

***INVITATION TO
CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP***



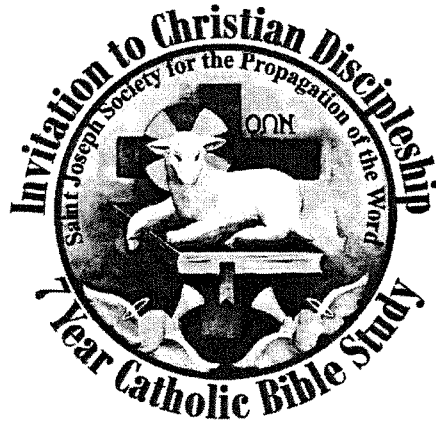
St. Michael Victorious Raphael

***COMMENTARY ON
THE APOCALYPSE***

TEACHER'S MANUAL

INVITATION TO CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

A Seven Year Catholic bible Study



The Apocalypse or The Book of Revelation

Commentary by
James P. O'Bryan, S.T.

St. Joseph Society for the Propagation of the Word
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INVITATION TO CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

A Seven Year Catholic Bible Study

Commentary by: James P. O'Bryan, S.T.

This multi-year Catholic Bible Study series is entitled, INVITATION TO CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP. It is an in-depth study of the New Testament for Catholic laity so that the Word of Christ, rich as it is, might dwell in us.

Thus you will be able to grasp fully, with all the holy ones, the breadth and length and heights and depth of Christ's love, and experience this love which surpasses all knowledge, so that you may attain to the fullness of God himself. (Eph. 3: 18-19)

The general motivating force behind this course is the preservation and growth of the Christian faith as understood and transmitted by the Catholic Church through the centuries.

This course has four immediate goals:

1. To ensure a true spirit of repentance
2. To foster a deeper commitment in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ
3. To create a greater awareness of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer
4. To encourage a more vibrant participation in the life and mission of the Church

This Bible Study is now available to all parishes and at-home study groups. It has been accredited by the Catechetical Institute of the Orange Diocese, Orange, California, for CCD re-certification. The study is designed for presentation by either a religious or layperson. Most studies have received NIHIL OBSTAT and IMPRIMATUR through the Bishop of Orange, California. All studies have been submitted for Imprimatur and no work of Father O'Bryan has ever been rejected.

The complete study consists of:

1. A spiral-bound Teacher's Manual containing the printed text for all of the lectures of the study ordered (Mark, Luke, Acts, etc.)
2. A spiral-bound Student Manual (Meditations) containing a corresponding Summary of the Lecture and Worksheet for each week's study. Each student should purchase a copy of the Student Manual to keep a personal record of their responses to the questions, as well as notes that might be taken during the lecture or group sessions.
3. A few studies are available only in 3-ring binders. One copy each of the Teacher's Manual and Student Manual are purchased, and copies of the student manual are made for each participant.

**NIHIL OBSTAT: Rev. Raymond Skonezny, S.S.L.
Censores Deputati**

**IMPRIMATUR : +Michael Driscoll
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September 17, 1991

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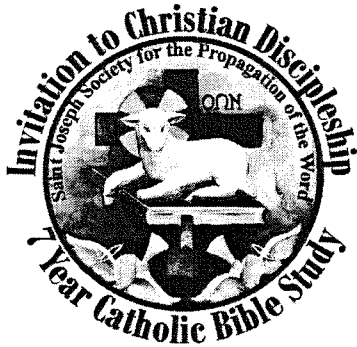
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The St. Joseph Society for the Propagation of The Word Presents:

An Invitation to Christian Discipleship

James P. O'Bryan, S.T., Author and Presenter

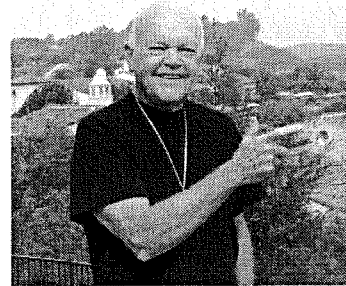


It was the early 1970's when a group of laywomen in Orange, CA approached Fr. O'Bryan about the lack of Catholic Bible studies in Orange County. There was, of course, the Protestant group nearby that had signed up over 200 Catholics to their study. Father knew he couldn't do the work without a great deal of assistance. Volunteers stepped up to do the logistical tasks and Father worked with the Holy Spirit to provide the works. This was the beginning of his "seven year sentence". Working 60 – 65 hours per week, he was never more than two weeks ahead and, most of the time he was working with less than a day to presentation time. His work was all hand written and needed to

be typed and copied for distribution. These two hour sessions (1 hour sharing + 1 hour lecture) were attended by approximately 400 people weekly, split between a morning and an evening class. Father claims he never rewrote a word; "I didn't have time", he said.

Father's efforts resulted in a seven year study plus several spin-off works used for educating Catholics around the world. The seven year study includes:

- Invitation to Christian Discipleship (Intro)
- The Gospel of St. Mark
- The Gospel of St. Luke
- Acts of the Apostles
- The Gospel of St. Matthew
- The Gospel of St. John
- Romans
- Hebrews
- 1 Thessalonians
- 2 Thessalonians
- 1 Corinthians
- 2 Corinthians
- Galatians
- Revelation



Fr. Jim

Other excellent teaching materials, often used in RCIA and formation classes, are the result of Father's dedication to the laity. These materials include, "Christian with a Capital C", "Rock Foundation Revisited" and "On Eagle's Wings". In 2005, a Group was formed to help publish and distribute Father's work. The **St. Joseph Society for the Propagation of The Word, Inc.** has been instrumental in setting up a web site and taking on the ministry of spreading the Gospel by promoting the instructional works of Fr. O'Bryan. **Materials available include teacher's manuals, student workbooks, CDs of lectures and several inspirational works for RCIA and adult education.**

The seven year study is designed to be presented by the laity or religious. Guidelines are available for starting a study group. Of particular interest is the fact that these studies are

accredited by the Catechetical Institute of Orange County and have the Imprimatur through the Bishop of Orange, California.

