith of the Thessalonians requires patience and perseverance. However, some fall prey to the misunderstanding of the *kerygma*. Aquinas thinks that this misunderstanding also comes from Paul's use of the expression "we who are alive" in the first letter, which gives the impression that Paul and the Thessalonians will be alive at the second coming, and thus that *parousia* will happen during their lifetime: "For this we say unto you in the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who remain unto the coming of the Lord, shall not prevent those who have slept." (*I Thessalonians*, 4:15) Aquinas shows that the expression does not mean Paul and his contemporaries but means whoever will be alive at the second coming.⁴⁸ By that, Paul assures the Thessalonians that the dead will not have a delayed or a "lesser" resurrection than those who will be alive at the second coming: "But he is not talking at present about himself and his contemporaries, but about those who shall be found alive in the time of Christ's coming. We who remain, that is, those who shall be left after the persecution of the Antichrist, shall not prevent those, that is, those who are living shall not receive their consolation first."⁴⁹ Aquinas also combats the idea that those who will be alive at the second coming will remain alive. They will, on the contrary, first die and then resurrect. Because the time between their death and their resurrection will be very short, they are regarded as living.⁵⁰ Besides, they will resurrect at the same time as the ones who died before: "For when the Lord does come, first those who are found alive will die and then, immediately together with those who have died before, they will rise up and be taken up into the clouds to meet Christ, as Paul says."⁵¹

Aquinas makes efforts, even more than Heidegger, to show that we cannot know the moment of the end. This uncertainty comes from the difference between divine and human knowledge but also the experiential nature of the eschatological expectation. The human calculation of the final moment results in inauthentic attitudes toward the *parousia*, which impede the believer from facing her suffering and faithfully working and worshipping God. This lesson holds also in our current pandemic. Those who thought how the pandemic fares in apocalyptic calculation remained trapped in negligence or panic. They either failed to take it seriously (the end is always later, it cannot be now) or panicked to the point of self-destruction (the end is here). The right attitude, described, as we have seen, also by N.T. Wright in his recent *God and the Pandemic*, is to reckon with one's tribulations and still live the present moment with labor and hope.

3 Conclusion

The last moment's uncertainty qualifies the authentic waiting for the second coming of Christ against the inauthentic expectation of calculative reasoning. Indeed, Aquinas' and Heidegger's most significant concern in reading *Thessalonians* seems to be not so much the lack of faith, but rather the authenticity of faith. As we have seen, this authenticity is opposed to false security or destructive panic. It entails sobriety, work, and virtuous actions while reckoning with suffering. Instead of relying on a precise date, the Christian must always be ready through a personal relationship with Christ. Aquinas and Heidegger offer, hence, an existential view on eschatology, in which the earthly human existence participates in the future life to come and has, so to speak, a foretaste of it. In light of this view, the extreme attitudes playing out during the current pandemic (underestimation or panic) seem to rest on deficient eschatological expectations.

Waiting for the end of the world engages a mode of rationality different from calculative reasoning. The rationality required for the authentic expectation is lucidity shaped by apocalyptic anguish and salvation's joy. Therefore, dealing reasonably with a crisis means taking it seriously but at the same time keeping the

⁴⁸ Eleonore Stump remarks that Aquinas is not interested in adopting philological and historically critical tools in interpreting the Bible and focuses on developing insights and arguments of philosophers and theologians. See Stump, "Biblical Commentary and Philosophy," 256. In this case, although he thoroughly comments the Biblical text line by line, Aquinas works on an eschatology that reflects the Christian life and Church doctrine.

⁴⁹ Aquinas, "Commentary on the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians," 185.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 187.

⁵¹ Ibid., 188.

promise of salvation in mind. In the current pandemic, we need to find a sober middle way between “It is just the flu” and panic. We are called, here and now, to reasonable service, a term Aquinas borrowed from Paul. Enduring through the pain of the pandemic, we must continue working and leave the certitude of the end to the One who redeems us.

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