



## THE BOOK OF REVELATION - COMMENTARY

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### REVELATION—OVERVIEW

Revelation is probably the most misunderstood book in the New Testament. Some fear to read it at all. Others have made it into a nightmarish prediction of the immediate future.

This study of Revelation is meant to show the book for what it really is: a message of hope for Christians who live in difficult times. The good news is that Jesus is Lord, even in an age when the world seems to have lost its mind.

### THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE BOOK OF REVELATION

We need to remember that 90% of what is described in Revelation has already taken place! Only the final coming of Jesus is still in the future. The author of Revelation is writing about the events of his own time. His community is persecuted; his faith in Jesus is a death-warrant. He has to be careful not to stir up more hatred from his enemies. He writes in veiled language to hide his denunciation of his society but share the insight with those who "know".

Here is the story behind Revelation. The place is Asia Minor (modern Turkey). The time is about A.D. 95. The situation is a severe persecution of Christians by the Roman Emperor Domitian. For some years, since the death of Emperor Nero (A.D. 67) the Christians had been tolerated and Christian communities had established themselves in several large cities.

Domitian, continuing the recent custom of Roman emperors, declares himself divine. This imperial "religion" is being promoted in the province of Asia Minor. Statues and temples dedicated to the emperor are set up, and a liturgical cult is developed. Christians balk at this, and will not submit to Domitian's blasphemous demand.

Nero had hated Christians for social and economic reasons. They were simply a burden on his aristocratic society, and a pain to his egomania. Nero needed a reason to deflect unpopularity away from himself and the Christians were an easy scapegoat. Nero's burning of the slums of Rome for his urban renewal Projects was blamed on the Christians.

Domitian has a new excuse. Christians are to be hated not because they are poor, but because they are atheists! Their lack of faith (in himself) undermines all of society. They are his personal enemies and the enemies of all that Rome stands for.

The more the Christians resist, the more Domitian insists. Legal pressure becomes economic sanction. Christian merchants are forbidden to buy or sell without a license bearing the imperial seal; this seal cannot be had unless an oath of allegiance to the Emperor is taken, which in turn demands recognition of his divinity.

Revelation's author sees what is happening, and is concerned that his Christian brothers and sisters may break under the pressure. He remembers the time of Nero, and believes that Domitian is simply a "Nero come-back-to-life", an incarnation of the demonic antichrist. But, just as Nero was crushed by his own evil, so Domitian, a mortal, cannot long withstand the power of God. The author envisions clashes of increasing severity between the Empire and the Church, but he is convinced that the Church will prevail.

#### **WHY READ REVELATION IF IT IS ABOUT THE PAST?**

Like all of the Bible, Revelation is written in and for its own time, but its message is an enduring one. It continues to speak to us in our own time.

How often have we felt "all alone" in our attempt to live our faith in Jesus Christ? Do we ever wonder why we seem so "out of it", like aliens or foreigners, in today's world? In our nation, we practice a form of capitalistic economy; we take an aggressive military stance; abortion, capital punishment, sterilization, contraception are legal (and sometimes even popular); pornography is tolerated; drug abuse is widespread and, in the case of alcohol, legal; crime is common and poverty is on the increase in the wealthiest nation on earth. The Catholic Church speaks out on each of these issues, challenging us to examine our way of life in the light of the Gospel. The more we try to live as Christ and his Church teach us, the more we find ourselves out of the mainstream of American culture.

How often have we been misunderstood, perhaps thought odd or even ridiculed, because we have tried to grow spiritually.

Have we ever thought that it is not worth it or wonder about our motives when we try to bring our life into harmony with God's word? After all, others seem to blend their religion and their lives so easily; why should we become so serious about it? Wouldn't it be great just to go to church and say a prayer and be happy? Who needs the struggles and the sacrifices? Again, we may feel alone, out of touch.

Revelation speaks to this. Revelation is a message of hope. Endurance will bring us greater happiness and hope will not disappoint us. Though all the world forget God or rebel against God, our faithfulness will become joy. And we can take some comfort in knowing that many others, in other times and places, have taken up the challenge of the Gospel.

They too have suffered and might have given up; they remained faithful and today they are our heroes, our saints. There is good reason to resist "the world", to fight evil, to struggle in the spirit: God is Lord, and has chosen us to be his people. Revelation reminds us of our dignity and refreshes us in our weakness as it describes the glory which awaits us.

And, like all of the Scriptures, Revelation is a "church book". (By church is meant a community of believers, not the building where worship services are held.) Its message is community-centered. It gives hope to little Christian communities as they struggle together in the midst of overwhelming difficulties. Revelation is less of a message for the individual, and more oriented toward the church, so that we may better understand our place in the world, our mission, and our future glory as the people of God, the new Israel, and the communion of the saints.

## OVERVIEW

An historical background has already been given. Most scholars accept that Revelation was written about A.D. 90-95. At this point, it is appropriate to consider the authorship of Revelation and its main themes.

The book is formally entitled, The Revelation to John. Who is John? The most ancient tradition claims that John is the Apostle and Evangelist John, who also gave us the Gospel and three Epistles. His references to Christ as the Lamb and as the Word of God, and his use of water as a symbol of life, are similar in the Gospel and in Revelation.

John is also traditionally known as the "disciple whom Jesus loved" [John 13:23], to whom Jesus entrusted His mother, Mary [John 19:26], and who was a witness to the empty tomb [John 20:2 and 21:7]. This unnamed disciple seems also to be the "disciple known to the high priest" [John 18:15] who was nearby during the trial of Jesus. This last reference has been used to suggest that John was of the priestly tribe. This would also explain his knowledge of the Temple liturgy and of the festal calendar [John 5:1, 7:37, 10:22, 19:14] as well as the liturgical emphasis in Revelation.

John has become a legendary person as well: John 21:23 hints that John died at an old age, rather than as a martyr, even though several attempts were made on his life. According to Tertullian, John was thrown into a cauldron of boiling oil, but was miraculously preserved. Another story tells of John being offered a cup of poisoned wine, which he blessed and then drank without harm. There is an old custom of blessing wine on his feast day, and John is sometimes shown in art holding a goblet, with a serpent or dragon in it.

Yet there are great differences in language and style between the Gospel of John and Revelation: the Gospel is written in simple and correct Greek; Revelation's author was not so precise in his grammar.

What seems to be sure, in any case, is that Revelation was inspired by the apostle, and shares in the authentic apostolic tradition. In other words, even if Revelation was not handwritten by John the Apostle, it carries John's authority.

If you have ever wondered what a book like Revelation is doing in the New Testament, you are in good company. The tradition of John the Apostle's authorship was not universally convincing. The Churches of the Western Roman Empire (central and western Europe, and northern Africa) accepted Revelation as authentic at an early date, but the Churches of the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean world did not.

Some of these eastern communities were caught in a dispute over the interpretation of Rev. 20:1-6 (the 1000-year earthly reign of Christ); others did not accept the claim that Revelation was written by John the Apostle. Their solution was simply to ignore the book. Some old Greek manuscripts of the Bible, even as late as the 9th century A.D., do not include Revelation.

Under the influence of St. Athanasius (293-373), one of the bishops at the Council of Nicaea (325), Revelation was gradually accepted by all the Churches. But the ancient prejudice still exists in the liturgical use of the book: the Roman Catholic Church uses Revelation extensively in its liturgical readings, particularly during the Easter Season, whereas the Eastern Orthodox Churches do not read from Revelation at all.

The message is about the purpose of human history. Revelation will often refer to God as the One *who was and is and is to come*. God is the Lord of History; God knows the deeper significance of every event. We experience time as past, present, and future. For God, everything is present, everything is now. Even the unraveling of the world as we know it is part of God's Great Plan ("the mystery", Ephesians 1:9).

Revelation describes history as a great struggle between God, the Lord and Creator, and the human and angelic powers in rebellion against God. These forces of pride and evil will be overcome. The plan of God will not be frustrated, even though it may be delayed.

The book is in two major parts, it's an introduction and a conclusion.

The first major part of Revelation, chapters 2 and 3, is a series of letters to the churches (Christian communities) of Asia (Asia Minor, now called Turkey).

The second part, chapters 4 through 22:5, is best understood as a series of three preludes, followed by the great events of the destruction of the corrupted, rebellious world and the coming of the new creation. Each prelude is made up of seven events or signs (seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls); and with each sign the anticipation grows. Yet each series ends with a disappointment: the final end has not arrived.

Only the last series brings us close to the end, and even this is not entirely complete until the last battle and the triumph of the risen Christ.

This overview has been simplified. Revelation is not a direct narrative. There are interruptions and complications. Later lessons will unravel and untangle these. This kind of disorder is typical of apocalyptic writing. It is also typical of human life and history, which does not proceed straight forward but tends to flow forward and backward, up and down, repeating and cycling. Here, too, Revelation clearly shows that God is Lord of all our beginnings and our endings, our progressions and our confusions.

## **REVELATION—INTRODUCTION**

A few things about Revelation need to be grasped from the beginning.

1. Revelation is symbolic. Twentieth-century American Catholics seem to have developed an allergy to symbolism. For many of us, what is symbolic is unreal. We want the symbols "explained." Look at what has happened to our Liturgy in the last generation. We talk and explain and comment and define. We won't let the symbols "speak for themselves."

Symbolism is a kind of language because it is a medium of communication. It does not address the intellectual and sensory powers of the human person, but the intuitive and spiritual side. Symbolism works with the "right brain" (imagination) rather than the "left brain" (logic). Symbolism allows the God-given power of imagination to flourish. The restrictions of logic do not apply. There are no exact equivalents nor precise definitions. Each image operates on many levels at once. For example, think of fire. A whole array of connections appear: heat, light, danger, safety, a ruined home, an intimate evening at the fireplace, the family campout, etc. So what "fire" means may be different at different times, according to our experiences of it. And, it may mean all of them at once. It is important that we not get "hung up" on one particular word or phrase, looking for its "meaning" in the sense of definition. It is also important not to analyze a symbol, so as to destroy its spiritual communicating power.

Revelation uses imagery and language that doesn't "make sense." It is useless to try to draw up definitions or to picture clearly what is happening. The author is trying to put into words what cannot be put into words: an experience of God's presence, an awareness of God's action in our history.

The Risen Jesus has overcome evil and death for all time and for all people, and we are invited to share in this victory. The richness of this experience is best expressed in symbols.

Symbols invite us to contemplation. We are to be caught up in them, in their many, many layers of meaning, so that God can speak to us in a deeper way. Symbols communicate what is most real. Symbols are God's "language."

Revelation draws its imagery from the Old Testament and other apocalyptic literature. Of its 404 verses, 278 contain at least one reference to the Old Testament. Some of the symbolism opens itself to us because of our familiarity with the Bible. The words of the prophets and their rich imagery come back to us.

To appreciate other symbols, we need to remember that the original readers were first-century A.D. people, living in the Mediterranean world. What moved these people to awe, joy, or fear? What were their miracles, their tragedies? We may have to recover a bit of our innocence, and remember a time before fax machines, space shuttles, AIDS, and Holocausts.

Here is an example: One very strong image in Revelation is that of *light*. In several places, the Divine presence is represented by light-symbols, and in some cases, several symbols are combined or placed together to intensify the impression.

Light is represented by the sun, fire, stars, jewels, crystal, glass, rainbow, torches, eyes, gold, polished bronze, white, lightning, etc. All these are ways to speak of the presence of God. While some of these images may not be the way we would describe the presence of God, these images were significant for the first readers of Revelation. And, again, they are not to be taken literally.

Revelation uses all kinds of things as symbols. Certain numbers carry meanings: *seven* indicates perfection; *twelve* is completeness. *Four* is for the visible world. *Six*, one less than seven, is imperfection, and therefore connotes evil. *Thousand* expresses infinity. Numbers are also added, multiplied or divided. Examples of this are *three-and-a-half* (half of seven), or *ten* (seven plus three), suggesting various lengths of time or periods of human history.

In Hebrew, letters are also used as numerals, and so words or names are given a numerical value. For example, the Hebrew word for life, *chai* is spelled with the same letters as are used to represent the number eighteen. Some modern Jews consider it appropriate to give a gift of "eighteen" on the occasion of a birthday or wedding, to express a wish for a long and happy life. Revelation will occasionally use numbers to represent names.

There are *colors*: white for victory, black for death. There are parts of human or animal bodies: the horn for strength, the head for authority, the eye for wisdom, the wing for speed, mobility, or power. Religious symbols occur as well, borrowed from Judaism: the altar, the sacrificial lamb, the incense. There is the Temple, the Ark of the Covenant, Jerusalem - transformed and perfected - the sacred places where God is.

There are evil places as well, notably Babylon, the enemy of Israel (Psalm 137) and home of the ancient tower of Babel, the symbol of mankind's attempt at godhead (Genesis 11:1-9). Cities, especially Jerusalem and Babylon, are sometimes personified, that is, represented by a woman.

We should try not to ask “do these things really look like this?” Let the complex of images just make an impression. Again, they are not to be taken in a strict literal sense.

2. Revelation is *apocalyptic*. (Older editions of the Bible named this book “The Apocalypse.”) *Apocalypse* is a Greek word for revelation, uncovering, disclosing. (Don't confuse apocalypse with *apocrypha*. *Apocrypha* means "what is hidden away," "secret.") Apocalypse tries to uncover or to expose. There is much apocalyptic writing in the Bible: Daniel, Zechariah, Ezekiel, and a few passages in Isaiah, to name a few. There are apocalyptic chapters in the Gospels, too. These writings try to uncover or to reveal God's plan for the world. They try to help people have a sense of direction or meaning. "What is this world coming to?" is a question that apocalypse tries to answer. Apocalyptic writing flourishes during times of intense persecution. The authors describe in great detail the suffering of their people, and expect a world-ending catastrophe to put an end to the oppression and to inaugurate the reign of God. To describe the final destruction, they use examples of common natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, plagues) or call to mind fierce battles or feared enemies.

3. Revelation is *eschatological*. This word is from the Greek *eschaton* which means “the horizon” or "the end.” Revelation looks to the limits or boundaries of human life, and beyond them. It is not so much about the “end of the world” as it is about "a new heaven and a new earth.” Since no one knows the future, the author uses symbol and allegory to construct a future history.

To imagine what "the end” would be like, the author takes a creation story (e.g. Genesis 1) and reverses it: the sun is darkened, the earth is swallowed by the sea, the dome of heaven comes crashing down. Nevertheless, the unraveling of this creation is merely the prelude. A whole new world is coming to birth, and a new, divine life is made available to God's people. Revelation is not meant to scare us to death but to inspire us to conversion, so that we may live a new life in Christ.

As we read Revelation, we can gratefully recall that in Baptism, we have already passed over the boundary. In us, the end is now and the future creation is now. Theologians call this "realized eschatology:” what others only hope for or search for, we already have.

4. Revelation is *liturgical*. There has been a mutual borrowing between the Bible and the Liturgy. Revelation uses liturgical language and image to describe the experience of God. And, the Liturgy has often put into practice what is written in Revelation.

Think of a solemn celebration of the Roman Catholic Mass: singing and acclamations, professions, a large gathering of people, priests and ministers in white vestments, candles, incense, festive colors, gleaming vessels, triumphal music. Revelation shows us the same scenes, but in heaven. Revelation used the Jewish Temple liturgy as a way to describe heaven; Christian liturgy in turn borrowed the images of Revelation. In the Eucharist, Christ, the Beginning and the End of all, is present. Heaven comes to earth and the Lamb is wed to his Bride each time the Liturgy is celebrated.

These four basic notions will keep us on the track, and enable us to enjoy reading and praying the Book of Revelation.

This commentary refers to verses in various books of the Bible for comparison or further explanation. These references are enclosed in brackets ( ); where no book is named, the chapter and verses are from Revelation.



## LESSON 1 - REVELATION 1:1-20

### Revelation 1:1-3

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants...