Check the web site for a study near you, or start one today.

Be advised, this is an “in depth” study of the scriptures so that the Word of Christ, rich as it is, might dwell in us.

“Thus you will be able to grasp fully, with all the holy ones, the breadth and length and heights and depth of Christ’s love, and experience this love which surpasses all knowledge, so that you may attain to the fullness of God Himself” (Eph. 3:18-19).

<http://www.invitetodiscipleship.org>

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THE BOOK OF REVELATION

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE APOCALYPSE

Only with prudent trepidation do we undertake the study of the Apocalypse, the final written message of the New Testament. Of all the writings of the New Testament it is the most obscure and enigmatic. St. Jerome, the great biblical scholar of the early Church, complained to Paulinus, Bishop of Nola, “The Apocalypse of John has as many secrets as words.” There are 913 distinct words in the book. Without inspiration from the Holy Spirit it remains a sealed book, and its study an exercise in futility, or worse, delusion. The following admonition of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council to students of the sacred Scriptures will never be more appropriate than in the present study:

And let them remember that prayer must accompany the reading of sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together; for “we speak to Him when we pray; we hear Him when we read the divine sayings” [St. Ambrose] (Rev. VI,25).

St. Jerome teaches:

To read or study the Holy Scripture without the Holy Spirit is like skipping stones across a frozen pond: The mind remains but on the surface of meaning while the spirit remains in darkness (St. Jerome).

Likewise, it is well at this time to recall the instruction given by the Second Vatican Council concerning the interpretation of sacred Scripture:

Since God speaks in sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God

wanted to manifest by means of their words. Those who search out the intention of the sacred writers must have regard for "literary forms." For truth is proposed and expressed in a variety of ways, depending on whether a text is history of one kind or another, or whether its form is that of prophesy, poetry, or some other type of speech. The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances as he used contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture (Rev.III,12).

Because of the literary form used, the revelations of the Apocalypse are extremely difficult to interpret and, in certain sections, probably impossible. The author of our present study used a literary form peculiar to his time, a form certainly mysterious and perhaps even bizarre for people today. The form is called "apocalyptic." *Apocalypse of Jesus Christ*. In the Greek *apocalypse* means "uncovering" or "unveiling." Our English translation reads "revelation." The word may imply a disclosure of a hidden and specific truth or the revelation of events unknown, whether of the past, present or future.

THE LITERARY FORM

Apocalyptic writings are prophetic in the sense that the writer acts as a messenger from God revealing that which only the Divine could make known. However, it differs from those writings generally accepted as prophetic because of its dual view. The apocalyptic writer does not picture merely the perceived empirical reality of the here and now, but he beholds that which stands behind reality and transcends it. As with the author of the Book of Hebrews, the real is not the seen. That which is presently seen and experienced is but a shadow or prefiguring of what truly will be. The apocalyptic writer sees both this age and the age to come. The age is transitory; it is passing away and shortly will give way to the eternal age to come that presently stands at the door of time. He beholds the present age as a battlefield upon which the future is being decided. There is a twofold struggle going on between Light and Darkness, Good and Evil, God and Satan. The ultimate outcome is assured: the power of God will triumph and Satan's power will be destroyed. There will come to be a new heaven and a new earth.

It needs to be noted that heaven and earth are not to be viewed as two distinct realities, as day and night. Rather they are two sides of the one coin, or better

still, the inner and outer of the same reality. The earth is the outer physical reality of existence, and the heaven is the inner spiritual power beneath the physical surface. Heaven is a synonym for spiritual power and presence--both good and evil. From time to time the heavenly realities break in upon the earth--symbolized by the presence of angels and demons. On occasion, the earthly actions affect the heavenly as in the case of the death of Jesus upon the Cross. When the new heaven and the new earth come to be, the heavenly and earthly will be one. The lamb and the lion will safely lie down together.

The apocalyptic writer sees that beneath this present earthly dimension lies the supernatural struggle between good and evil. Human beings are merely willing instruments in an unseen and undreamed reality. Side-by-side, the writer presents the historical and the supernatural, the transcendental events.

One of the essential elements of apocalyptic writing that distinguishes it from general prophetic work is that apocalyptic material comes clothed in picturesque and often bizarre images and mysterious symbols. All true mystical experiences are ineffable, which means such empiricisms cannot adequately be expressed in plain, ordinary, concrete language. The mystical experience defies definition. Vocabulary does not exist by which to communicate such experiences. If a mystic wishes to impart to others a mystical experience, he or she must resort to images and symbols that inadequately express the message. When Teresa of Avila desired to impart her vision of the human soul to others, she resorted to the image of an "interior castle." Even after a seer has described the mystical message, the hearer only "sees indistinctly, as through a dark glass." Moreover, in the case of apocalyptic writers, they resort to images and symbols not only because of the mystical nature of the revelation, but because of the politically volatile nature of the material revealed. The message is deliberately veiled to hide it from the uninitiated.

Apocalyptic writings dealt with the past and present and with the future. The future would be divided into the historical future--things to come to be within the present world--and also with that final cosmic occurrence that would bring into being the new heaven and earth. These dimensions of time would be viewed from the supernatural or transcendental point of view. The images and symbols used to describe the past and present situations would be thinly veiled and easily decoded by the people of the day. Their presentation would be something like a political cartoon of today.

As the Seer describes future events, images become more nebulous and vague. Knowledge of future events is only dimly seen, and their signs easily misread and misinterpreted. When the author turns to describe the future cosmic events shaking the very foundation of the universe, he resorts to wild and fantastic images and symbols. It is the intention of the author to “blow the mind” of the reader.

It rightly has been observed that apocalyptic writings are not meant so much to be understood by the mind as to be experienced by the spirit. They are not allegories with each detail pregnant with meaning, but they are more like the modern painting or musical composition that is created to produce a reaction deep within--beyond the surface of human understanding--down into the deep waters of the subconscious and beyond it, to the shore upon which the light of the Spirit shines. Apocalyptic writings are not meant so much to produce knowable facts within the mind as to produce illuminations within the human spirit. As someone once observed, divine revelations are secrets shared by lovers. In the case of apocalyptic revelations, the intention is to strengthen the heart of the beloved.

Such writing came to be in times of religious crisis in Israel. It took the form of a series of visions, supposedly received by some patriarch or prophet of old but hidden under a pseudonym. At that time there would have been no accepted spirit of prophecy in Israel. The writer foretold that the present tribulations of Israel would soon end with the triumph of God over evil, which would usher in the new age to come. The People of God were to remain steadfast in the faith and bear with patience their afflictions; they were not to be disheartened by the apparent triumphs and successes of their enemies. These successes were temporary and delusive.

This form of literature appeared in Israel especially after the Babylonian Exile, during the Maccabean Period, and during the Roman conquest of Israel. Apocalyptic passages may be found in Isaiah (Chapters 13-35). Joel, Zechariah, and Ezekiel are also largely apocalyptic. However, it was the Book of Daniel that set the form of later apocalyptic writing. This book probably was written around 165 B.C., when the Jewish People suffered under Antiochus Epiphanes. The writer identified himself with Daniel, a Jewish prophet in the time of the Babylonian Captivity. He represented Daniel as foreseeing the Maccabean Age in a series of visions. The author who actually wrote while the persecution was going on sees it, under inspiration, from its divine and transcendent dimension. The work of Daniel was not without

future predictions. Other Jewish apocalyptic works followed Daniel in times of religious crisis: Book of Enoch, The Apocalypse of Baruch, Fourth Book of Esdras. The latter was written at about the same time as the Christian Apocalypse. However, none of these later writings were included among the Sacred Scriptures.

Christians coming out of Judaism would no doubt have been influenced by the Jewish apocalyptic writers. The writer of the Apocalypse was certainly influenced by Daniel, Zechariah, and Ezekiel. We find characteristics of apocalyptic writings in Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians, where he speaks of "mass apostasy," and the appearance of the "lawless one," who offers himself as an object of divine worship, producing signs and wonders to lead the lector astray. A so-called "Little Apocalypse" appears in the Synoptic Gospels. Speaking of the end times, St. Mark writes:

During that period after trials of every sort the sun will be darkened, the moon will not shed its light, stars will fall out of the skies, and the heavenly hosts will be shaken. Then men will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. He will dispatch his angels and assemble his chosen from the four winds, from the farthest bounds of earth and sky. Learn a lesson from the fig tree. Once the sap of its branches runs high and it begins to sprout leaves, you know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, you will know that he is near, even at the door. I assure you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away (Mk.13:24-31).

In summary, apocalyptic literature appears in a time of religious crises believed to be the final age of world history. It sees the present world's consummation to be imminent. A visionary, usually writing under an assumed name, receives visions from an angelic being, in which the present world is pictured as being given over to Satan and his angels until God directly intervenes in history, ushering in the Age to Come. The visions are recorded in unusual images and symbols. They seek to destroy the illusion of the omnipotence of earthly powers and the eternal endurance of evil by demonstrating its ultimate defeat by God. The intention is to console the People of God, and encourage them to be faithful. This is done by insisting that God's break into world history is imminent. It has been said that to expect the New Age to come is to personally aid and hasten its coming on earth.

THE AUTHOR

Unlike the Jewish writings, the Apocalypse of the New Testament was produced under the author's name. The writer is a Christian prophet known and respected by the churches to whom he writes. His name is John. The writer speaks of himself as "*his servant John,*" "*John who wishes you grace and peace,*" "*I, John, your brother, who shares with you the distress and the kingly reign and the endurance we have in Jesus, found myself on the island called Patmos because I proclaimed God's word and bore witness to Jesus*" (Rv.1:1,4,9). The author apparently writes in exile from the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, southwest of Ephesus. He closes his work with the confirmation, "*It is I, John, who heard and saw all these things*" (Rv.22:8).

Who was this John? Our earliest written testimony comes from Irenaeus. He maintains that the author of the Apocalypse was John, Son of Zebedee, the brother of James, one of the Twelve Apostles. Irenaeus himself was born in the Province of Asia around 140 A.D., probably in the city of Smyrna. As a young boy he was a student of St. Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna. Polycarp was born around 69 A.D., and died a martyr's death at the age of eighty-six in the year 156 A.D. Polycarp had personally heard St. John the Apostle. Polycarp was the chief source for Irenaeus' maintaining that John the Apostle wrote the Apocalypse and the Fourth Gospel. St. Justin the Martyr, born in Palestine around 104 A.D., confirmed John the Apostle to be the author of both books. Justin died in Rome with six companions, beheaded in 165 A.D. for their faith. Tertullian (155 A.D.) and Origen (185 A.D.) both accepted John the Apostle as author of both the Fourth Gospel and the Apocalypse.