These first verses are a solemn introduction to the book, and establish its authority and purpose. It is a message from God, given to Jesus, and then to God's people, His servants, by means of angels (the heavenly messengers) and John (the human messenger). All important messages are transmitted in this way, until the coming of Jesus, who is the Word of God Himself (Galatians 3:19b, Hebrews 1:1-2).

God wants us to know *what must soon take place*. All of Scripture is rooted in the real life of God's people; it speaks to the present moment, about people's real concerns. John looks at the world he lives in and realizes that history is fast approaching a critical moment. Humans have challenged the authority of God long enough. God is about to take on the world and make it clear who is in charge here. God will establish His kingdom (authority) here. Since humans are unwilling to yield to God, a struggle, warfare is inevitable. Much of the Bible, especially the prophetic books, speak of what God is about to do so that God's people are ready for the struggle and the gift of the kingdom.

This critical moment, this arrival of the kingdom, this establishment of God's authority is often referred to as "The Day of the Lord" or simply "The Day."

A blessing is pronounced on those *who read aloud* and *those who hear, and who keep the words*. What is meant by blessed here? This is not the "blessed" as in "blessed be God" or "blessed be the Lord" (in Hebrew, *baruch*; in Greek, *eulogetos*). This is the word for fortunate, happy, or praiseworthy (in Hebrew, *ashre*; in Greek, *makarios* (Psalms 1:1, 32:1, 106:3; Matthew 5:3-11, Luke 6:20-22 and 11:27-28).

A hint is here of the liturgical proclamation of the Word of God. What is spoken by God is not to be hidden, but announced to all; even so, only those who belong to God will comprehend it. True wisdom and purity of heart are necessary (Matthew 5:3-11, Luke 11:28). The reader is urged to pay attention to the message, because *the time* (another way of saying "the day") God's moment of intervention, *is near*.

### Revelation 1:4-7

John introduces us to God and to Jesus, who are the true authors of the message: God is the Lord of all time; all spiritual and universal powers serve Him (*seven spirits who are before his throne*).

Jesus is God's *faithful witness*: Jesus can be trusted to hand on the message of God.

We have taken the Greek word for witness, *martyr*, into our language; we usually understand this to mean “one who dies for a religion or cause;” its actual meaning is “one who testifies.” If suffering or death is a result of speaking the truth, the “*faithful witness*” accepts this.

And Jesus did indeed die for His testifying; but he is also the *first-born of the dead*. Hence, "death," "the dead" is personified. Jesus is the first person to come to life from death. Death was not a finality for Him, but a womb, a place from which to enter a new life.

The *first-born* is the privileged one and is at the head of the family. What God has done for Jesus in the resurrection is unique. But God is so generous that he grants this to us as well. Resurrection is also our heritage. Jesus is the *first-born* of many brothers and sisters (Romans 8:29). The Letter to the Hebrews (12:23) refers to the entire community of the redeemed as the *assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven*. All Christians will share in the privileges of the first-born Jesus.

When the Bible speaks of the coming of the Kingdom of God, the image of childbirth is sometimes used. This is especially true when the child to be born is a person of importance, or whose birth has been long awaited. The pain of labor and delivery represents the painful struggle of the coming of the Kingdom; the joy of the arrival of the newborn child is symbolic of the fulfillment of the divine promise. The coming of the Kingdom, The Day, is so momentous, that even Death "gives birth;" the power that no man could ever conquer yields to God, and Jesus is "born" from the world of the dead. Jesus' resurrection is the clear sign that the Day is here.

As Truth and Life, Jesus is Lord over all powers and authorities.

Jesus gives to His faithful ones His own dignity: in Jesus we are kings and priests. These two classes of people were the sacred persons of their time.

*Behold, he is coming with the clouds* (Daniel 7:13-14, Acts 1:9-11, Psalm 68:4). We who are familiar with air and space travel take it for granted; ancient people gave their chief god the incredible attribute of being able to ride on clouds, thus showing his mastery over the whole of creation. So Jesus is seen as Lord. His authority is not only over those who choose to believe in Him; His authority is over all, even those *who pierced him*. While the historical crucifixion of Jesus was done by a very few, all those who persecute the Church are equally guilty. (Acts 9:1-5). Since all are now ashamed of their hostility toward God and God's Anointed One, *all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him*.

And just to be sure, John translates the word *Amen* for us: *even so*, or “yes, indeed.”

## Revelation 1:8-11

*I am the Alpha and the Omega*, which are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. We would say that God is everything from A to Z. God is and *was* and *is to come*, for God is in charge of history. This expression will occur again and again because Revelation understands God as being revealed in our history, just as other writers see God in the natural world.

John introduces himself as the visionary but wants us to be assured that his message is firmly rooted in real life. He calls himself *brother*, and he has a *share with you in Jesus*; he knows well what we experience, because he is living through it as well. Notice again the merging of past, present and future: we share the *tribulation* of the current age, as well as the future *kingdom* now; our *patient endurance* results from the hard training of discipleship (Romans 5:2-5).

*Patmos*, a small island about 50 miles southwest of Ephesus, was used by the Romans as a penal colony. John has been deported there for being a Christian proselytizer. Isolated from his community, John finds himself *in the Spirit on the Lord's Day*; unable to worship with his brother and sister Christians on a Sunday, the usual day for assembling, John is with them in spirit. On such an occasion, John feels more acutely the pain of separation, and is more likely to be open to a mystical experience.

The Lord's Day is popularly thought of as the Sabbath. The Sabbath is the seventh day, Saturday; it symbolizes the Sinai covenant. The Lord's Day is the first day of the week, Sunday; it symbolizes the creation of light and the resurrection of Jesus. Justin the Martyr (ca. A.D. 150) reports that Christians gathered on this first day of the week for reading the Scriptures, instruction, prayer, and the Eucharistic meal. Since Christians at the time of John were no longer welcome in the synagogue for the Sabbath observance, it seems that they met among themselves, in homes or in deserted places, late on Saturday night or before sunrise on Sunday.

John hears a *loud voice like a trumpet*. Revelation is full of such "hearing" and "seeing" of heavenly realities. Since no human language can adequately describe these realities, images and metaphors are used, many of which are borrowed from the Scriptures. The trumpet, a signal for battle and an announcement of significant days, is the image used when God appears to Moses on Sinai (Exodus 19:16) and for the prophetic announcements of "the day of the Lord" (Joel 2:1, I Corinthians 15:52, I Thessalonians 4:16).

## Revelation 1:12-14

The Temple of Solomon was furnished with an elaborate oil lamp of seven branches, to be refilled and lighted by the priest every evening and allowed to burn through the night, thus acknowledging the dwelling of God within the veiled Holy of Holies.

(The continually burning light is still used in Jewish synagogues in front of the ark or cabinet in which the Torah scrolls are kept, and in Catholic churches to indicate the presence of Christ in the Eucharist.) Such a display of light, together with the cloud of incense regularly offered there, recalled the luminous cloud (*Shekinah*) which signified God's presence among the people during their sojourn in the desert and God's acceptance of the Temple as a permanent home (Exodus 13:21-22, I Kings 8:10-13, Ezekiel 43:5). Similarly, Christ appears among *seven golden lampstands*, a perfect blaze of glory.

The son of man is a human figure invested with divine authority in Daniel 7:13 and is Jesus' own title for Himself. (For a full explanation of this title, see *Inexhaustible Presence: the Mystery of Jesus* by J. Patrick Gaffney, SMM, pp. 89-96.)

He is *clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle*, that is, vested as a priest. The risen Lord, radiating divine light, is also described as having hair *white as white wool, white as snow*, and eyes of *flame*. This son of man is identified with God, the Ancient One, the All-Seeing One. Since human language falters before an experience of the divine, John can only describe this divine man with a complex of images.

#### **Revelation 1:15-16**

Used in ancient times for mirrors, *burnished bronze* is another image of light. Another portrayal of divinity is the voice which resembles the *sound of many waters*; it is the very Word of God (Psalm 29).

The *seven stars*, representing universal powers, are all in the hand of Christ: all power and authority is in his control. Stars and angels are interchangeable in biblical and mythological literature; sometimes angels are depicted as governing the star, sometimes the star is the visible appearance of the angelic power. Such angels are not the sweet-faced Christmas card angels, but the mighty Guardians of the universe. Near Eastern art portrays them as fearsome beings, resembling the most powerful of animals (lions, bulls, eagles) with the superior intelligence of humans. Yet they are subjects of Christ.

From Christ's mouth comes a *sharp two-edged sword*. In ancient times, swords were either broad, curved weapons for slashing, or narrow, pointed, two-edged weapons for direct attack. The shorter double blade of the Roman army was far superior to the broad sword or saber. The sword symbolizes authority, especially the authority to judge. In the same way, God's word is direct, powerful, and irrefutable. Those who hear it are immediately judged and their inmost thoughts are exposed (Luke 2:35).

#### **Revelation 1:17-20**

... *his right hand*, which is his authority to bless and to judge, is also His sign of acceptance and commissioning. To stand or sit at the right side of someone of importance indicates the highest honor, the greatest intimacy (Psalm 110, Song of Songs 8:3, Mark 10:37).

*Fear not*, which are the first words spoken whenever an angel or God appears, is a proper greeting, since the human reaction to such an apparition is mortal terror.

Christ, risen from the dead, is no longer under death's power, but death is under His control so He says *I have the keys of Death and Hades*, I have the authority to open and to close the gates or doors to the underworld, I can decide who will live and who will die. This is an important statement, since the Roman Emperor has claimed supreme authority for himself. In opposition, John declares Jesus, not Caesar, to be the Lord.

As the stars and planets are governed by spiritual beings, so the *angels of the seven churches* are the guardians of the struggling and persecuted Christian communities. As the Temple lamp manifested the presence of God, so the Christian church is the sign of the hidden majesty of God. Surrounding Christ, they reveal His glory to the world.

## LESSON 2 - REVELATION 2:1-20

### Revelation 2:1-4

The letters to the churches now begin. Each letter follows the same outline:

- 1) A message from Christ, recalling something of His appearance in the opening vision:  
*The words of him who ...* (holds the stars, has the sword, etc.);
- 2) A word of praise or encouragement;
- 3) A complaint or warning;
- 4) A blessing or a promise, usually phrased: *To him who conquers I will give ...*
- 5) The conclusion: *He, who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*

Each letter is addressed *To the angel of the church*, that is, to the presiding or guardian spirit of each community. We think of “guardian angels” for each individual; the ancients understood that cities, nations, planets and stars also had a spiritual overseer. (Paul sometimes recognizes that the controlling spirit of Earth is Satan, the usurper (Ephesians 2:2).)

The order of the letters reflects the geography of the area. Beginning with Ephesus, one can make a “circle tour” of all the cities.

*Ephesus*, one of the finest cities in the Empire, was the provincial capital of Asia Minor and the center of the cult of Artemis (Diana). It was also the commercial hub of the province. The church of Ephesus was founded and served by the apostle Paul for some three years (Acts 19-20).

An apostle is “one who has been sent,” an ambassador or envoy. The Christian apostle is sent by the authority of Christ, as his envoy, to carry the message with the authority of the One who sent him. Preachers who take this role without authorization are those *who call themselves apostles* but who do not continue faithfully the ministry of Christ. They are tested and fail. Their message is their own, and not God's.

The Ephesian church is well-established and strong, *bearing up for my name's sake*. Yet, as time goes on, the tendency to accept and tolerate the varieties of religions grows as well. Christ complains that *you have abandoned the love you had at first*, the initial fervor of a young community.

### Revelation 2:5-7

The most basic call of the Gospel is repeated here: *repent* (in Greek, *metanoeson* from *metanoeo*, to have a change of heart.) To follow Jesus faithfully involves a daily “change of heart;” a change of mind, placing God's will first.

We are aware of how deeply God loves us, and how provident is His plan, and so we gladly allow Him to have His way with us. Love is the most genuine motive for repentance. Without sincere repentance, Christ will *remove your lampstand from its place*, that is, disinherit the community that has lost their devotion. A church that no longer loves God has ceased to be a church.

*Nicolaitans*, a sect or group of which very little is known, seem to have twisted two basic Christian ideals: freedom, and temporal responsibility. Freedom from the Law of Moses became license for immorality; living "in the world," neighborliness and acceptance led to a tolerance for paganism and superstition. This sect resembles the Gnostics, (named from the Greek word *gnosis*, knowledge) who justified their behavior by claiming privileged knowledge, revealed to them by means of angels. The Gnostics became a major threat to orthodox Christianity, which upholds the truth that God has made himself known to all of us through the Son in the Holy Spirit. (Hebrews 1:2) No one can claim any superior knowledge of God, much less any esoteric privileges.

The *tree of life* is known to us from Genesis 3: humans were tempted by knowledge and ignored the wisdom of God expressed in His commandments. For this they were barred from the Tree of Life lest they arrogate immortality to themselves. But those who have heard and heeded the Word of God are granted free access to Life, Immortality.

#### **Revelation 2:8-11**

*Smyrna*, the number two city in the province, had a large Jewish community. The Christian minority, being mostly the poor (as seen in Christ's reference to *your poverty*) had to endure the hostility of these Jews as well as the Roman persecution. Though materially poor, they *are rich*: their faith in Christ is their real treasure.

It is important for us to realize that the Bible, especially the New Testament, has sometimes been twisted to serve anti-Semitic thought. Such interpretations are never justified; the Catholic Church holds that God is faithful to the People of the First Covenant and that by faith in Christ, we share in their privileges (Romans 11:1, 17-20). Keeping in mind that the Christians here are a minority, and persecuted, there is still a certain reverence for the Jewish faith. John has Christ speak about the persecutors as those *who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan*. This is not to say that Jews are evil, but rather that a Jew (or anyone) who does evil shows his or her true "religion" is an evildoer who has made a covenant with the Evil One.

Here, the Roman authority is bluntly called *the devil* who is *about to throw you into prison*. But this suffering is brief (*ten days*) compared to the eternal reward, *the crown of life*. One who has died for Christ is assured of the resurrection; whereas those who are unfaithful will endure both physical mortality and *a second death*; the spiritual torment of one who realizes that all hope of salvation is gone, now that God's invitation to life has been definitively refused.

## Revelation 2:12-14

The *sharp two-edged sword* was explained in the notes on 1:15-16.

*Pergamum* was the location of many pagan shrines and the cult of the Emperor was quite popular. This seems to be the reason why the city is called the place *where Satan's throne is*.

The names of *Balaam* and *Balak* are found in Numbers 22-24. Balam was a Moabite prince who hired the prophet Balaam to pronounce a curse upon the people of Israel as they approached Moab on their way from Egypt to the promised Land. The story is both humorous and profound. The prince is frustrated because no amount of money or sacrificing can bring anything out of the prophet's mouth but a blessing. The blessings themselves are magnificent messianic prophecies still read in our Church during the Advent season. Numbers 31, however, tells of a Balaam who, through the influence of the Midianite women, led Israel to reject the LORD. This may be the Balaam remembered by the early Churches; 2 Peter and Jude condemn those who, "like Balaam," accept money and human glory for wrongdoing. Here, Balaam represents idolaters, and, in the context of Revelation, those who secure themselves financially and politically by yielding to the pressure to worship the Emperor. The faithful are urged not to compromise.

To eat *food sacrificed to idols* is to participate in a communion sacrifice, the sacred meal celebrated at the temple of a god. Such a ritual declares the oneness of the temple of a person (or community) with the god. It is the making of a covenant (1 Corinthians 10:14-22).

This is also to practice *immorality*, or as is sometimes translated, adultery. In the Bible, sexuality is a symbol of faith. Adultery symbolizes idolatry. The human covenant of marriage symbolizes the divine covenant, between God and Israel. To worship another god is to break the marriage bond with the True God.

## Revelation 2:15-17

Christ will *war against them with the sword of his mouth*. Christ's word, the Truth, will destroy evil and deception. False knowledge is shattered. See the notes above on the Nicolaitan sect.