The authorship of the Apocalypse was not questioned until the third century. St. Dionysius of Alexandria, after studying the texts of both works, concluded another John had written the Apocalypse. He found support for his theory from the fact that the city of Ephesus claimed two monuments to be the tomb of John. Eusebius wrote that according to Papias, bishop of Hieropolis and a personal friend of St. Polycarp, there were two Johns and both were disciples of Jesus. St. Dionysius ascribed the authorship of the Apocalypse to that other disciple named John.

Historical evidence confirms that John the Apostle did live in Ephesus and was buried there. According to Irenaeus, John the Apostle still lived in the time of Trajan at least to the year 98 A.D. Other ancient writers confirm the Apostle lived to an old age; the Fourth Gospel implies this. When Peter asked

Jesus about John's death,

...the Lord replied, "Suppose I want him to stay until I come. How does that concern you? Your business is to follow me." This is how the report spread among the brothers that this disciple was not to die. Jesus never told him, as a matter of fact, that the disciple was not going to die; all he said was, "Suppose I want him to stay until I come." It is the same disciple who is the witness to these things; it is he who wrote them down and his testimony, we know, is true (Jn.21:22-24).

It is also difficult for many modern scholars to believe that the same person wrote both the Apocalypse and the Fourth Gospel when they compare the grammar and the vocabulary of the two works. It has been said that the Apocalypse contains the worst Greek in the New Testament. The author of this work translates Aramaic expressions literally. He appears to have been a man who thought in Aramaic and only later in life came to Greek, a language he never mastered. On the other hand, the Fourth Gospel is written in worthy and honorable Greek. However, it is possible that the Fourth Gospel may have been written in Aramaic by John and translated into Greek by a disciple. If John was a prisoner on Patmos, the luxury of a translator would have been denied him. Perhaps he expressed his message to the Churches in the best Greek available to him.

In our times it has been the content of the Apocalypse and the Fourth Gospel that also causes problems. Many find it hard to believe that the same spirit was the author of the two works. It has been observed that a man nicknamed "Son of Thunder" who beseeched the Lord to call down fire upon an inhospitable town could have written the Apocalypse. Martin Luther wrote: "My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book. There is one sufficient reason for the small esteem in which I hold it -- that Christ is neither taught in it nor recognized."

Alfred North Whitehead expressed regret that this book has an influence on the formation of religious sentiment because of its "barbaric elements." D. H. Lawrence called it the Judas of the New Testament: "Just as inevitably as Jesus had to have Judas Iscariot among his disciples, so did there have to be a Revelation in the New Testament." For Lawrence, the Lamb is a "lion in sheep's clothing -- we never see it slain, we only see it slaying mankind by the millions." For Lawrence, the Apocalypse is an outgrowth and reinforcement

of envy on the part of the “have-nots.” It is their spiteful attack on the pleasures and achievements of human civilization. There is a dragon that appears in sheep’s clothing in the Apocalypse, but apparently Lawrence failed to distinguish the lamb from the dragon.

Even though it is dramatically and dogmatically denied by many scholars that John the Apostle wrote the Apocalypse, I feel, as the gossiping lady said to her friend, *“I cannot tell you any more. I have already told you more than I know!”* The scholars have truly told us more than they know. With my mind still open to other possibilities, and while noting the insufficient evidence of the opposition, I opt to remain on the side of Irenaeus and Justin and hold that John the Apostle was the author of the Apocalypse.

Since St. John’s authorship of the Apocalypse was generally accepted by the western Church, the divine inspiration of the work was readily accepted. This work, along with the letters of John, was classified with the other inspired writings of the New Testament. However, the apostolic authorship would not have been so readily upheld if the contents of the book had not been in harmony with the teachings of other apostolic writings. The book stresses Christ’s sacrificial death, and the imminent return of Jesus. It expresses the belief that the true goal of human life is only fully achieved in the Age to Come. When Martin Luther taught us that the book was neither apostolic nor prophetic, he also told us more than he knew!

TIME OF COMPOSITION

Early tradition in the Christian Church -- Irenaeus, Eusebius, Jerome -- is almost unanimous in assigning the composition of the Apocalypse to the last years of Domitian’s reign. Domitian reigned as emperor of Rome from 81 to 96 A.D. This time still remains the most probable time of composition. Scholars have proposed a date as early as Claudius (41-54) and as late as the reign of Trajan (98-117). Many preferred a date between the reign of Nero (54-68) and Vespasian (69-79). However, the greater majority of scholars agree that John composed the Apocalypse during the last years of Domitian’s reign. It was written at a time of persecution when the churches in the East were compelled to choose between Christ and Caesar. As John foresaw the situation, the persecution would spread over the entire Roman Empire and end only with the fall of Rome and paganism.

The Christian Church had not yet recovered from the psychological shock resulting from the terrible persecution inflicted by Nero. Until Nero singled out the Christian Community as his scapegoat for the burning of Rome, Christians lived in relative peace under Roman authority. They were accepted as a Jewish sect. According to Roman law, no religion could be publicly practiced outside of its native origin with the exception of Judaism. Of course this did not apply to the official worship of Rome.