*I will give some of the hidden manna ...* The Ark of the Covenant, which was the throne of God in the Temple of Jerusalem, was a golden chest containing the stone tablets of the Law. It also contained other sacred items, one of which was a jar of manna. This miraculous food was the sign of fidelity and love of God during the Israelites' wandering in the desert. Before the city and the temple were destroyed, the prophet Jeremiah hid the Ark and its contents until the time of restoration. So the Jewish people looked forward to the day when the nation would be restored, and the Ark, as well as the manna, would be given back to them; they longed to be assured of God's presence and fidelity.



“... and I will give him a white stone,” most likely a kind of small tablet, of stone or clay, with a new name written on the stone which for Christians refers to the name conferred at Baptism, symbolizing the new birth, new life, the new creation.

#### **Revelation 2:18-20**

People who are healthy and happy have bright, clear eyes. Joy and inner peace make the eyes glow with light. The wise, who have the peace of knowing God, have such eyes. Christ, the very wisdom of God, has brilliant eyes *like a flame of fire*.

*Thyatira* was a military city, not a cultural or religious center. The difficulties of the Church here were from within, not from outsiders. *Jezebel*, the foreign-born wife of King Ahab, persuaded him to introduce worship of Baal, the rain-god, into ancient Israel. During Israel's "desert days," the LORD, the Shepherd-God, was faithfully worshipped by the nomadic people. As Israel settled into an agricultural society, the gods of fertility became more attractive. Against Jezebel appeared the famous prophet Elijah, who held for absolute monotheism and fidelity to the Covenant. [1 Kings 18]

### LESSON 3 - REVELATION 2:21—3:13

#### Revelation 2:21-24

The message to the church of Thyatira continues, as Christ complains about the unrepentance of "Jezebel," the false teacher.

Instead of the joy of a true covenant, symbolized by a marriage bed, sin will bring the desolation of a *sickbed*. And this pain extends to those who commit *adultery with her* (notes on 2:12-14).

*I am He who searches mind and heart*, the all-seeing, all-knowing God, perhaps in contrast to the seers of pagan cults who searched among the organs of sacrificed animals for signs foretelling the future or revealing the will of the gods.

"... *who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan...*" The ancient mystery religions included an initiation into the life of the god or goddess, and a learning of the secrets, or mysteries, of the god. Only the initiated knew the secrets, and only they shared in the power of the god. Whereas the Gnostics claim profound knowledge of God, they have actually plunged into the depths of evil.

*I do not lay upon you any other burden* reminds us of the decision of the apostles not to impose the full Mosaic observance upon the Gentile Christians, but only the basic commandments of God (Acts 15:19-21, 28). God asks fidelity to what is promised, more than excessive promises or demonstrations (Micah 6:6-8).

#### Revelation 2:25-29

The *rod of iron*, instead of the more common wooden staff, is unbreakable, and represents everlasting authority. This authority, proper to the Messiah (Psalm 2), is shared with all faithful disciples.

And *the morning star* indicates the impending sunrise. The dawn is the symbol of a new world, and the morning star is the herald of this new life. In the Easter Vigil liturgy,

Christ is praised as the morning star which never sets. Christ is the messenger of the new age because He is the first to rise from the dead. Those who resist the lure of worldly power and who conquer sin by the patient endurance of the cross will share in the glory of the Risen Lord.

### Revelation 3:1-3

*Sardis* had a reputation for luxury and licentiousness. The dominant cult here was that of Cybele, the great mother goddess of Asia Minor. Her primary function was that of fertility, but was also petitioned for healing and protection in wartime. At the time of Revelation, the ritual of the *Taurobolium* was beginning to be required for those who worshipped her.

*Taurobolium* meant that the person stood in a pit at the foot of an altar, on which a bull (*taurus*) or goat was slaughtered. The blood flowed over the altar and drenched the worshiper.

This ritual was performed for the forgiveness of sin as well as for the welfare of the Emperor or the Empire.

The *seven spirits of God* does not refer to the sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit but the seven angels or ministering spirits who stand attentive at God's throne.

... *you have the name of being alive, and you are dead*. Modern people sometimes refer to unrestrained behavior as "living it up" but the wise know that this means death to the spirit. The lustful and the hedonist appear to be enjoying life but theirs is an awful emptiness, an inward death. The church of Sardis is weakening and dying in spirit; it is not too late for them to stir up the Life which Christ has given them. Christ calls them to remember and to return to Him. The word *perfect* here translates a Greek term which means complete, filled, finished. Their task of serving the Lord is not yet finished: it is not time to stop and rest, but to push on.

### Revelation 3:4-6

Jesus commends those *who have not soiled their garments*, that is not taken part in Cybele's rite. They are *worthy*, deserving of praise, honorable. But the same idea returns elsewhere, as when the martyred Christians are referred to as those who *have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb*. (7:14) These faithful ones, written in the *book of life* (the register of those baptized), will have Jesus acknowledge them before God and the angels even as they acknowledged Jesus before the imperial officials and their servants. (The reference to baptism here reflects the practice of the ancient Church. Normally, this was adult baptism after an extended time of formation, the *catechumenate*. Only those who had proved themselves faithful and had displayed a sincere conversion of life were *enrolled in the book of life* and baptized.)

### Revelation 3:7-10

*Philadelphia*, which literally means "brotherly love," was a smaller city with a strong Jewish community. Several references to Judaism are in this letter. *The holy one, the true one* are familiar Jewish names for God Himself.

*The key of David* is the authority of David, the ideal king. The keys of ancient times were large wooden implements designed to slide back the bars across a door. A designated, trusted official carried this key on his shoulder. The prophet Isaiah predicted that Eliakim would replace Shebna as the key-bearer (Is.22:15-24) and would wield royal authority. Jesus, the true son of David, has received all authority as the exalted Servant of God, and replaces secular powers.

*An open door* is a common apocalyptic phrase for the beginning of a revelation, or the opportunity for a vision or word from God (4:1). God has not shut out his people, but welcomes them into his kingdom in Christ.

The minority of Christians... *have little power, and yet ... have kept my word*, the Truth. Christ promises that his truth will protect them from the hour of trial, the time marked by falsehood and confusion which precedes the Day of the Lord. When worldly securities and verities fail, the Word of God remains. We ask God to spare us this *trial* as we say the Lord's Prayer.

#### **Revelation 3:11-13**

*I will make him a pillar in the temple*, for, like the just ones of Israel and the apostles, they are the strength of the community. The Temple of Solomon, like other ancient temples, was also ornamented with a pair of bronze pillars, given the symbolic names of Jachin and Boaz, probably meaning "it is firm" and "it is strong." Such pillars represented the power of the One who dwelled in the Temple; the true believers in Christ are similarly his "pillars."  
*...the new Jerusalem which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name...* Jerusalem is the center of God's world. It is the focal point of the covenant. It is the coming together of sacred history and the promise of future fulfillment. The prophet Ezekiel imagined a future promised Land in which each tribe held an equal portion, and the holy City stood in the exact center, perfect in its dimensions and layout.

The showpiece of Jerusalem is, of course, the Temple, built by Solomon, damaged by the Babylonians, restored by Nehemiah, desecrated by Antiochus IV and rededicated by Judas Maccabeus. A second temple was built in the time of Herod, and destroyed utterly during the conquest of Jerusalem by Titus in A.D. 70. At the time of Revelation, there was nothing left of the Temple itself, only the retaining wall on the western side of the mount. (This is the "Wailing Wall" or "Western Wall" which remains to this day.) The idealized Jerusalem would have an ideal Temple as well. "Jerusalem" as a symbol is the spiritual home of every Jew, Christian and Muslim. It is the place of universal peace. Popular piety recognizes in its Hebrew name *Yerushalayim* the word for peace: *shalom* (see Hebrews 7:2). It is the capital of all the nations. Such a place is God's gift, not human accomplishment: hence the City *comes down from my God out of heaven*.

## LESSON 4 - REVELATION 3:14-4:11

### Revelation 3:14-16

The last of the letters is addressed to the believers in Laodicea, a city renowned for its wealth. After the earthquake in A.D. 60 which ruined many cities in the Empire, *Laodicea* boasted that it was able to rebuild without outside aid. This attitude of contentment and self-sufficiency was likewise present in the church.

*Amen*, from the Hebrew word *emeth*, truth, is here used as a title of Christ, who is the constant "Yes" to the Father. In contrast to their Master, the Christians here have become indifferent, *neither cold nor hot*, a people of "maybe" or "no opinion." It has been said that the opposite of love is not hate, but apathy. Hatred at least shows some passion, some anger, some sense of relationship. The lack of interest displayed by these people is distasteful to God, just as cold, left-over coffee or warm, flat soda would be to us.

### Revelation 3:17-19

Christ condemns their complacency: *you say, I am rich*, but these words belie their utter spiritual poverty. Laodicea was known for its banking and cloth industries and for a powder used in treating diseases of the eye. Christ advises instead to *buy from me gold refined by fire*: obtain a genuine, time-tested treasure, the Word of God (Psalms 19:10, 12:6), God's whole self-revelation. He also seeks *to clothe you in your nakedness* (Ezekiel 16). Israel was "naked" in her poverty and helplessness in Egypt. The LORD "clothed" her and gave her dignity. She then "uncovered her nakedness" (made herself available for adultery; that is idolatry and alliances with foreigners) and then was stripped in punishment. Christ comes to clothe us anew, giving us the dignity of the children of God. Finally, Christ offers *salve to anoint your eyes* (John 9). Blindness symbolizes a lack of faith, an alienation from the Light which is God.

### Revelation 3:20-22

Christ's promise "*I will come in to him and eat with him*" reminds of the many times he ministered to sinners, tax collectors, and outcasts of all kinds by eating with them. The sharing of the table is intimate communion. To share food is to share life, love,

friendship. (Notice how people resist eating with strangers in a fast-food restaurant; we separate ourselves, or, if we are alone, we distract ourselves with reading or music, and do not linger.) The Hebrew prophets envisioned the future Kingdom of God as a great banquet, whose invited guests included the poor and the estranged. Jesus declared the presence of the Kingdom in His meal sharing (Luke 14:1-24) and in signs of feasting (Mark 6:34-44 and 8:6-9, John 2:1-11).

Above all is the new covenant meal, the Eucharist, which makes present both the past and the future.

Here is Jesus, who was crucified and is risen; here is the beginning of the future kingdom (Luke 22:14-20, and 24:30-43).

The Eucharist is the foretaste, the appetizer, of the heavenly wedding feast of God and his People, during which no one will fast or go hungry (Mark 1:19, Isaiah 55).

Moreover, Jesus will permit the faithful Christian *to sit with him on his throne*. At the heavenly wedding feast we are not the guests. We are Christ's bride, the King's queen.

#### **Revelation 4:1-3**

We have now completed the series of letters, and begin the second major part of Revelation.

John communicates the element of surprise: *Lo!* (Look! See this!) The visions to follow are from God, not from himself. As is common in apocalyptic writing, the vision begins with an *open door* into heaven. The messenger (angel) invites John: "*Come up hither, and I will show you...*" the other world, the world of God. God's plan will now be manifested.

Lest we confuse this with physical "seeing" or with imagination or dreaming, John reminds us that he is *in the Spirit*. This is God's doing. It is important once again to remember that we are about to read of a profound spiritual experience, which cannot be communicated except by way of symbol and imagery. John will describe his awareness as a heavenly "liturgy," a blend of court ceremonial, divine worship, and displays of power. From time to time we will be informed of what is going on "in the world," but our primary point of view will be as a guest in God's home.

... *a throne*, either a chair or simply an elevated place. The placing of a throne signifies the establishment of authority; to be seated there is to wield that authority. The Bible describes all of Heaven as the throne of God for there is no challenge to his authority above earth.

... *jasper and carnelian*: semiprecious gemstones. Jasper is quartz of various colors, carnelian is red. Some translations have "a diamond and a ruby." We do not see the un-imaged Holy One, but only the reflection of His glory (Exodus 33:18-23). God is surrounded by light and color: *a rainbow*, which is in turn compared to an *emerald*.

#### **Revelation 4:4-6**

... *twenty-four elders*: a double set of twelve, perhaps the apostles and the patriarchs, form God's council. This image is that of the Church in which the bishop presides in the midst of the presbyters.

All the signs of divine power are present for this gathering: *lightning, voices of thunder, torches of fire*. The seven spirits of God are the angelic manifestations of God's presence.

Since God is the Holy One (in Hebrew, *kadosh*; literally, separate or different) God is inaccessible, beyond our grasp. The sea is such a figure of boundlessness and the *sea of glass* brings back the image of light.

The thrones of earthly kings were supported by figures of great beasts as a display of strength. God, the Living One, has a living throne: *four living creatures*, combining all the majesty our minds can imagine and *full of eyes* which represent knowledge and wisdom. God does not rule over "dumb animals," but over every intelligence and spiritual power.

#### **Revelation 4:7-8**

John repeats Ezekiel's vision of God's throne here (Ezekiel 1:5, 10, and 18; also 10:14). Each creature represents power and authority: *a lion* (majesty), *an ox* (strength), *a man* (intelligence), and *an eagle* (divinity). We may also note a blending of Semitic and Western symbolism here. The ancient Near Eastern peoples depicted their gods as enthroned on bulls or lions; the Greeks fashioned gods in human form; the Romans used the eagle to signify divine authority.

Now we borrow from Isaiah 6: *like the seraphim the creatures have six wings, and are full of eyes*; again like the seraphim, they cry out the adoration of God: *Holy, holy, holy*. This triple repetition is the Hebrew way of expressing the superlative. We might say, the Holiest of the Holy. But a difference between the visions of Isaiah and John is seen here: God is not just the God of creation ("heaven and earth are full of your glory") but also the God of time and history, of our past, present and future: *who was and is and is to come!* God is living, active, and present.

#### **Revelation 4:9-11**

The heavenly liturgy continues, and we see a harmony of worship as the acclamation of the living creatures elicits the response of the elders around the throne. They *fall down before him*, a gesture of homage which usually means kneeling and then bowing forward so that the forehead touches the floor.

"*Worthy art thou.*" in Greek, *adios*. In the Greek Church, this is the people's acclamation of approval for one who has been newly appointed or elected a bishop or priest. (At an ordination in the Roman Church, the bishop announces that he has chosen the candidates for Holy Orders, and the people give their approval by applauding.) Instead of acclaiming any earthly ruler, the Church gives all the honor to God with a verbal "standing ovation."

## LESSON 5 - REVELATION 5:1-14

### Revelation 5:1-4

...*scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals*... The scroll is the divine message, full and complete. Scrolls were rolled and tied with a cord or ribbon, and wax or clay was used to secure it; this was then stamped with the seal of the sender. The sevenfold seal indicates the great secrecy and seriousness of the message. No human being can comprehend it and John the seer weeps from sorrow and frustration at the alienation of God and humanity.

### Revelation 5:5-7

Christ will be called by the titles: *the Lion*, the heraldic symbol *of the tribe of Judah* derived from Jacob's blessing of his sons in Genesis 49:9; *the Root of David*, that is, the one who is descended from David and rightfully shares David's royal authority by being anointed with the Spirit of God (Isaiah 11:1, 10). The victorious Messiah is worthy to declare God's plan.

The Messiah is seen as *a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain*, a sacrificial victim. He has conquered death by dying; His wounds are visible, but He stands upright, for He is risen from the dead.

... *with seven horns and with seven eyes*, that is, having the perfection of strength and power, and the perfection of wisdom and knowledge.

### Revelation 5:8-10

... *each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints*. The liturgy of Solomon's temple was famous for its music and chanting; a variety of instruments was used, but the harp was preferred. Incense was spread over the holocaust (burning sacrificed animal) as the completion of the offering. Incense can be frankincense, the dried and powdered resin of *Boswellia* trees (native to S. Arabia and Somalia) or other aromatics such as myrrh, galbanum, or balsam. It served the practical function of masking the unpleasant aroma of the burning flesh and bones.

Incense was used for the protection of the high priest as he entered the Holy of Holies lest he see God and die (Exodus 33:20; Leviticus 16:12-13). Incense was also offered by itself and its rising smoke came to symbolize the praises of the community.