Under the Jewish umbrella, the Christian Community flourished with the Empire. From the Acts of the Apostles we know that the first persecutions of the Christian Church came from the Jewish leaders. Apparently there was much fighting among the Jews and the Christians who considered themselves the New Israel. During the reign of Claudius, all Jews--Christians along with them--were expelled from Rome because of the internal dispute among them over a certain "Chrestus," who was no doubt Jesus Christ. Nero would not have elected the Christian Community as his target of persecution if it had not become clear to him that there was a real distinction between Jews and Christians.

Nero may well have come to this understanding, and decided to select the Christians as his victims, through the advice and encouragement of his wife, Poppaea Sabina. Poppaea was sympathetic toward the Jews, and many believed she was a secret convert to Judaism. The same chief priests who sought the death of St. Paul in Jerusalem were being held in Rome as hostages at Poppaea's insistence. These men had considerable influence over Poppaea Sabina. They would not have missed this opportunity to turn the favor of Rome away from the Christian Community they detested.

Both Peter and Paul would die within this persecution which, once inaugurated, would last throughout the century. As we know from pagan sources (Tacitus and Suetonius), the cruelty of Nero to the Roman Christians finally sickened even the Romans who had no love for the Christians. They, too, began to see that the Christians suffered terrible deaths, not for punishment of their crimes, but to please the perversity of Nero. Convicted Christians were covered with the skins of animals and torn to bits by wild dogs; they were covered with cloth and pitch and used as torches to light the Imperial Gardens at night. Nero, dressed as a charioteer, drove his chariot among the dying, gloating over their sufferings and taunting them as they died. The horrors of this first persecution, in which the leaders of the Church died, affected the entire Church. This Nero, who inflicted every cruelty

possible upon an innocent people, indeed became the symbol of the Evil in this world, Evil that triumphs over goodness and violently opposes the Reign of God. Nero symbolized the Beast, the Anti-Christ “*drunk with the blood of God’s holy ones and the blood of those martyred for their faith in Jesus*” (Rv.17:6).

Even after Nero’s violent death in 68 A.D. many believed he was still alive. There were rumors that he was hiding in Parthia and would one day return at the head of a great army. His devotees continued to strew his tomb with flowers, edicts were issued in his name, pretenders arose who claimed to be Nero restored to life.

The Apocalypse sees the return of Nero (*Nero redivivus*) in the person of Domitian. The persecution under Nero was largely confined to Rome, and Christians were killed for being arsonists--if not atheists. But the persecution that broke out under Domitian extended to the provinces, and concerned the refusal of Christians to worship the Roman Empire and the emperor who personified himself as the divinity of Rome. Christians were accused of atheism and of being haters of the human race. Even Domitilla, the Christian niece of Domitian, was banished to a penal colony; her husband, the pro-consul Flavius Clemens, was executed. Both were accused of being atheists.

Domitian was serious about being worshipped as God. Toward the end of his life he demanded that everyone render him divine homage under the title “Our Lord and God” (*Dominus et Deus noster*). Domitian’s insistence upon divine worship would have been enforced more within the Roman provinces than in Rome itself, because the provinces jealously strove to demonstrate their loyalty to Rome and the Emperor. The absence of Christian citizens from the civil-religious services and games honoring the emperor would not have gone unnoticed very long before action was taken. This situation was conducive to the initiation of a persecution that would spread like wildfire throughout the Roman Provinces, truly devastating the Christian Church. St. John foresaw and forewarned this possibility. Only the assassination of Domitian on September 18, 96 A.D., prevented the possibility of a widespread persecution becoming a terrible reality.

THE LETTER’S DESTINATION

John addressed The Apocalypse as a letter to seven churches within the Roman Province of Asia. The province was created in 129 B.C. as the result of

a land grant willed to the Roman Senate by Attalus III, the last king of Pergamum. The province ran about 260 miles along the Aegean Sea, reaching about 300 miles inland. The seven cities named in the letter were located on a circular road that connected the most populated and wealthy sections of the province. They would all be key centers for reaching the entire province. Even though John only addressed the seven churches, he probably intended to speak to the entire Church in the Province of Asia. He addressed congregations known to him and to whom he had ministered. He delivered to them revelations from the Chief Shepherd of the Church, Jesus Christ. These revelations came to John through a succession of visions which he recorded and transmitted as commanded.

Each of the seven Christian Communities addressed in the letter had problems peculiar to itself. The letter presents Jesus Christ, the glorified Head of the Church, as having personally visited these churches. He came, not so much in the role of the Good Shepherd, but more as the Inspector General of the army. The searchlight of Divine Truth had shone upon them, and the Eye of the Lord saw down to the heart of the matter. The spiritual conditions of each community were assessed and its particular circumstances noted. The Lord sent a report of these findings to the churches through his messenger John. The report may certainly serve as a shadowy example of the judgment each Christian Community must one day endure before the judgment seat of the Lord.

Only two of the churches escaped criticism. As a whole, the social and religious environment of these churches in Asia had taken their spiritual toll upon the spirit and faith of the Christians. The standard of Christian life in Ephesus had decreased--the community was losing spiritual ground. The Community at Laodicea had lost its zeal and fervor. Sardis was in the worst condition and was pronounced spiritually dead. Smyrna and Philadelphia suffered from the hostility of the Jews. Pergamum and Thyatira were plagued with the heresy of the Nicolaitans.

The message to the Churches demonstrated an exact knowledge of their situation, and each could honestly confess after hearing the letter, "We resemble those remarks!" The divine analysis of these Christian Communities would later serve churches and Christian individuals as ideal material for spiritual examination and assessment. One has the impression that the Inspector General has reviewed his troops in order to assess their weaknesses and strengths. The report sent to the Churches indicates the spiritual work to

be done speedily within the Communities. They had lived in a time of relative peace, but this period was quickly drawing to an end and a time of tribulation lies ahead.