... *by thy blood didst ransom men for God*... "Atonement by blood" is a rather difficult concept for twentieth-century people. We are uncomfortable with the animal slaughter and sacrifice as described in Leviticus. We are probably just as hesitant about the crucifixion of Jesus as "demanded by God." Consider instead the concept of blood as life and therefore as sacred and belonging to God.



Every act which involved the spilling of blood (hunting, butchering, killing) had to be “justified:” the blood had to be returned to God, or the “balance of the universe” would be upset. To the ancient way of thinking, God allows us the use of animals for food so long as we remember their Source. To spill blood unnecessarily or to neglect to return the blood to God was a supreme insult. By extension, the misuse of any of the gifts of creation insults the Creator. Rituals develop around the human need to “set things straight.” The solemn and correct slaughtering of a representative animal makes up for previous negligence.

Another way to understand this is that animal sacrifice is a substitute for human sacrifice. The ritual death of a human person, especially one of royal blood, was meant to insure the continuation of life for the whole community.

Those who wish the challenge of a true literary adventure should read James Frazier's *The Golden Bough*, a nineteenth century anthropologist's explanation of sacrificial rituals. Frazier claims that a king or a high-priest was an incarnation of a god, especially of the earth-gods who provided for the rebirth of nature each spring. Before aging or sickness could diminish his vigor, the king was ceremonially killed so that the divine power could be transferred to another. Frazier continues the thought that this death/life cycle is also represented in the symbolic harvesting of the first grapes or grain so that the wine or bread made from it might also contain the life-power of the god.

Back to Revelation! The blood of Jesus spilled in His execution is interpreted by Christian believers as the gift of *the life of Jesus*. His death is understood as a blood-offering or ritual sacrifice. Jesus' life, His very existence, accomplishes once and for all the very thing that humans have always longed for: to be free of death and assured of life.

A note about priesthood. In ancient times the priest was the privileged man who could offer sacrifices and prayers and bestow blessings. The priest was the one closest to God. Sometimes it was the patriarch or king who performed this function; in other cultures it was the “holy man,” the one who seemed to have the right powers or knowledge. In later times priesthood was either hereditary (as in Israel) or by appointment or election, but it was still reserved to the elite. God declares all of his people Israel to be his *kingdom of priests*, His elite and favored ones, the ones closest to Him (Exodus 19:6). Here, God's choice extends to all peoples everywhere. In the Catholic liturgy, the priesthood of the faithful is expressed in the Prayer of the Faithful and in the procession of the gifts; it is lived out daily in charity and working for justice.

#### **Revelation 5:11-14**

As John is brought more and more into the heavenly worship, the voice of the angel, of the creatures, and of the elders becomes *the voice of many angels*, the whole community of heaven. They proclaim “*worthy is the Lamb.*”

Christ is the perfect king, and is honored with seven aspects of royalty: *power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory, blessing*. (This word *blessing* means praise.) Christ embodies the excellent qualities of David, Solomon, and all ideal rulers. The entire universe joins in the worship. Every living being acknowledges the victory of Christ and the supremacy of God; except, of course, the Roman Emperor and those who have been deceived into following him.

## LESSON 6 - REVELATION 6:1-17

### Revelation 6:1-2

The famous “four horsemen of the Apocalypse” now appear. ...*one of the seven seals* is opened to suggest the gradual unfolding of the divine plan. (John shows us some imagination here since a scroll is just as tightly bound by one seal as by seven.)

...*a white horse, and its rider had a bow; and a crown...* The most feared of Rome's enemies were the Parthians, famous for their archery. The approach of these people from the east brought fear and terror, especially into Asia Minor. Their victory would spell certain destruction for the Empire. The white color of the horse signifies invincibility. This rider, however, is from God. His victory will signal the end of the reign of evil.

### Revelation 6:3-4

The second horseman is war, represented by *bright red*, the color of flowing blood, and bearing a *sword*. War, by disrupting civil and family life, is another sign of the unraveling of the present world and a herald of the coming Day of the Lord. Compare the words of Jesus in Mark 13:7-8.

### Revelation 6:5-6

War damages the earth, unbalancing the ecology and providing for the spread of disease. So the next sign to appear is a *black horse and its rider had a balance in his hand*: namely, famine and pestilence. Human economy suffers as well. *A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius* is extreme inflation: a day's wages is the price of a minimal amount of food. Barley was the food of the poor, since it was more affordable than wheat. *Oil and wine* used for feasting is left untouched. No one cares to celebrate in such crucial times.

### Revelation 6:7-8

The fourth sign is a *pale horse, and its rider's name was Death, and hades followed him*. The natural result of conquest, war and famine is death and the grave.

The destruction of the world takes place only partially; here, it is a *fourth of the earth* that suffers. The Second Letter of Peter (3:8-10) speaks of the patience of God, awaiting our repentance. Revelation suggests that not everything is destroyed at once for the same reason. The death of another should move us to consider the quality of our own lives. Once again, the instruments of death are named: *with sword, famine, pestilence, and by wild beasts*.

## Revelation 6:9-11

The altar of holocaust in the Jerusalem temple was so placed that the blood (i.e., life) of the sacrifices could flow under it and into the crevices of the Temple Mount. John sees the blood of the martyrs, spilled on the earth, as a sacrifice patterned on the sacrifice of Jesus himself. John transfers us from the heavenly sanctuary, and thus *under the altar the souls* of the saints remain, waiting for God's justice to vindicate them. The Roman liturgy for the dedication of an altar recalls this scene. The relics (usually bone fragments) of martyrs are enshrined beneath the altar table.

This is the first mention in Revelation of an altar in heaven. Just as the Jerusalem temple had an altar for the offering of sacrifices and of incense, the heavenly temple has its altar as well. This altar, however, is the place where the prayers and offerings made on earth are accepted. This image is found in the Roman liturgy in the First Eucharistic Prayer: *Almighty God, we pray that your angel may take this sacrifice to your altar in heaven;* that is, accept the gift which the people have offered.

... *how long...*? A familiar prayer of the oppressed and the poor who await justice (Psalms 6, 13, and 77; Luke 18:1-8).

Since the dead martyrs already share in the victory of Christ, they are given *a white robe and told to rest a little longer*. Still, they are one in heart with the suffering Church and pray on their behalf. Here is a beautiful expression of the Communion of the Saints. We are not forgotten by our brother and sister Christians who have come into their personal fulfillment in heaven.

## Revelation 6:12-17

The earth, thought to be a stable part of creation (Psalm 104:5), is shaken by *earthquake* since a newer world is to be born. Similarly, the sky, thought of as a solid crystal dome, simply rolls up (v. 14) and mountains disappear.

... *the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell...* A total solar eclipse darkens the sun. A total lunar eclipse causes the moon to glow in coppery red color. The falling of stars is most likely a meteor shower. All these were regarded as bad omens. It is impossible for a solar and a lunar eclipse to happen simultaneously. If the author intends us to think of this, then he reinforces his point. The natural order is upset and creation is unraveled as the *great day*, the Day of the Lord, approaches. General panic reigns, and the distinctions of human society no longer matter (v.15-17).

## LESSON 7 - REVELATION 7:1-17

### Revelation 7:1-3

Here is an interruption in the sequence of the seals. Our attention is now directed to the heavenly world, and to the angels who govern the right order of the universe. Those who govern the destructive winds (which blow from the corners of the world rather than from the sides) are commanded not to harm *the earth or the sea or the trees* (the living things of the earth).

The angel of the rising sun, that is, appearing in the east, represents the coming of salvation (Luke 1:77-79). This coming includes the protection of God's people. They are claimed and marked with God's seal. Any further judgment is restrained *till we have sealed the servants*.

Slaves were branded or tattooed with the mark of their master. God's servants are marked with the sign of Christ, the cross, *on their foreheads*, visibly and unmistakably. The initiation rituals of the Church continue this signing in the rite of becoming a catechumen and in confirmation. The penitential signing with ashes on Ash Wednesday is most likely derived from the same gesture.

### Revelation 7:4-8

The *144,000 sealed* are not the literal population of heaven, but the symbolic ideal population of Israel: twelve (complete) times twelve, times a thousand (infinity); each tribe is complete, in full prosperity, and equal to the others. We notice also that these "tribes" bear the names of the original twelve sons of Jacob/Israel, not the historical tribal divisions. The "Joseph" tribe was actually divided into two parts, "Ephraim" and "Manasseh." "Levi" was the priestly tribe, and held no territory, since their "portion was the Lord." The people of Levi made their living from the sacrificial offerings of the other tribes (Numbers 18:20; Joshua 13:14).

### Revelation 7:9-12

Added to the idealized and restored nation of Israel is the uncountable throng of the Gentiles, now welcomed into the ranks of the Chosen. John sees them *clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands*. They are the victorious heroes of the persecution. Palm branches were waved to acclaim returning military victors; but the heavenly army claims no glory for itself; *they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God*.

### Revelation 7:13-14

Lest we confuse the white-robed army with angels or other spiritual beings, John has a conversation with one of the worshipping elders. Who are they? *These are they who have come out of the great tribulation*: the martyrs. Their “survival” is not that they have escaped the persecution, but that they endured it in faith, and have died. Their “survival” is in their resurrection.

... *they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb*: the blood of the martyrs is like the blood of Jesus. They have given their whole lives to Christ, and this is their dignity and honor (notes on 3:1-6).

### Revelation 7:15-17

The martyrs *serve Him day and night within his temple*; they are happy to praise God continuously, and have attained the peace of dwelling safely in God's house (Psalms 84 and 90; Isaiah 4:5-6, 25:4-5, 49:10; Luke 2:37 and 1 Timothy 5:5-6).

When Israel was in the desert, they longed for their promised land, even though God was powerfully with them. They complained in their hunger and thirst (Exodus 16:2-3, 17:2-4; Numbers 21:4-9).

These saints, having the fulfillment of the promise, *hunger no more, neither thirst anymore*; their journey is complete. ... *the Lamb ... will be their shepherd*. (Ezekiel 34:11-16, 23-31; John 10) Christ is both Lamb and Shepherd. As man, He lives in our world and knows our needs: He understands and has compassion (Hebrews 4:15-16). As God, He leads us along the right paths (Psalm 23) and will *guide them to living water* (John 4:10-15).

Living (stream or river) water is fresh and flowing, unlike well or cistern water. Jesus offers the Holy Spirit, making us truly alive in God. People who refuse this gift and want instead to prolong “life” in this world will stagnate and have only the outward semblance of life. Spiritually, they are dead.

## LESSON 8 - REVELATION 8:1-13

### Revelation 8:1-2

We return to the opening of the seals. With everything leading to such a climax, one would expect the seventh seal to bring the end of the story. Instead, there is simply *silence*: more is to come (Habakkuk 2:20, Zephaniah 1:7). God is present, yet we must wait upon Him to see His plan. Christian spirituality of all times has emphasized the need for silence of mind and heart to “make room” for the coming Lord.

Another sequence of seven is about to begin: this time *seven trumpets*, the instrument of alarm, a signal for battle and a summons to assembly. The trumpet of biblical times functions like our bells or sirens.

### Revelation 8:3-5

This *golden censer* is of the type used in the Temple. Unlike the vessel on chains familiar to us, it is a scoop or shovel to carry coals to the golden “altar of incense,” and then to spread the incense on these coals. So the angel is able to fill the censer with fire, and to fling it on to the earth. As children, we might have imagined rain as angels' tears, or snow as angels playfully sprinkling petals or feathers. Here, the undoing of creation in storm and earthquake is part of the heavenly liturgy. The worshipping angels and saints (the holy martyrs) are hastening the coming of God's reign with their prayers.

### Revelation 8:6-7

The trumpets, used in ancient Israel to announce great events or the beginning of holy days, are signals of the imminent Day of the Lord (Joel 2:15). The signs of terror portrayed here are similar to the plagues upon Egypt at the time of Moses (Exodus 7:14 - 11:7). *Hail and fire*, that is, lightning, is seen as *mixed with blood*, signifying death. Water, the gift of life, is so polluted that it is an agent of death. Each announcement brings only partial results: *a third of the earth*, or sea, or sky, is damaged. This may be taken to mean that God is patient and waits for repentance (2 Peter 3:3-10, and notes on 6:7-8) As in Genesis 9:11, God will not destroy everything because of human sinfulness. We are also aware, however, that human sinfulness itself destroys God's creation.

### Revelation 8:8-11

The Nile River became blood at the time of Moses; here the whole *sea became blood*. The *great mountain, burning with fire*, may be a volcano, such as Vesuvius, spewing fire on land and sea. *Wormwood*, a bitter substance extracted from the plant *Artemisia absinthium* and used for making absinthe, is here the name of a star, a spiritual power.

Just as wormwood pollutes the fresh water supplies, so the worship of other gods pollutes the human spirit (Deuteronomy 29:18) (“poisonous and bitter fruit” in RSV is elsewhere translated “poison weed and wormwood”), (Amos 5:7).

#### **Revelation 8:12-13**

*... a third of the sun, ... moon...* The heavens are not exempt from the judgment. This is another example of the imagination of the apocalyptic writer: one-third less sun means one-third less daylight.

As the triple adjective, “Holy, holy, holy” means “the holiest of the holy,” now the divine authority, symbolized by the eagle, announces *woe, woe, woe*: the worst of all troubles. He flies in *mid-heaven*, the space between earth and the dome of the sky, so that the news is heard by the inhabitants of the earth and the inhabitants of God's world above the sky.



## LESSON 9 - REVELATION 9:1-21

### Revelation 9:1-4

...*a star fallen*, not the “fallen angel” Satan, but an angelic messenger allowed to “fall,” to descend to earth to carry out God's command. Only God, or God's delegate, holds authority over the world of the dead: *the key of the shaft of the bottomless pit. From the smoke came locusts*, the dreaded plague which meant certain famine and death in the Middle East (Joel 2:1-11, in which a plague of locusts is vividly described as a fierce army).

The locusts are so thick as to resemble the billowing smoke of a furnace. In this instance, though, God has no desire to destroy his creation, but *only those of mankind* who are allied with idolatrous Rome. The “locusts,” with their “scorpion sting” may well be an army of Parthian archers.

### Revelation 9:5-6

The invaders, like a Palestinian scorpion, cause pain, but not death: *to torture them but not to kill them*, to urge repentance. Yet people, so self-centered, do not turn to God. *Men will seek death and will not find it*, not realizing that sinfulness is living death. The human mind, caught up in sin, has become unable to distinguish reality from unreality. There is no life that is without some measure of suffering, hurt or grief; those who suffer can grow in endurance and courage, coming to a new strength of character and a new perspective on life. But the people described in these verses can see only two options: physical comfort and death. If life doesn't go as planned or if there is pain, discomfort or inconvenience, then death is chosen. This attitude is hardly unique to Roman times. How often do we prefer to kill or destroy what annoys or pains us?

### Revelation 9:7-12

John blends the image of plague and war: *the locusts were like horses arrayed for battle*. The warriors are depicted as victorious barbarians wearing gold captured in battle and with long, unbound hair. The fear they inspire makes them appear demonic: lions' teeth, iron scales, etc. Their leader and their identity is named *Abaddon, Apollyon*, words meaning “the Destroyer.” So the first woe has come: the absolute rule of Rome, weakened internally and threatened by invasion, is about to collapse, and to make way for the kingdom of God.

### Revelation 9:13-15

The four horns of the golden altar recall the “altar of incense” inside the Temple of Jerusalem: a square pillar or pedestal, with four “horns” or projections on the corners at the top. On this was placed the burning coals and the incense. This scene indicates that the prayers of the saints ARE being heard and answered (6:9-10 and 8:3-5).

The divine voice orders, “*Release the four angels*” (since the destruction will be worldwide)... “*bound at the river*” (since they only act when commanded by God.) The river is the Euphrates. The angels are “bound” in the sense that the river is a barrier (16:12). The Euphrates was also the ideal eastern frontier of Solomon's kingdom (Psalm 72:8). Beyond this was the pagan world, which often threatened Israel's existence and was seen as an instrument of God's judgment (Isaiah 8:5-8: the people are told that their lack of faith in God and their fear of neighboring kings will be punished by an even worse invasion from the east.) In the time of John, this eastern frontier is under Parthian rule.