The letter does not so much turn attention away from the Seven Churches as it turns the eyes of the Churches away from their own particular problems to behold a panoramic view of the world. The revelation is of vital importance to all Christian Churches. It gives reason and purpose to the critical analyses of individual Christian Communities. The inspired message is intended to produce some vital changes within the Christian Church.

The visions and revelations are fearsome and are intended to profoundly affect the spirits of those who hear them. The forces of the Antichrist are gathering strength to march upon Asia. Christian People must realize who they will encounter in the coming storms of persecution. The greatest power the world can muster rises to confront the Church. Those people appearing visibly on the earth's surface are but pawns in the hands of more terrible and evil powers.

The visions tell of coming persecutions involving the entire Church; the time and length of persecution remains indefinite. One picture suggests that it will be continuous until the consummation of the world, and another suggests a time lapse between the fall of pagan power and the end of the world. The anticipated and final struggle between the Church and the World--between Christ and the Antichrist--comes in the final visions. The whole world turns in force against the Church. The hour of its greatest peril ushers in the hour of its final triumph and eternal victory. It will be a time of unparalleled affliction. However, the chief danger to Christians will be spiritual--false Christ and false prophets.

Those times will be more distressful than any between God's work of creation and now, and for all time to come. Indeed, had the Lord not shortened the period, not a person would be saved. But for the sake of those he has chosen, he has shortened the days. If anyone tells you at that time, "Look, the Messiah is here!" "Look, he is there!"--do not believe it. False messiahs and false prophets will appear performing signs and wonders to mislead, if it were possible, even the chosen. So be constantly on guard! I have told you about it beforehand (Mk.13:19-23).

In the Apocalypse--after the frightful visions of the night and with the approach of the morning mist--the Seer sees that Babylon has fallen, that the Beast and the False Prophet are doomed, and that Satan's power is finally destroyed. The Seer's vision grows brighter and more radiant as he beholds the City of God, adorned as a glorious and victorious Bride, descending from Heaven. The victory of Christ is being depicted in the innumerable multitude before the throne of God. These never received the mark of the Beast, therefore, they have escaped the second death. They are the blessed who died in the Lord -- they rest from their labors, and their works have followed them. They shall "*enter the city through its gates ... the Lord shall give them light, and they shall reign forever*" (Rv.22:14,5b). One author has written that the entire Apocalypse is, for the Christian Community, a *Sursum Corda!* -- Lift up your hearts!

THE DOCTRINE

The doctrine of the Apocalypse firmly defends the oneness of God. It assumes an immovable stand against idolatry. It beholds in idolatry the mother of all sin, and the essential cause for the corruption of all earthly and human life. Idolatry was the damning sin of the Roman Empire, reaching its peak in the emperor's claim of divinity. Idolatry is demonology, with magic being but the manifestation of its powers.

The Apocalypse presents the Christ of the Gospel, but a Christ changed through the Resurrection and Ascension. Christ receives the titles of God: the Alpha and Omega (Beginning and End), the Living One, the Holy, the True. Even at the sight of the glorified humanity the Seer swoons; Jesus appears with His face shining like the sun at high noon, his hair as white as snow, with His eyes flashing like lightning and with a voice that sounds like thundering waterfalls; his feet appear to be metal in a fiery furnace. Christ appears as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who relates to the Church, to the world, and to God with the greatest fullness. This Ascended Christ demonstrates total love for His Church. To the redeemed, Christ is all in all. From Jesus Christ to the members of the Church flow all spiritual gifts and aids. Christ bestows upon the saints their final reward. The martyrs are His witnesses on this earth and the saints are His servants.

The severity of God is depicted in the Apocalypse. This severity is directed against evil--unrepentant evil. The portrait of God in the Apocalypse has caused much difficulty for people who are accustomed to the Gospel's

presentation of Jesus Christ. In the Gospel, Jesus appears more as our loving brother, the Good Shepherd in search of the sinner, the lost sheep; Jesus presents God in Heaven as our loving Father. The presentation in the Apocalypse balances the picture presented in the Gospel.

However, on closer observation of the Gospel presentation, it is not all that different--it is more a matter of emphasis. Human beings have a tendency to hear what they want to hear, to believe what they think should be. People desire God to fit their expectations of Him. They force their concept of Him into personal molds. Many are guilty of the sin of image-making, i.e. making an image of God according to their own heart's desire. People have a tendency to block out what is too unpleasant to deal with.

The Apostle John writes a great deal about how we Christians ought to love one another, but his references are generally to those who are brothers and sisters in the faith. He identified some former members of the Church as anti-christs--men who have sinned unto death--and prayer should not even be offered for them. He wrote, "*The man who sins belongs to the devil...It was to destroy the devil's works that the Son of God revealed Himself*" (1Jn.3:18). Of course, the best way to destroy an enemy of God is to make the enemy a friend of God. But what of the enemies of God who refuse the friendship of God? If we look closer at the image of Jesus in the Gospel, we will get a different understanding of Jesus, especially by looking at him from the standpoint of the Scribes and Pharisees. These are some of the things Jesus said to them:

You belong to what is below... You belong to this world... That is why I said you would die in your sins (Jn.8:23-24). Why do you not understand me? Because you cannot bear to hear my word. The father you spring from is the devil, and willingly you carry out his wishes. ... Because I deal in the truth, you give me no credence (Jn.8:43-45).

To their faces Jesus accused them of being liars, murderers, and sons of Satan. Jesus, who forgives sins, taught there would be sins not forgiven, even in the world to come. More than once he taught the doctrine:

None of those who cry out, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of God but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ... I will declare to them solemnly, "I never knew you. Out of my sight, you evildoers!" (Mt. 7:21,23).

The Scriptures do confirm that God hates evil, and those who incarnate evil in their lives and confirm this evil within their souls are the enemies of God. They will ultimately experience the wrath and rejection of God. In the Apocalypse we see this confirmed--evil in confrontation with God in its struggle to destroy the kingdom of God on earth. This confirmed evil may be found both in angels and in men. Ultimately, God will destroy all evil. Angels and men who cling to their evil will be destroyed. Life on earth is a time of war; one can be lost in a war. The Apocalypse makes clear the meaning of being lost to God. This message was needed when Christians faced the moral laxity of pagan life on the one hand, and the pressure to acknowledge the divinity of Rome (to worship the State) on the other.

The history of interpretation of the Apocalypse is as long as Church History itself. There are several major schools of interpretation that deserve notice. The first and foremost in popularity has been the millennium, or chiliastic, school of interpretation. Chiliasm was the conviction that the existing world order was about to come to an end, and that an earthly millennium, during which the saints would reign, was to succeed it. This theory has had a long run in Church History. The earliest commentaries on the Book of Apocalypse appear to have belonged to the millennium school. This school gives a very literal interpretation to Rev. 20:4-6 in which we read:

...I also saw the spirits of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and the word of God, those who had never worshiped the beast or its image nor accepted its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life again and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The others who were dead did not come to life till the thousand years were over. This is the first resurrection: happy and holy are they who share in the first resurrection! (Rv.20:4-6a).

How this passage was interpreted directed the rest of the interpretation of the Apocalypse. This concerned the actual reign of Christ on earth for one thousand years, beginning with the "first resurrection" and ending a thousand years later with the Final Judgment. However, what it actually meant for Christ to reign on earth and what was meant by the "first resurrection" have been subject to many and various interpretations. Many of the predictions about the end of the world flow from an interpretation of this text. Early Fathers of the Church, such as Irenaeus, Justin, and Hippolytus were of this school.

Two concepts expressed within the Apocalypse held great interest for the early Church in Asia Minor as it faced persecution: the Coming of the Antichrist and the hope for the Thousand Years. Irenaeus expected Jerusalem to be re-established, and a terrestrial kingdom of a thousand years to be established. Irenaeus saw the Romans as the beast, and he interpreted Rv.17:12--*“The ten horns you saw represent ten kings who have not yet been crowned: they will possess royal authority along with the beast, but only for an hour”*--to mean that the Empire would be broken into ten kingdoms and Rome reduced to ashes. Hippolytus saw the ten kingdoms as the Second Beast. The Montanist heretics of the second century considered Pepuza in Phrygia to be the New Jerusalem, and they also believed that Jesus had returned in Montanus.

On the other hand, the school of spiritual or allegorical interpretation was born in Alexandria. Origen rejected the literal interpretations of the closing chapters of the Apocalypse as “Jewish.” A noble and mystical interpretation was given to the Apocalypse under the allegorical school of interpretation. This school of thought conceived the interpretation of all Scripture to be on three levels, corresponding to the three dimensions of human existence: body, soul, and spirit. There would be the concrete interpretation of the Scriptures dealing with the historical facts. There would be the moral interpretation of the Scriptures stressing its moral value for directing human life and conduct. However, behind both of these lay the true hidden beauty of the text, the spiritual. In order to arrive at this spiritual dimension of the Scriptures, the historical presentation of the Scriptures was treated as allegorical.

For many centuries most Christians contented themselves with giving purely mystical interpretations to the Apocalypse. Needless to say, such a school of interpretation opened the door to unlimited flights of fantasy and imagination. In the fourth century, Tyconius, following the spirit of this school, saw the situations described in the Apocalypse as symbols of universal facts and realities. Jerusalem equaled the Church; Babylon equaled the hostile world. He fixed the attention of his readers, not upon Rome itself, but upon the world-long struggle between good and evil. Tyconius, who was the founder of the Donatist heresy, identified the Catholic Church, which opposed him, with the evil of the world.

In the ninth century, Berengaud combined the historical and mystical and endeavored to make the Apocalypse cover the whole history of mankind. For example, the first six seals covered history from Adam to the fall of Jerusalem.

The first six trumpets represented preaching from the patriarchs to the age of the Christian martyrs. The “thousand years” reached from the Ascension to the end of the world, and the “first resurrection” was the spiritual condition of the Saints in present life.

Among the popular schools of interpretation has been the recapitulation theory. This theory holds that the Apocalypse is not a strictly consecutive account of a sequence of events, but a description that repeats the same facts over and over in different forms, such as seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls. Irenaeus appears to have supported this interpretation. This method has been widely accepted among many Scripture scholars.

Another popular theory has been the historical school, which maintains that the Apocalypse revealed a philosophy of history, and anticipated persons and events only when they were “solitary examples of a principle” of good or evil operative within the historical situation. In such a theory, men like Napoleon and Hitler could readily be identified as antichrists. Another historical school of interpretation maintained that the Apocalypse was only a historical monument that threw light on an obscure age with first rate importance to students of history, but had no application to the future. Along with Luther, this school held the work not to be prophetic. This school was popular in Germany.