“*The hour, the day, the month and the*” year is determined by God, the Lord of all history, and the One who controls every detail. Again, four terms are used; the event is world-wide.

#### **Revelation 9:16-19**

The invaders number “*twice ten thousand times ten thousand:*” more than anyone could imagine. Once again, it is God who is behind these events; it is not merely human politics.

The invading army is dazzling in color: “*fire, sulphur, sapphire (or hyacinth) brilliant red, yellow and blue.*” It is dreadful in power, fierce as lions and wreaking destruction like “*fire, smoke, and sulphur.*” Their weapons and cruelty are equal to mythological monsters, having “*power... in their mouths and in their tails to bite and sting.*”

#### **Revelation 9:20-21**

All this fear and trembling does not sway the idolatrous heart: “*Rome did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping their emperor god.*” We are the work of God's hands, yet we create things that we adore. The description of the idols echoes the mockery of the prophets (Jeremiah 10:3-5 or, for a more extended satire, Baruch 6, also titled “The Letter of Jeremiah”). We make “the work of our hands” into gods when we give them more attention than we do to God, when we treasure them more than God's gifts, and when we expect that these accomplishments of ours will save us. The more we learn to control the universe, the more we adore the work of our hands. “We have the technology” but we do not have wisdom; wisdom comes from reverence for God, who alone is Lord (Psalm 111:10, Proverbs 9:10).

## LESSON 10 – REVELATION 10:1-11:19

### Revelation 10:1-3

Just as the narrative of the seven seals was interrupted, so we now have a double interlude after the sixth trumpet. One is the appearance of the angel with the scroll. The second is the measuring of the Temple and the two witnesses. Only the first interlude will be dealt with in this lesson.

John sees “*another mighty angel coming down from heaven,*” a great and majestic being. He is “*wrapped in a cloud*”, like God's presence over the holy Tent in the desert (Exodus 40:35-35) “*with a rainbow over his head*” (4:3), a sign of God's beauty and fidelity (Genesis 9:14-15). He has a face like the sun, like Christ in 1:16, and in his Transfiguration (Matthew 17:2), and “*legs of fire,*” as the Holy One in Ezekiel 1:27. This being is truly “*the angel of the LORD,*” which is a title in the Bible for the very appearance of God. The divine messenger stands upon land and sea because he has a message of universal importance. He speaks with a voice of God and has an open scroll, a message for all. “*... when he called out, the seven thunders sounded,*” since the message is the word of God (Psalm 29:3-9).

### Revelation 10:4-7

Yet John is told to “*seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down.*” The word of God, proclaimed to all, is still a secret understood only by the faithful. It is not something that a human can “own” or control. It baffles human understanding and philosophy (1 Corinthians 1:17-25). Jesus, especially in Mark's Gospel, commands silence from those who have healed and rebukes Peter for calling him the Christ. Only after the crucifixion and resurrection may he be proclaimed (Mark 1:34, 7:36, 8:29-30, 9:9, 15:39, 16:16). Humans tend to trivialize God's word, and use it for their own purposes (1 Timothy 6:3-6). This vision calls us to respect the word in all its power.

The angel “*lifted up his right hand to heaven and swore,*” using the same gesture we do when taking a solemn oath. He swears by God, calling upon Truth to confirm the truth of his announcement. The message is wonderful news for the persecuted Churches: “*that there should be no more delay.*” The end of all things is near! “*The mystery of God,*” which is the plan of God for bringing everything into unity with God, “*should be fulfilled.*” This concept of the “mystery” or the “plan” is central in Paul's epistles (Ephesians 1:9-10, Romans 16:25-27). Everything that is created is destined to find its fulfillment in God and Jesus Christ is the way in which this fulfillment is accomplished.

### Revelation 10:8-11

Like the prophet Ezekiel, John is told to “*take the scroll,*” that is, to receive the word of God (Ezekiel 2:8-3:3).

John elaborates on this image, for he is also told *“take it and eat: it will be bitter to your stomach. but sweet as honey in your mouth.”* The gospel is easily received but not so easily “digested”. The consequences of the message are often difficult, bitter, painful. In this case, too, the hope-filled message to the Churches does not at once eliminate all the suffering and trials yet to be undergone.

John is also told *you “must again prophesy,”* not only to Rome but to all the world. The universal significance of the prophecy is noted in the four terms: peoples, nations, tongues, kings.

#### **Revelation 11:1-3**

The interlude continues: John is told *to rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship.* This measuring of the temple, like a taking of inventory, is understood to mean that the Temple is “off-limits” to the invading armies. In A.D. 70 members of the Zealot party locked themselves in the Temple, hoping that the Romans would not enter. John is also thinking of the new Temple, the Christian Church, which is protected by the power of God, and which will withstand the attacks of the evil one (Matthew 16:18). The persecution is expected to last *forty-two months* (three-and-a-half years, one-half of seven), the same as *one thousand two hundred and sixty days*. Again, this is not a literal chronology, but a sign of what is transitory and limited, instead of what is perfect. The time period may also refer to the persecution of the Jews in the time of the Maccabees (1 Maccabees 1:20-24, 1:29, 1:54, 4:52-54; i.e. 168-164 B.C.; Daniel 7:25).

#### **Revelation 11:4-6**

The meaning of the next section has been much discussed among biblical scholars. In the context of Revelation it is best interpreted as: The Christian Church bears witness to God in an ungodly world. The whole Church is represented by two witnesses, since the testimony of only one witness would not stand in court (Numbers 35:30, Deuteronomy 19:15, Mark 14:56). These two witnesses are described as Moses (who turned the river into blood) and Elijah (who prevented rain for three-and-a-half years) (1 Kings 17, James 5:17). Moses and Elijah together summarize the whole of Jewish tradition, the Law and the Prophets. In the story of the Transfiguration, they bear witness to Jesus. In Zechariah 4:11-14, a vision of two olive trees flanking a lamp is explained as referring to Joshua the priest and Zerubbabel the king, for in the messianic age secular and religious authority are one, both being anointed, consecrated to God. Here, *the two olive trees and the two lampstands* may be taken to refer to all the Christian martyrs or to the apostles Peter and Paul, the traditional founders of the Roman Church. Like Elijah in 2 Kings 1:10, these witnesses are filled with the power of God.

### **Revelation 11:7-11**

Because the witnesses proclaim Jesus, not Caesar, to be Lord *the beast will make war upon them*, that is, Domitian will arrest and kill them. (We will learn more about this beast later. The inspiration for this image is in Daniel 7.) Not to be buried was the utmost disgrace among the Jewish people; to say of the witnesses that *their dead bodies will lie in the street* indicates their abjection. Further, it is the street *of the great city* which is allegorically called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified. The city is the Evil City, later identified also as Babylon, the utter opposite of Jerusalem, the city of God. Sodom, which was so evil that not ten good people were found there and would not welcome the messengers of God (Genesis 18:20-32, 19:4-5) was destroyed, leaving only its name as a term for sexual perversion. Egypt, for the Jews, represents all that is inimical to God: slavery, stubbornness, idolatry, darkness, death.

So also Babylon, the empire that ruined Jerusalem in 587 B.C., is the archenemy of God (Psalm 137). All these images together are symbolic names for the place where Satan/Domitian rules, namely, Rome. Since Jesus was crucified outside of Jerusalem and by the order of the Roman governor, he is described as having been crucified “in Rome”. It was in Rome, too, in the reign of Nero that Peter and Paul were executed (A.D. 67).

Thus, evil seems to triumph, and the whole world is swept away by it. Note again the fourfold term: peoples, tribes, tongues, nations, indicating this universal event. A festival ensues, for these two prophets had been a torment and their death brings jubilation to the wicked. But not for long! God is still in charge and now shows his power through the slain witnesses. In the midst of the sinful revelry a breath of life from God entered them and they are resurrected. The breath of God is life itself (Genesis 2:7, Ezekiel 37:5-10, John 20:22, Romans 8:11). The Hebrew word *ra'ah* means breath, wind, and spirit: these terms are interchangeable in the Bible.

### **Revelation 11:12-14**

The once-conquered witnesses are now vindicated as the heavenly voice says to them: come up hither! and in the sight of their foes they went up to heaven. They are taken up in a cloud which is the glory of the LORD (Acts 1:9, 1 Thessalonians 4:17). Punishment soon follows: at that hour there was a great earthquake with a stunning death-toll (recall that 1000 means an uncountable or infinite number). Unlike previous warnings, this disaster manages to sober the survivors and move them to repentance.

### **Revelation 11:15-16**

Now we resume the story of the trumpets. So far, six signal trumpets, including two woes, have occurred. Could the seventh be the herald of the end?

Even though victory is assured, the struggle is not yet over. Instead of a terrible destruction, we hear a hymn of praise: the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever. (Those who are familiar with the baroque oratorio *Messiah* by George Frederick Handel will recognize this verse as part of the triumphant “Hallelujah” chorus.) The twenty-four enthroned elders are still worshipping, and bring their own hymn of praise.

#### **Revelation 11:17-19**

We give thanks to thee, Lord God almighty... This hymn of praise is now included in our Church’s liturgical Evening Prayer.

Many of the themes of Revelation are included here: God is Lord of creation and of history. God's reign is assured though the unbelieving nations will rebel against God's authority. The fury of the pagans will give way to God’s will. God will judge: this time. the persecuted prophets and martyred believers (even the unknowns) will be rewarded and those who destroy the earth (by living in sin and thus causing the destruction of the world) will perish.

God's temple in heaven opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen. The vision of John contrasts God's presence in heaven with his presence in the Jerusalem Temple. On earth, the ark was hidden by a double curtain, in the recess called the Holy of Holies.

Only the High Priest entered this room, and only on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). This room was inside the Temple itself which was also screened from public view by huge doors. Opening the doors would permit a distant glimpse of the interior by the worshipping men within the Court of Israel. (Women gathered outside this area.) But John sees the heavenly temple, open wide, revealing the very throne of God which the Ark represented.

The earthly Ark had disappeared at the time of the Babylonian Exile (586 B.C.). It was believed that it had been hidden by the prophet Jeremiah and its location would remain a mystery until God revealed it by another prophet (2 Maccabees 2:5). Historically speaking, the Ark was probably broken up and melted down by the Babylonians. John sees instead the true Ark, the most sacred dwelling place of the presence of God. Christian tradition recognizes Mary, the Mother of God, as the true Ark since she carried the incarnate Word of God within her womb. The next section will speak more about this symbol.

## LESSON 11 - REVELATION 12:1-18

### Revelation 12:1-3

*A great sign* interrupts the story. A magnificent Woman, ornamented like heaven itself, is seen. (John was probably not aware of Egyptian mythology, but we find there an interesting similarity. The birth of the sun-god Horus is depicted as taking place surrounded by the sun, the moon and twelve stars. These stars stand for the twelve nights from the crescent to the full moon, symbolizing rebirth and resurrection.)

Who is the woman? She is the glorious Daughter of Zion, the beloved Bride of God (Song of Songs 6:9-10). She is the Chosen People of Israel, the twelve stars representing the twelve tribes. As the Day of the Lord nears, Israel gives birth to the Messiah, the Savior-King.

This is a dual symbol; for "Israel" is also the new Israel, the Christian Church, persecuted and pursued by the powers of darkness. Catholic tradition makes a further connection and recognizes the Woman as Mary, the true Mother of the Messiah.

Mary is highly esteemed and venerated in Catholic and Orthodox Christianity because she is an image (icon) of the Church, even as Christ is the Image of the Father (Colossians 1:15). Every Marian title or feast-day is therefore a description or celebration of our true identity. Mary's foremost title is Mother of God (in Greek, *Theotokos*, the God-bearer): we bring God-in-the-flesh into our world. Mary is conceived without sin; we are born into holiness by baptism. Like Mary at the Annunciation, we are the servants of the Lord who wait upon his word; like Mary at her Assumption, we look forward to our own resurrection in Christ. True Marian devotion, according to St. Louis de Montfort, is the renewal of our baptismal covenant in Christ. We become more aware of our Christian identity. Because of Mary, God is not an idea, not an impersonal force, but a real person and one of us.

This passage is read on the feast of Mary's Assumption (August 15), for she is God's Ark, dwelling in his Temple in heaven, fully sharing in the risen life of Christ (see previous lesson).

As we read on in Revelation, however, it is best to understand the Woman as the Church, of which Mary is the image.

### Revelation 12:4-6

The pain of labor is used by Paul to describe the longing and suffering that accompanies the coming of God's kingdom (Romans 8:18-25).

*And the dragon stood before the woman ...* A graphic confrontation between the evil Empire and the holy Church. The faithful woman is not afraid.

She bears *a male child who is to rule all the nations with an iron rod*: the Messiah, the anointed shepherd of Israel. The Messiah is under God's protection from his birth to his ascension: *her child was caught up to God and to his throne*. The Evil One has no power over him.

The crucifixion was a hollow victory for Satan since Christ's death was the destruction of sin, death and hell. Meanwhile, the Church suffers exile: *the woman fled into the wilderness*. The wilderness, the traditional abode of demons, is also the place where ancient Israel was espoused to God. The forty years in the desert was the time of testing and of purifying of faith. The prophets (e.g. Hosea) looked upon the desert sojourn as the “honeymoon” period of God's marriage to Israel. In the same way, the contemporary persecution of the Church is a time for greater reliance upon God in faith. God will care for the Church as long as the trials last: *1260 days*.

#### **Revelation 12:7-9**

Michael, the leader of the army of angels, comes to overthrow the dragon. His name means “Who is like God?” indicating that it is by God's power that evil will be conquered. The dragon is explicitly named: the Devil (from the Greek *diabolos*, slanderer, accuser) and Satan (a Hebrew term for prosecutor or accuser). He is also described as *the deceiver of the whole world*, since he is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44). The dragon “drops his mask,” the Imperial authority, and is seen for who he is.

#### **Revelation 12:10-12**

The immediate victory of Michael over Satan brings forth another hymn of victory proclaimed by a heavenly voice: *Now have salvation and power come...* All the saints, who waited so long for their vindication, are the victors: *they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word*. Their faith in Christ, sealed by their testifying and by adding their blood to the sacrificial death of Jesus, is seen for what it is. What seemed their defeat is their victory.

*Rejoice then, O heaven... but woe to you, O earth and sea for the devil has come down to you*. Heaven's jubilation is contrasted with the predictable fury of the Persecutor. But the time of the wreckage of evil is short. God will reign; his kingdom has already been established and is growing. The miracles of Jesus and of his disciples are signs of Satan's fall (Luke 10:17-19, John 14:12).

#### **Revelation 12:13-15**

The evil one, conquered by Christ and the angels and martyrs, now turns his attention to the present-day Church: *he pursued the woman*. But the Church enjoys the same protection of God as did the Messiah himself. She is given the *two wings of a great eagle*: an image for great strength and speed (Exodus 19:4).



God provides, promptly; and once more the image of God's providence in the desert is used. The dragon tries all of his power, especially death. (Here again, the sea is an image of death, and the dragon is a sea-monster, personifying Death.) If direct persecution fails, the evil one will simply wait for the Church to die out.

**Revelation 12:16-18**

The flood, Death, is also helpless before the power of God: *the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river.* The earth as the helper of the Woman may suggest the underground refuge of the persecuted Church. The desperate dragon continues his futile warfare nonetheless: *and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus.* The Woman's children are the members of the Christian faithful.

## LESSON 12 - REVELATION 13:1-18

### Revelation 13:1-3

Before proceeding into the text, take a moment to recall our understanding of God and of our Church. God the Father, the almighty One and the Creator, sends the Son into our world. The Son, incarnate in Jesus, has received from the Father all power and authority. Jesus' divine mission, the "work of our redemption" is to do the Father's will. This includes his passion and death, his utter giving of himself to the Father. As the time of his death approaches, Jesus promises the Holy Spirit, also sent from the Father, to continue and bring to fulfillment the sanctification of humanity. Thus all people are to be fully re-created in the image of the Son. The role of the Church is to be a living image of Christ, the Son of God. It is animated by the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit enables signs and miracles to occur "in the name of" (by the authority of) Jesus. This quick summary of the Trinitarian aspect of salvation will get us well into the next chapter. Revelation will use its apocalyptic imagery to show how human beings, impelled by evil, attempt to set up an alternate kingdom with themselves as "god".

Jesus was once seen coming up from Jordan's water, anointed with the Spirit and declared to be the beloved Son of God. Here John says: *I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns.* This ugly beast is inspired by Daniel 7, where four kingdoms attempt to make war on God's people. The beast portrays the Emperor as an anti-Christ, a false Messiah, bearing a *blasphemous name*. The sacred and unpronounced name of God in Hebrew, YHWH, was translated into Greek as *Kyrios* (and into English as LORD). This holy name is blasphemed in the title *Caesar Kyrios* (Lord Caesar). *To it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority.* The term authority here means power, right, ability. It is the power or capability that flows from the very being of the person. The beast personifies the evil that flows from the dragon's being. The Roman Emperor is given power from the devil to work evil in the world as an enemy of God.

Every human kingdom is liable to death. The Roman empire has suffered setbacks (the assassination of Julius Caesar and of Nero) *but its mortal wound was healed* (as in the peaceful, unified Empire under Augustus). John suggests that Domitian is the resurrected

Nero ready to resume his attack on the Church. With its efficient government, disciplined army, and network of roads, Rome held the whole known world under its spell: the whole earth followed the beast with wonder.

### Revelation 13:4-6

Instead of worshiping God, the real source of power, men worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast.

The worldly success of Rome makes people slaves to greed and lustful for power. Materialism prevails. ... *who is like the beast*: a parody on the name of the angel Michael (Who is like God?) The Empire boasts of its power as though it was God: *it opened its mouth to utter blasphemies*.

#### **Revelation 13:7-8**

We know that God is really the one in charge. John reminds us that the sufferings of the Church are “permitted” by God. Rome is *allowed to make war on the saints*. (The “saints” are the “holy ones”, the living members of the Church [2 Corinthians 13:12-13, Philippians 4:21-22].) Similarly, Rome's world-wide dominion is not from itself; God has allowed it to exercise authority ... *over every tribe and people and tongue and nation*. God's justice will set things right and Rome will suffer for its arrogance.

The people of the world will be deceived into the worship of Rome and will accept the divinity of the Emperor. They will be taken into his cult. These are the unbelievers: *every one whose name had not been written ... in the book of life*, the ones who were not enrolled as Christians and baptized. The faithful Christians will suffer captivity (i.e., exile, like John himself) and death (the sword) but their serene acceptance of their plight will show their endurance and faith. (Note: the RSV follows a manuscript which reads: *if anyone slays with the sword with the sword must he be slain*. Other versions read: *if anyone is slain by the sword, by the sword he is slain*. This version seems to fit the context better.)

#### **Revelation 13:9-12**

So humans, rebelling against God, worship the dragon instead of the Father and the beast instead of the Son, the Lamb. The false “trinity” is completed with the appearance of *another beast which rose out of the earth*; it pretends to represent both the dragon and the beast. This second beast may represent the priesthoods or cult leaders who encouraged worship of the Emperor. These religious leaders *exercise the authority of the first beast*. They have the support of the government.

#### **Revelation 13:13-15**

By means of magic the second beast *works great signs*. These are not true miracles but deceptions: it deceives. The idolatrous cult-leaders *make an image of the beast which was wounded*, namely, the current Emperor, Domitian. Again, John describes Domitian as the resurrected Nero. The “talking image” may refer to the local authorities who were mere political puppets and who spoke for the Emperor. It may also refer to some kind of representation of the Emperor, perhaps a mask worn in a sacred drama. The point is that these cult leaders are authorized to enforce worship of Domitian and can sentence to death those who do not submit.

## Revelation 13:16-18

The enforcement of the Emperor-cult extends into daily life and business as well. Licensing of merchants and craftsman was required, and this meant submission to the cult. The beast *causes all ... to be marked on the right hand or the forehead*. Ancient writers describe brands and tattoos being employed to mark slaves and military personnel. As Christians were sealed with the sign of the cross (7:3), so the devotees of the Emperor are marked with his sign. The right hand and the forehead are parts of the body that are always in plain view; thus the acceptance of the cult was public knowledge. The economic pressure (that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark) served as another hardship for the Christians and made them outcasts.

The mark is further described as *the number of the beast, for it is a human number; its number is six hundred and sixty-six*. "Human number" means that the mark is a man's name. All of public life was "in the name of" the Emperor. What is the name represented by 666? One way to interpret this is to recall the Hebrew use of letters as numerals. Some commentators claim that the name "Caesar-Nero" in Hebrew will add up to 666. Others find its symbolism in the number six, which means imperfection or evil. 666 is a numerical way of saying "evil, evil, evil" - the ultimate enemy of God, the "holy, holy, holy" One. Either way, 666 is John's code name for the Emperor. While most people go along with the crowd, the Christian should be able to recognize the evil one in the Emperor. This recognition is a sign of wisdom.

## LESSON 13 - REVELATION 14:1-20

### Revelation 14:1-3

We now move back to a heavenly liturgy. Before we encounter more visions of destruction we are refreshed with a scene of victory and praise. *On Mount Zion stood the Lamb*. Zion is the hill upon which Jerusalem was built and signifies the throne of God and the Temple, or Dwelling, of God. Zion is the earthly counterpart of heaven. Christ, the slain but risen Lamb, stands in triumph. With him are members of the heavenly Church, the communion of the saints, represented by the 144,000 sealed believers. As usual, they are worshiping and praising; they *sing a new song*, that is, they have personal experience of God's goodness and sing with sincerity. Their voices are in harmony with God and the Spirit of God sings in them. The sound is described as the voice of God himself (Psalm 29). *No one could learn that song* because the song is not "learned" like a lesson but lived in faith. Only the survivors of the persecution can really "tell the story".

### Revelation 14:4-7

The faithful disciples of God *are chaste*, loving God, unlike those who "commit fornication" (idolatry). Alexander Schmemmann, an Orthodox Christian theologian, writes this on chastity: "If one does not reduce this term, as is so often and erroneously done, only to its sexual connotations, it is understood as the positive counterpart of sloth... Sloth is, first of all, dissipation, the brokenness of our vision and energy, the inability to see the whole... the broken character of our existence is nowhere better manifested than in sexual lust - the alienation of the body from the life and control of the spirit. Christ restores wholeness in us ... (Great Lent, page 36).

The faithful ones *follow the Lamb wherever he goes*, even to sharing in the sacrifice of the crucifixion by their own martyrdom. They are people of the Truth, Who is God. They are not of the Lie.

The *first fruits* are the sacrificial offerings at harvest time (Exodus 23:19, Deuteronomy 26:1-11). God was given a portion which represented the entire harvest. The sacrifice of the first fruits included animals and children as well (Exodus 13:2, 12-15). The martyrs are the first fruits, the first sacrifice, of humanity. Their consecration to God sanctifies all who will follow.

The next appearance is that of *another angel flying in mid-heaven* (the space between earth and the "dome of the sky") ... *with an eternal gospel*. The "good news" is that the final judgment, the irrevocable decision of God, is at hand. The message is for all people everywhere and of all times. Those who are faithful to God will be rewarded, but those who neither believe nor report will be destroyed (John 3:17-21, 16:8-11). Our refusal of God is itself our destruction and our sinfulness is its own punishment.

### Revelation 14:8-11

The verdicts are given by two more angels. The first is the news that *Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great*. As voted earlier, Babylon represents Rome, the Enemy of God, just as Jerusalem/Zion represents the Church. Babylon/Rome has deceived the whole world by encouraging and enforcing idolatry: the intoxication of wine represents the seduction of idolatry. The third angel then declares that those who have yielded to the cult of the Emperor will suffer for that choice: it is *wine of God's wrath, cup of his anger, fire and sulphur*. These physical images hint at the pain of remorse and guilt of those who are brought face to face with the holiness of God and who then see clearly their own self-centeredness. They have rejected the Lamb; when they see him and the holy angels their sinfulness will cause them much pain. *The smoke of their torment* goes up, a kind of mimicry of the fragrant incense of the prayers of the saints. The patient endurance of the martyrs has won them rest, but the wicked will have no rest.

### Revelation 14:12-13

Again we are called to patient endurance. The image here is that of military loyalty and valor. The observance of God's commandments and faith in Jesus both require courage and strength of character. Keeping the commandments shows that we acknowledge an Authority greater than ourselves or any other human government. Faith requires commitment to one we have never seen (1 John 4:12, 1 Peter 1:8-10). Faith is difficult enough, but then there is persecution on account of the faith! Is it really worth all the suffering? Why not just yield, and go along with everyone else? The heavenly voice declares: *Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord*. (Another of John's beatitudes.) Those who are faithful until death, who suffer the temporary loss of life, who do not turn back in the time of battle, will be blessed and will have unending peace. The Spirit of God testifies to this saying as well (1 John 5:7-10). The dead are indeed blessed. *Their deeds follow them* giving proof of their fidelity, just as the spoils and prisoners of war follow the victorious general in a triumphal parade. The Christian is not called to fight but to endure. Christ has already fought "the wondrous battle" (his death) and has won the victory (his resurrection).

### Revelation 14:14-16

The *white cloud*, the symbol of God's presence, serves as a throne for the *son of man*, the divine-human (Daniel 7:13). His crown shows that he is victorious. The sickle is the power of judgment. Two judgments will follow: one on God's people, the other upon the pagans. The command to judge is given from the temple, that is, from God. *The harvest of the earth is fully ripe*: this first harvest is understood as the assembly of the faithful. Since they have not swerved from their commitment to Christ, they are fully matured and perfect. Like ripe grain, they are gathered up and brought home (Matthew 13:30, 37-43). They have reached their goal. The heavenly being on the cloud brings his authority to bear on the earth.

## Revelation 14:17-20

A second judgment is also announced. This is the judgment upon the pagans, the judgment of destruction. The pagans, too, have gone as far as they can go. Like ripe grapes they “beg” for their fate. But grapes are not just gathered up; they are crushed. Wine and blood are frequently associated and are interchanged as symbols.

(Primitive peoples recognized the “divinity” present in the grapevine, since its fruit had a powerful effect on its partakers. The wine was the “spiritual blood” of the god.) So the conquest of the pagans and their bloody destruction is imaged as a human wine-press: *blood flowed from the wine press*. This occurs *outside the city* of Jerusalem, since bloodshed would defile the sacred place. God is elsewhere described as standing outside the city when he comes for judgment (Zachariah 14:3). The exaggerated river of blood, both in depth and extent (*1600 stadia* (4 x 4 x 100)) represents the world-wide scope of this event.

## LESSON 14 - REVELATION 15:1 - 16:21

### Revelation 15:1-4

If you have been struggling along through Revelation, the first verse of chapter fifteen should give you hope! John tells of a great and wonderful portent (sign) and that this sign is the end of it. We have one more cycle of seven: seven plagues which are the last. This time the seventh sign will lead us directly to the final confrontation. Evil Babylon (Rome) will be shown for what it is and destroyed, but holy Jerusalem (the Church) will be revealed and glorified.

First, another look into heaven: *a sea of glass mingled with fire*. This sea is not the place of death but a place of beauty and rest. Its clear, calm waters are bright and luminous. Its real beauty is from the fact that *those who had conquered the beast and its image*, the faithful martyrs, are *standing beside the sea*, just as the victorious Israelites stood on the far side of the Red Sea and saw the mighty works of God (Exodus 14:26 - 15:1). John intends this understanding, for he says that the saints *sing the song of Moses*. This song is not literally the great Exodus hymn but a new song with a new meaning, for it is also *the song of the Lamb*. Still it is very much in the spirit of the Song of Moses. God is praised for his holiness and justice. All nations will worship him. This song is part of our Evening Prayer on Fridays.

### Revelation 15:5-8

The final series of destructive signs begins, as we might expect, as an act of worship. *The temple of the tent of witness* was opened and angels in priestly garments (1:13) come forth in procession. The term *tent of witness* is used to recall the original dwelling of God among the Israelites in the desert (Exodus 40:34-35, the tabernacle or tent of meeting). Like the ark of covenant, the ancient tent was expected to be revealed at the time of the coming of the Messiah (2 Maccabees 2:4-8). The power of God in the heavenly temple is in the form of a luminous cloud (1 Kings 8:10-13). No one can enter the holy place to petition God and try to prevent the coming of the plagues. The plagues represent the irrevocable judgment and are the fulfillment of God's will.

### Revelation 16:1-3

Chapter 16 is the actual coming of the final plagues which are similar to the plagues upon Egypt at the time of Moses. They are meant as one last warning to the idolaters to repent. Like Pharaoh, they persist in their stubbornness and curse God. The first two plagues are infected sores and the turning of the sea into blood (Exodus 9:9 and 7:17-19). Unlike the disaster brought by the second trumpet (8:9) which was only partial, this ruin is total: *every living thing died that was in the sea*.



### Revelation 16:4-7

The *third angel* pours out the bowl upon the fresh water, also turning it into blood. The *angel of water*, that is, the spirit to whom all water has been entrusted, approves of this: *Just art thou in these thy judgments, thou who art and who wast, O Holy One.*

It is fitting that the unrepentant should find their world bloodied since they had *shed the blood of the saints and prophets* (both the witnesses to Christ and the holy ones of the Old Testament). Will blood being everywhere, even to drink, bring these people to their senses? The altar, the place of intercessory prayer and atoning sacrifice in front of the temple, also affirms the justice of God. The voice may be that of the angel who attends the altar (8:3) or the martyrs (6:9).

### Revelation 16:8-11

The power of God is not only over the earth. The heavenly powers, especially the sun, respond to God's will. The *fourth angel* causes the sun to exceed its usual limits and *to scorch men with fire*. Worship of the sun was a common cult in ancient times. Like other sins, this foolishness has its price: those who worship the sun “get burned” for seeking another god.

Like the Pharaoh whose heart was hardened and would not obey the word of God through Moses, the idolaters do *not repent and give him glory*. Nor do they pray for help from the God who *had power over the plagues but they cursed the name of God*.

Another reference to Moses and the Pharaoh: the Pharaoh's palace and his own person was invaded by the plagues (Exodus 8:3 and 8:24). The plague sent by the hand of the *fifth angel* is directly upon *the throne of the beast*, the city of Rome. The result is *darkness* upon the Empire just as Egypt suffered darkness in Moses' time. This is simply an outward sign of the deeper darkness of evil and sin that has been spreading through the whole Empire. The same anger and curses against God are noted.

### Revelation 16:12-14

We are closer to the end. The *sixth angel* causes the river Euphrates to dry up. The natural border of the Empire is no longer an obstacle to invasion of *the kings of the east* who will overthrow Rome. The Roman Emperor (*the dragon*) responds by summoning up all his power both political (*the beast*) and religious (*the false prophet*, the same as the beast from the earth in 13:11), mobilizing his allies, *the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day*. The call to battle against God is a foul, evil message. The words are *like frogs* (like an Egyptian plague). Rome will display signs of power to entice the allies to join in the warfare.

## Revelation 16:15-17

*Lo! I am coming like a thief! Blessed is he who is awake, keeping his garments that he may not go naked and be seen exposed!* This parenthetical verse seems out of place, interrupting the story of the sixth plague, but it also affirms the nearness of the Day of the Lord. The person who is awake sees clearly what is happening and is prepared. Those who have undressed and are sleeping are paying no attention to the cosmic signs. Perhaps they have convinced themselves that “it won't happen to me”.

*Armageddon*, like 666, is one of the words that comes to mind when people think of Revelation. It is derived from the Hebrew *har Megiddo*, the mountain of Megiddo. Megiddo is the name of a town located in a pass between the coastal plain and the plain of Esdraelon, thus making it of strategic importance. The conquest of Megiddo assured dominance and success. Judges 5:19 names Megiddo in the famous battle of Sisera against Deborah and Barak when “the stars fought against Sisera”. Megiddo became the symbol of decisive victory. Rome is ready to wage war against God one last time.

The *seventh angel* performs his task, upon the air. The judgment is complete. The earth, the sea and the water, the fire, and now the air, have all been affected: *it is done*.

## Revelation 16:18-21

Since the judgment is complete, the old world must give way to the new. Familiar signs of the unraveling of the universe are seen: lightning, thunder, hail, and earthquake (even bigger than the one that struck in A.D. 60, such that only Laodicea was wealthy enough to rebuild (3:17)). *The great city* is ruined, as are the *cities of the nations*. *God remembered great Babylon* not with compassion and mercy but with vengeance for all that has been done to his holy people (Psalm 137:7-9). The whole earth is torn up: *every island fled away and no mountains were to be found*. What once was stable and reliable vanishes before the power of God. *Great hailstones* are one more destructive blow and the response is still stubbornness and cursing.

## LESSON 15 - REVELATION 17:1-18

### Revelation 17:1-3

What was hidden will now be exposed for what it is. We will witness the *judgment of the great harlot*. Rome is imaged as a drunken prostitute, contrasted to the virgin bride Jerusalem. First, we are told that the harlot is *seated upon the many waters*, that is, someone who controls the seaways. Second, she is the one *with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication* - she has led them into idolatry. Third, her sinfulness has influenced *all the dwellers on earth*.

John receives a vision, *being carried away in the Spirit, into a wilderness*, a place of desolation and the abode of evil spirits (Leviticus 16:10, Matthew 4:1 and 12:43). He sees a *woman* personifying the city of Rome, *sitting on a scarlet beast*.

Divine beings, including the God of Israel, were often depicted as mounted on various creatures. Canaanite divinities were shown astride a bull; the LORD rides upon the Cherubim. The self-proclaimed god of Rome rides the ugly beast first described in 13:1. This beast also represents the whole Roman Empire for it is *full of blasphemous names*: everywhere the “divinity” of Domitian is proclaimed.

### Revelation 17:4-6

The harlot is luxuriously and richly dressed in *scarlet and purple*. Only the wealthy could afford colored clothing, and purple was a mark of royalty. *Gold and jewels and pearls* are also tokens of vast wealth as well as the fact the Rome received the tribute of the whole world. She is addicted to sin and is not satisfied with her past deeds. She continues to drink of *abominations and fornication*. She is drunk with *the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus*. Her name, a *mystery*, is a symbolic name. She, Rome, is *Babylon the great, mother of harlots*, that is, the greatest of all harlots.

### Revelation 17:7-8

The next verses are typical of apocalyptic literature. The seer is overwhelmed by what he sees but the angel/messenger provided an explanation: *I will tell you the mystery*. The beast, which pretends to divine authority, in reality *was and is not, and is to ascend from the bottomless pit and go to perdition*. The beast, unlike God (who “was and is and is to come”) is transitory; its origin and destiny is nothingness. Yet its pretenses are enough to convince those who are not God's people to *marvel to behold* it. Again the angel notes that the beast *was and is not and is to come*.

## Revelation 17:9-12

The further explanation is given for those who have *wisdom*, the ability to understand how apocalyptic symbols: that the beast's *seven heads are seven mountains*, the seven hills of Rome." The heads also dignify the *seven kings*, the current dynasty of emperors. It is perhaps fruitless to try to connect this with actual history but attempts have been made. One numbering is as follows: The five *fallen* are Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero. The *one who is*, is Vespasian; the short-lived one is Titus, and the *eighth who belongs to the seven* (also an emperor, and the "resurrected Nero") is Domitian, who *goes to perdition*. This interpretation has led some to conclude that John wrote 11 the time of Vespasian. This may simply be an effort to "veil" his message or to give it the "authority" of having been written in a former time, as a prophecy now being fulfilled.

The *ten kings* represent various satellite nations who will share in Rome's power, but only briefly (*one hour*).

We can easily become lost in trying to make too many connections to actual historical persons. We can also get confused by taking too literally the "explanations" given in the text. The basic idea remains clear: Rome, for all its display of authority, will be no match for God who comes to judge and to save his persecuted Church.

## Revelation 17:13-14

Rome has mustered its forces and allies to *make war on the Lamb*. They are of *one mind*, which is conspiracy or alliance (Psalm 2), but *the Lamb will conquer them*. Christ identifies himself with his people. Those who attack his disciples attack him (Luke 10:16, Acts 9:1-5). Christ alone deserves the royal and divine titles *King of Kings and Lord of Lords*, the supreme King, the universal Lord. His saints all described in a three-fold phrase: *called, chosen and faithful*. They have heard the message of Christ; they have believed in it and lived by it, they are faithful unto death. This three-fold designation suggests also the various members of the church: the catechumens who are beginning to receive the Gospel, the elect or "chosen" who have proved themselves and are being prepared for the sacraments, and the faithful who share fully in the sacramental life of the Church. All of them stand with the Lamb.

## Revelation 17:15-18

The angel continues to explain the mounted harlot: *the waters are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues*. Rome governs people over all the earth. The harlot is seated upon them. But there is chafing under the yoke. The subjected peoples will finally revolt and throw off Rome's authority. This overthrow of the Empire is also a part of God's plan to reduce human arrogance.

The city will be looted (*make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh*) and burnt. Since all human thoughts and secrets are known to God, and since God is the source of all knowledge and insight, the Bible often speaks of God as putting something into the heart (“putting ideas into people's heads”) (Exodus 11:10, Jeremiah 32:40, Baruch 3:7). God now inspires a plot: the subject nations yield their power to Rome only to turn on her. Finally, in case we have not yet grasped the symbol, the angel repeats: *and the woman that you saw is the great city which has dominion over the kings of the earth.*

## LESSON 16 - REVELATION 18:1-24

### Revelation 18:1-3

The next section of Revelation is a hymn of lamentation over the destruction of Rome. We may wonder why there would be mourning over the destruction of evil. Actually, the rhythmic repetition serves to impress upon us that the judgment has actually occurred. After so many signs of chaos and ruin, we have no literal description of the end of Rome. It is as though it simply vanished and those who witnessed the event are stunned at how something so vast and imposing should simply cease to exist. Such is evil, hollow and illusory.

*Another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority* announces that Rome has come to an end: *Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!* It is a desert where demons and vultures dwell. The nations have accepted her idolatries, kings have made alliances with her, and merchants grew rich by her materialism. The kings and the merchants will have their own songs of lament.

### Revelation 18:4-8

First, though, *another voice from heaven* which summons the Christian people to separate themselves from the pagans. This separateness is the original meaning of the Hebrew word for “holy”; the holy people of the Holy God will have no interest in the sinfulness of Rome. We may not participate in sin, or we will also share in the plagues which are the consequence of sin.

Verses 6-8 seem to be addressed to God, asking him to avenge his people and to repay Rome doubly for her crimes. Drinking from a cup seals a covenant and expresses acceptance (Psalm 75:8, Mark 10:38 and 14:36). The voice asks God to give Rome “a taste of her own medicine,” except at double strength. Her glory will now be her misery, her lust will become grief, and her royal dignity will become poverty and widowhood.

### Revelation 18:9-10

The kings of the earth, who had made alliances with Rome and had accepted the demand that the Emperor be acknowledged as divine, thought that they were secure under Rome's power. Now, shocked by Rome's rapid fall, they *stand far off*, rejecting her. They are afraid that their association with Rome will result in a similar fate for themselves. They lament that the *great city* which had seemed so strong and invincible has fallen in *one hour*, almost instantly.

### Revelation 18:11-14

The lament of the merchants hints at Rome's luxury. Exotic goods from the whole Mediterranean world, as well as the Middle East and Africa, were commonly seen in Rome, the hub of highways and sea routes. John lists all kinds of items, some practical, and some luxury. *Scented wood* refers to the wood of the citron tree, imported from Africa and used for fine furniture. Purple and scarlet cloth was made from imported dyes and could be had only by the wealthy. Egypt was the source of Rome's wheat; spices and incense are from the Middle East. Once, anything could be bought and sold in Rome, even *slaves, that is, human souls*. (The author emphasizes this, as though to make us realize that human persons were treated as mere animals in the slave markets. Such slaves were kept for field or house work as well as for erotic entertainment.) Now there is no one to buy these goods. The merchants mourn for themselves because their market has disappeared.

### Revelation 18:15-19

The funeral dirge over the fall of Rome continues, taken up now by *the merchants ... who gained wealth from her*. Although the tone of the lament is that of personal grief, the merchants *stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning* more for themselves and their lost profits than from any genuine affection for the city. They weep because *in one hour all this wealth has been laid waste* and they themselves will be the losers. The next section shows that the fall is that of Rome and not of ancient Babylon. Rome is lamented by *all shipmasters ... all whose trade is on the sea*. Rome controlled the Mediterranean Sea and its trade-routes whereas Babylon is an inland city. The shippers mourn saying, "*What city was like the great city?*" recalling Rome's pride and blasphemy. "Who is like the beast?" (13:5)). In Middle-Eastern fashion, they mourn by putting dust or ashes on their faces. This outward grief is self-serving, as before, and suggests the sarcasm of a mock funeral.

### Revelation 18:20-24

Meanwhile, the faithful are rejoicing: *Rejoice over her, O heaven, O saints and apostles and prophets*. The great persecutor is defeated and God's people see their vindication at hand. The angel, in prophetic fashion, mimes a prophecy by throwing a *great millstone ... into the sea* (Jeremiah 19:1-20:6). The sign is explained: *so shall Babylon be thrown down with violence, and shall be found no more*. The angel further describes the awful stillness of the dead city, naming sounds from ordinary life that *shall be heard ... no more*. An empty quiet pervades once prosperous place whose *merchants were the great men of the earth*. The cause of this devastation is stated again: *all nations were deceived by thy sorcery, and in her was found the blood of the saints, and of all who have been slain on earth*. Rome is held responsible for the execution of the martyrs and is also blamed for all the murders, war, and untimely deaths of all people. For John, Rome is "sin incarnate" and all the sins of all people find their source in her. She bears the guilt of all of them.

## LESSON 17 - REVELATION 19:1-21

### Revelation 19:1-3

The heavenly liturgy continues: John hears the *loud voice of a great multitude in heaven singing Hallelujah!* (Praise the Lord!), a liturgical acclamation, not translated from the Hebrew because of its widespread usage. *Salvation and glory and power belong to our God.* Arrogant Rome had deceived the world into finding their security in her. The saints know that salvation (freedom, help, safety) are in God alone. To God belongs the glory and the power. (These words, together with verses 5 and 7-8, are used as a canticle of victory in Sunday Evening Prayer.)

God's judgment is true and just: *he has judged the great harlot who corrupted the earth* (by idolatry) and he has *avenged on her* the death of the martyrs. Like a perpetual offering of incense, *the smoke of her goes up forever.* Rome remains forever a reminder of the fate of those who do not accept God's reign.

### Revelation 19:4-5

As in the first vision of heaven in chapter 4, *the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down* in their worship of God's majesty, singing: *Amen. Hallelujah!* Then, *from the throne came a voice*, for it is the Spirit of God who teaches us how to pray, and Who motivates our praises (Romans 8:26-27). *Praise our God, all you his servants; you who fear him, small and great.* In New Testament times there were Gentiles who believed in the One God and admired the devotion of the Jewish people, though they did not become Jews themselves. They were called the God-fearers, or "those who reverence God" (Luke 7:1-5, Acts 10:34-35, 13:16). Such holy fear (reverence, awe, respect) separates the believer from the unbeliever. Every creature, heavenly and earthly, Israelite and Gentile, is called upon to join in the victorious hymn of the saints.

### Revelation 19:6-8

The faithful on earth echo the heavenly hymn. John hears *the voice of a great multitude* resembling the *sound of many waters*, and the sound of *mighty thunder peals.* The huge crowd from all humanity declares that the *Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns.* There is no more fear of Roman domination and there is no reason to acclaim God secretly. In a beautiful image, found throughout the Scriptures, the unity of God with the People appears as a marriage. Though the prophets saw this in the future, now *the marriage of the Lamb has come; his bride has made herself ready.* After so much longing and suffering, the Church is now to rejoice in her Spouse's love (Song of Songs 3:1-4, 5:2-8, 6:3 (traditionally interpreted as referring to the union of God with Israel), Hosea 2:1-23, Isaiah 54:4-8.)



Because the Church has remained faithful, she is imaged as a virgin bride worthy of a royal wedding: it is *granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure*. John further explains that this fidelity is seen in *the righteous deeds of the saints*.

#### **Revelation 19:9-10**

Another of John's beatitudes: *Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb*. The marriage-feast is a wonderful image of the Eucharist. Our sharing in it is a sign that we are indeed faithful to God. In the Eucharist we celebrate in advance our final destiny as being united with God in everlasting joy. The angel assures John that *these are true words of God*: that is, the visions of the fall of Rome and the victory of the Church will indeed become reality. John, once more overcome with gratitude and joy, falls down in reverence before the angel. The angel, however, seeks no glory; he reminds John that he is a *fellow servant*.

The Church, as it continues on its pilgrimage, can rely on those who have been inspired by the Holy Spirit to teach and lead the community. These God-filled servants are the present-day prophets, who speak authoritatively in the name of Jesus: for *the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy*. The Spirit bears witness to Jesus, and leads the Church into truth (John 14:13-15, I John 5:5-9). This assurance that the Church's teaching is "of the Holy Spirit" is the basis for the doctrine of infallibility. Whatever is believed universally by the members of the Church and whatever is taught in fidelity to Tradition and the Holy Scriptures is without error. It is reliable and worthy of our belief. This fidelity and authenticity is what is meant by the Pope "teaching *ex cathedra* (from the chair (of Peter))." He ministers to the Church by teaching as the apostles taught.

#### **Revelation 19:11-13**

The end of the Roman Empire (and the end of the dominion of evil) is not an "accident of history." It is the victory of Jesus Christ. To make this clear, John now describes the coming of Jesus as victorious warrior and judge.

Heaven opens once more, indicating that John is seeing beyond the limits of this world. The Conqueror appears, mounted on a white horse. As in 6:2, this is the sign of invincible power. No one is able to withstand or resist him. Although his titles are *Faithful and true, He judges justly and fights for justice*. The just warrior-king is a traditional image for the Messiah (Psalm 72:2-10, Isaiah 11:3-4). He is described in divine terms: *his eyes are a flame of fire*. He wears *many diadems* because of the universal extent of his authority. He has a *name which no one knows but himself*, as does the God Moses encountered (Exodus 3:13-15: "I AM"). The rider wears a *robe dipped in blood* because he has fought and defeated his enemies. John further identifies the rider as the one called *The Word of God*. The rider is Jesus, the Christ.

### **Revelation 19:14-16**

Christ, the victor, leads a triumphant army *arrayed in fine linen, on white horses*, the faithful martyrs. As in 1:16, the word of Christ is *a sharp sword*. His truth demolishes all pretense and empty boasting. Christ, the eternal Shepherd, will *rule them with an iron rod*. The breaking of a staff or scepter symbolized the end of the reign; Christ's rule is unbreakable. Christ will execute God's judgment which is imaged as treading *the wine press (14:19-20)*. His title is openly displayed *on his robe and on his thigh* (perhaps meaning "his sword"). Christ is rightfully called *King of kings and Lord of lords* for he is God.

### **Revelation 19:17-19**

Since the outcome of the battle is certain, *an angel standing in the sun* (radiant with the divine joy of Christ's victory) calls out a summons *to all the birds that fly in mid-heaven*: they are to gather for the great supper of God. This is not the wedding feast of the Lamb but the carrion feast of the destroyed armies of the Evil One. The birds' grotesque meal will include *the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies*: Domitian and all his allies.

### **Revelation 19:20-21**

We may have expected a fierce battle but the confrontation is more of an arrest than a war: *the beast was captured and with it the false prophet*. The civil and religious authority of Domitian is no match for Christ, the King and Priest. Domitian's fate is to be *thrown alive into the lake of fire*: he will be consumed by his own evil. Fire is an agent of purification as is *sulphur*. Domitian's foulness requires this disinfecting of the world. Fire and sulphur (brimstone) also recall the irrevocable damnation of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24). Again, the word of Christ proves the most powerful force, for the assembled kings and their armies are all *slain by the sword...that issues from his mouth*.

## LESSON 18 - REVELATION 20:1-15

### Revelation 20:1-3

So much for Domitian and his allies. He was but the puppet-king of the real emperor of evil, Satan. What about him? John assures us of Satan's fate as well. We now see an *angel, . . . holding in his hand the key* (the sign of authority and control) *and the chain*. While the incarnate Christ conquers on earth, the angels of heaven overwhelm the Prince of Darkness, *the dragon, that ancient serpent, Satan is bound . . . for a thousand years*, imprisoned in *the pit*. Imprisoned, but not yet destroyed, for that privilege belongs to Christ. Satan will be *loosed for a little while* but only to stand trial before Christ.

Here again is a detail of Revelation that has puzzled many: to what does the *thousand years* refer? It is a symbol for a vast period of time, just short, as it were, of infinity. Some have taken this literally, and have imagined a precise interval of history. In the Middle Ages, A.D. 1000 was considered as the date of "the seventh day of creation." As the year approached, some expected the establishment of a messianic kingdom to last for 1000 years. Thus the end of human history would be in A.D. 2000. (As this was written in 1991, at that time it was expected that there would be many predictions of an imminent End in the years leading up to the year 2000, especially among fundamentalist Christians.)

The thousand year reign of Christ may be understood as the time of the Church, the time between the resurrection of Christ and his parousia (second coming). According to this view, the "first resurrection" (20:6) of the saints refers to their baptism; the "second resurrection," eternal bliss in heaven. In this time, the power of Satan is reduced but not destroyed; the saints live in joyful faith.

Another view is far simpler: John wishes to encourage the suffering Churches with the knowledge that a brief persecution ("3 ½ years") is nothing at all compared to the happiness of the victory of Christ ("1000 years"). Given the complex symbolism of Revelation, this simple explanation may be the most consistent and satisfactory.

### Revelation 20:4-6

John completes his description of the final judgment. *Here now are thrones and . . . those to whom judgment had been committed*. The martyrs, who shared in Christ's death by dying, now share in his triumphant judgment. The right to judge is granted to *those who had been beheaded; those who had not worshipped the false gods and had not received the mark of the beast*. These martyrs, whose souls had lain beneath the altar (6:9) crying for justice *came to life, and reigned with Christ for a thousand years*. Christ's victory is equally theirs. But the *rest did not . . . until the thousand years were ended*. The victory of the martyrs is not the same as the final resurrection of all mankind. The martyrs, uniquely one with Christ, also uniquely intercede with him for the earthly Church as she continues her journey.

John declares: *Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection*, because *over them the second death has no power* and they are assured of eternal happiness. “First” and “second” death and resurrection seem to refer to two different perspectives: the “first” is that of human history, the “second” that of the eschatological (final) age. The second death is eternal damnation.

The intercession of the martyrs, together with their self-sacrifice, is how they are *priests of God and of Christ*. Prayer and self-sacrifice is also how every baptized Christian exercises his or her priesthood.

#### **Revelation 20:7-9**

No apocalypse is complete without repetition and seeming contradictions, and Revelation is no exception. Having witnessed the victory of Christ and his own, John goes on to speak of yet a further battle *when the thousand years are ended*, when *Satan... will deceive the nations* once more and marshal the pagan nations symbolized by *Gog and Magog* against the Church, *the camp of the saints and the beloved city*. As Rome was vanquished in an instant, this impotent attack by Satan will fail at once: *fire came from heaven and consumed them*. Fire from heaven is biblical lightning. The last vestige of rebellion against God will quickly and definitively end.

#### **Revelation 20:10-12**

At last, the *devil who had deceived them* (the pagan nations) will be *thrown into the lake of fire and tormented day and night for ever and ever*. The power of evil is now brought to an end.

With all the battling finished, the final judgment of the whole world takes place. Instead of a white horse, John sees a great white throne. So awesome is this event John does not even name the Judge, but we know it is either God or Christ acting in God's name. So great is God and so firm his authority that nothing and no one can withstand it. *Earth and sky fled away* because they, too, have been tainted by the sinfulness of those who have rebelled against God. The first creation must pass away to make room for the new.

John now sees *the dead, great and small, standing before the throne*. All humans are called to account, regardless of any “earthly” status or dignity. All stand in reverence and expectancy. Christ alone sits enthroned. History is irrevocable, and so the *books were opened*: whatever has been done cannot be and ignored or covered. *Another book was opened which is the book of life*, the record of the enrolled and baptized Christians (notes on 3:4-6).

*The dead were judged by what was written*: there is no further opportunity for repentance nor is there any rebuttal of the Judge's decision. The evidence is plainly visible to all.

A person's actions show what is “within them” (Matthew 7:15-20). Our deeds make known what we really believe in, and are as clear as a written record.

**Revelation 20:13-15**

Even the secrets of the natural world are revealed as *the sea gave up the dead*, and *Hades* (the abode of the dead deep within the earth, known as *Sheol* by the Hebrews; the grave) *gave up the dead*. All must appear before God.

God, Who is Life, overcomes all death. Hence *Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire* to be destroyed just as surely as sin and evil are ended. “Death” and “The Grave” have no place in the New Creation. John explains that *this is the second death, the lake of fire*: it is final, utter abolition.

## LESSON 19 – REVELATION 21:1-27

### Revelation 21:1-4

At the beginning of this study, it was stated that most of Revelation has already taken place. These final chapters are what still remains to be fulfilled. The last two chapters are the brilliant, sublime images of our future as Christ's faithful ones. Here is our hope, in the glorious poetry of the Seer.

First, *a new heaven and a new earth*, a fresh, worthy place for God's people. And since there is no more death there is no reason to symbolize it: *the sea was no more*. Into this perfect world descends the *holy city, new Jerusalem*: not built by human labor, but bestowed as a gift. This is the community of the redeemed, the “communion of the saints,” the Church as she is meant to be. She is *bride adorned for her husband*: beautiful, radiant, joyful, full of anticipation, ready to be joined in total love. This wonder is described in the words of one of the living creatures: *Behold the dwelling of God is with men*. No longer is there a separation between “this world” and “God's world”. There is only God's world, and it is among God's people. Full of divine life, the new world is where *death shall be no more* (Isaiah 35:10) and the tears of grief have no place.

### Revelation 21:5-6

God himself describes His gift: *Behold, I make all things new*. This new creation is far more than the natural renewal of the world in springtime. It is also far more than the personal, spiritual regeneration of the Christian, or the reform of the Church. This is a total, inside and out, renewal and re-creation of the entire universe. This renewal begins and ends with Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:13-20, esp. 16-17). Now God's plan has reached its perfection. God is once more named as the *Alpha and Omega*, the Source and the Fulfillment. Faith in God is life: to all who come in faith God gives from the *fountain of the water of life* (John 7:37-39).

### Revelation 21:7-8

The gift of divine life, symbolized by the fountain of water, is for the faithful ones: *he who conquers shall have this heritage*. But this heritage is not just a thing we get: it is profound union with God. Our journey of faith leads us to the closeness and affection of Parent and child. God gives and sustains our life, loves us, protects us, guides us. Those who were unrepentant and persisted in idolatry are given instead *the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death*. They destroyed themselves by choosing self-gratifying pleasures instead of God, who is Love.

### **Revelation 21:9-11**

With all of the plagues and chaos now at an end, one of the angels invites John to see *the Bride, the wife of the Lamb*. This will be the perfect, newly restored Church which is symbolized by the name Jerusalem. John is taken to a high mountain to see the future holy People just as Moses was allowed a glimpse of the promised Land from the summit of Mount Nebo (Deuteronomy 34). John sees *the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God*, radiant with light because it reflects the very nature of God. The glowing cloud of the holy Presence (*Shekinah*) is now the holy Church: to see the Church as it really is, is to see the glory of God.

### **Revelation 21:12-14**

John also describes the city in terms of perfect completeness, without flaw or lack. Again and again the city is described in twelves: *twelve gates...twelve angels...twelve foundations*. The city is square, four-sided, to encompass all people and all places. Its strength and its foundations are the deep roots of Israel (twelve tribes) and the apostles.

### **Revelation 21:15-18**

John's vision of the perfect Church resembles closely the image of the perfect Jerusalem in Ezekiel 48:30-35. As mentioned before the city is *foursquare* and each wall is *twelve thousand stadia* in length: the city is large enough to be a home to every believer. Length, width and height are equal, because the city is complete and perfect. Its cubic form recalls the innermost room of the Temple, the Holy of Holies. The entire city is God's sacred dwelling. The wall is also perfectly formed: 12 x 12 cubits in height. The angel is using the ordinary measure; the earthly world and heavenly world are one, so that the cubit of a man is the same as that of an angel. The wall seems to indicate the boundaries of the holy city rather than serve as a defense for it. The wall of jasper (a clear gemstone) adds a further touch of brilliance to a city which is entirely pure gold, clear as glass. This layering of symbolism simply points to the fact that God is there.

### **Revelation 21:19-21**

John describes further the city's foundation, layer upon layer of jewels. He is perhaps thinking of the rows of gems which adorned the sacred breastplate of the High Priest (Exodus 28-17-21) which was also designed to create an impression of sacredness and the divine presence. The gates themselves are carved from pearl. (This verse is the origin of the "pearly gates" of heaven.)

### Revelation 21:22-24

The focal point of the old Jerusalem was the Temple, the dwelling of God among the people. Ezekiel's vision of a perfect Jerusalem also included a perfect temple (Ezekiel 45:1-3). John sees *no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb*; God has no further need of a dwelling or an outward manifestation of his presence. He has made himself available and visible in Christ (John 14:9). The radiance of God is so abundant, that sun and moon are no more, and Christ is the vessel of that glory: *the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb*. John refers also to Isaiah 60:1-7, a prophecy about the restored Jerusalem, when he says that *by its light the nations shall walk*. (The Isaiah passage is read on the feast of the Epiphany, when we celebrate God's revelation of himself to all the nations in Jesus Christ. What was first revealed in Christ is now perfectly revealed through the Christian community, the Church.) All earthly powers pay tribute in God's city, just as they once attempted to overthrow it (17:14, 19:19-20, 20:8-10).

### Revelation 21:25-27

The city is safe and secure and welcomes all who seek God: *its gates shall never be shut by day* and there is no night. No one can enter by stealth, since God sees all and his angels guard it. John further declares that nothing unclean shall enter it. There is no place in this holy communion, this spousal unity, for anything stained by human sinfulness. The city is so God-centered that no idolatry (*abomination*) is tolerated. Since all see God face-to-face, deception and falsehood are impossible. Only the chosen and faithful ones, *those who are written in the book of life*, are welcome.



## LESSON 20 - REVELATION 22:1-21

### Revelation 22:1-4

The final chapter of Revelation brings us one further vision of God and then a series of concluding warnings and exhortations similar to those at the beginning of the book.

The revelation of God is completed by the revelation of the Holy Spirit, so that humans can know God as the Holy Trinity. As John looks upon the Church, the new Jerusalem, he recognizes the Holy Spirit as the source of its vitality. The Spirit is imaged as *the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb*. As Jesus predicted rivers of living water flowing from the heart of the believer (John 7:37-39) so John sees the Spirit at work in the heart of the whole Church. The living stream is flowing through *the middle of the street*, accessible to all. The River manifests its life-giving power through the *tree of life* (understood better as many trees) which grow along the banks and produce *twelve fruits*, that is, a complete variety, suited to all needs, and without interruption, *twelve times a year*. Not only are the divine fruits for nourishment, the very leaves of the trees are medicinal as well: *for the healing of the nations*. In other words, God's Spirit both upbuilds and reconciles. The Spirit is the source of the *communion of the saints and the forgiveness of sins*.

The heavenly liturgy goes on, and takes the earthly worship into itself. No more idolatries: God's servants *shall worship him; they shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads*. God is fully manifested to his people *as he is*; they are known as his own, and he is plainly seen by them (1 John 3:1-2, 1 Corinthians 13:12, John 16:25-29).

### Revelation 22:5-7

Since the old order has passed away and all is now in God, who is light, the cycles of day and night are no more: *night shall be no more*. This also lets us know that there is no more fear of evil or of death since both have been overcome by Christ's resurrection.

The angel who has been John's guide through these revelations now affirms their truth: *these words are trustworthy and true*. The God who spoke truthfully by the prophets now has made these words known. John adds another beatitude: *Blessed is he who keeps the words of prophecy of this book*, that is, who faithfully lives by the word of God (Luke 11:28).

### Revelation 22:8-11

Once again, John's response is to fall down in worship before the angel. The angel repeats that he is only *a fellow servant with you and your brethren the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book*.

Furthermore, John's role is that of a preacher and a missionary. He is told: *Do not seal up the words of this prophecy*. The time of fulfillment is so close that the message John has received is of the utmost urgency. People need to hear the Word of God! John is not to hesitate nor evaluate his own success. The sinful will go on sinning, the holy will go on being holy. It is not for John to judge but to serve by making the message known.

#### **Revelation 22:12-15**

Now the speaker is Jesus: *I am coming soon*, he says, and he will be the judge. As before, Jesus identifies himself as true God, *I Am*, and as *alpha and omega, first and last, beginning and end*. In the Roman Catholic tradition, the Easter Candle, the principal symbol of the risen Christ, is blessed by recalling these same words.

One last beatitude: *Blessed are those who wash their robes*, that is, in the blood of the Lamb. Those who share in Christ's death by baptism or martyrdom will share his eternal life. They will have the *right to the tree of life* which was forbidden to man in Eden and they will *enter the city by the gates* (John 10:1-10). Jesus is the way to the Kingdom.

The holy city is off-limits to evil and to sinners. The dogs are not canines; this was a disparaging term used by Jews for the Canaanites. The Canaanites living in the holy Land still clung to their fertility gods, especially Baal (a name which means "master"). Like dogs mindlessly obeying their masters, the Canaanites foolishly followed Baal. Jesus himself used this epithet in speaking to the Syro-phenician woman (Mark 7:26-28). Here, the dogs are the pagans who will not accept the one true God or the Jews who will not accept Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:2). Also excluded are the irreligious and those who trust in magic or sorcery.

#### **Revelation 22:16-17**

Jesus identifies himself by name and further declares that he is the fulfillment of the old covenant and the certain revelation of the eternal life to come: *I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star*.

To this same Jesus *the Spirit and the Bride* (the Church), say "Come." This is the constant prayer of the faithful who look for the fulfillment of the divine promises, both in heaven and on earth (all *who hear*). To those who long for God, who are *thirsty* and who desire God, the *water of life*, the Holy Spirit, is given *without price*.

#### **Revelation 22:18-21**

John affirms the solemnity of this message and warns the hearer not to add or subtract anything: *if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues ... if any one takes away from the words ... God will take away his share in the tree of life...* We are not to substitute our own ideas for God's message.

We are not to add other promises or beliefs and we are not to omit parts of the message which we do not understand or which disturb us. Simply, the Word is to be received with humility and reverence (James 1:21).

And the promise of Christ, to be with us always (Matthew 28:20) is made again lest the suffering Christians feel abandoned or rejected: *Surely I am coming soon.*

John then concludes this message of hope with three expressions frequently used in the ancient liturgies: first, *Come, Lord Jesus!* (in Aramaic, *Maranatha*, the prayer of expectation and hope (1 Corinthians 16:22)); second, *Amen*, the Hebrew affirmation of faith; third, a blessing: *the grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints* that all of the faithful may remain united in Christ's own love.

With this we complete our study of Revelation. Fear has given way to hope, darkness to light, and death to life eternal. Jesus Christ alone is the Holy One, he alone is Lord, he alone is the Most High, together with the Holy Spirit and the Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

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