In 1202, the Abbot Joachim became the founder of the Ordo Florensis, a Franciscan movement. He made a marked departure from previous interpretations of the Apocalypse. Joachim was holy and learned; he had a profound influence upon his time, which he taught to be the final age--the Age of the Holy Spirit. Abbot Joachim interpreted the breaking of the sixth seal with the coming of St. Francis. He announced that the Antichrist would come in the year 1260, but he died before he announced the date of the end of the world.

Out of this movement came the Spiritual Franciscans, who were among the first to identify the Church and the Pope as Babylon and the Antichrist. They made a distinction between the Carnal Church (Church of Rome) and the Spiritual Church (those who maintained the spirit of Franciscan poverty). It is understandable that certain Protestant sects would not be too far behind these Franciscans in confirming their interpretation of the Catholic Church. They, too, would equate the Pope and the Papacy with Babylon and the Antichrist.

Millenniumism saw a new birth with the coming of the Anabaptist. Melchior Hofmann announced the second coming for the year 1533. The date was to coincide with the centenary of the Crucifixion of Christ. He died himself before the date, and his followers predicted a terrible vengeance on the godless before Easter 1534, and that the tenth man would not remain alive except in Munster itself, which they said was the city of the Lord and the New Jerusalem.

It is reported that the Anabaptists in Amsterdam stripped themselves of their clothes and ran through the streets crying, "*Woe, woe, the wrath of God, the wrath of God!*" Brought before the magistrates, they refused to dress. "*We are the naked truth,*" they said. Some of the early Quakers were also given to this means of "witnessing." James Milner, one of the leaders of the Quakers, foretold the end of the world in December 1652. The Shakers of this country, founded by Quakers, maintained that the millennium had begun in 1779.

The Spanish Jesuit, Francis Ribeira, maintained that the Apocalypse only foretold the future of the Church in the early century and the last days, but foretold nothing about the intermediate history. He relegated the Antichrist to the end of times, and identified Babylon as Rome--not a Papal Rome but a degenerate Rome of the future.

In England, Joseph Mede and two mathematicians, Sir Isaac Newton and William Whiston, found minute fulfillments in the Apocalypse from the time of Domitian to their own present. In the 18th century, Eickhorn maintained that the Apocalypse was a great drama that could be broken into acts and scenes. He maintained it was a drama of the progressive victory of the Christian Faith.

Many scholars today have rightly pointed out that the Apocalypse is an inspired work that was addressed to the Christian People of its own time. It ought to be studied in that light. If the author reveals the future, it is not with the intention of revealing concrete events of some distant age, but rather to stimulate trust in God, loyalty to Christ the King, confidence in the ultimate triumph of righteousness, patience under adversity, and hope in the prospect of a painful death; all things urgently needed by the Christians of Asia, and things that will never be without meaning and importance so long as the world lasts.

The Apocalypse addressed itself to a concrete situation--the Church in tribulation. The permanent value of the Apocalypse is that it offers insight to the Church for the understanding of world history. The history of this world is an arena in which God works out the redemption. All life comes within the embracing Will of God. The history of the world demonstrates a continuous conflict between the Will of God and the forces of evil. This evil uses human instruments to accomplish its designs and purposes, but the evil itself is of cosmic and universal scale. The Will of God is to create a new heaven and a new earth in which the saints will be vindicated. This final divine purpose will be accomplished in God's time.

As to the exact day or hour, no one knows it, neither the angels in heaven nor even the Son, but only the Father. Be constantly on the watch! Stay awake! You do not know when the appointed time will come (Mk.13:32-33).

CHAPTER 2

SIGNS, SYMBOLS, AND SOUNDS

INTRODUCTION

To try to analyze each image of the Apocalypse is like trying to unweave the rainbow. Apocalypse creates a drama more for the ear than for the eye. It seeks to create a dynamic psychological impression, effecting a mood rather than a visual picture. It is intended to be heard rather than seen. No scene in the Apocalypse could be successfully depicted upon a canvas, because it is symbolic, not pictorial. Many of its images are not meant to be understandable symbols; they are there to add power, drama, and color to the overall impression.

There is a difference in the perception of beauty between the Greek mind and the Semitic mind. Greek beauty strives for harmonious order and design of form--to create what would delight the eye. Semitic beauty consists more of dynamic impressions that touch the ear. Perhaps for religious reasons the Semitic soul found beauty in sound rather than sight. Color for the Jews was dynamic rather than just visual. Light and illumination were ideals of divine beauty. As the psalmist expressed, "*O Lord, my God, you are great indeed! You are clothed with majesty and glory, robed in light as with a cloak*" (Ps.104:1-2).

The presentation of truth through the apocalyptic literary form is not as foreign to our modern mind as we might first imagine. It is a method of presenting truth quite analogous to the one that we nightly experience--it is the stuff of which dreams are made. Truth in apocalyptic writings comes to us very much as truth comes to us in our dreams. Normally each night we have dreams and by morning we have forgotten them. It has been discovered that dreaming is as important to health as is sleep. Most dreams are not understood because they come clothed in symbolic images. Why we present truth to ourselves this way is a mystery. The psychiatrist would say that it is because we cannot bear to look at the naked truth; it would be too overwhelming to our sensitive balanced personalities. There is a Chinese saying that the un-interpreted dream remains an unopened letter.

Dreams may be oriented towards the past, present, or future. Their messages may remain mysterious; even when the dream is recalled, the dream sequence fails to flow in a logical sequence for the mind to comprehend. Dreams present their messages clothed in symbolic images that need to be deciphered. A good analyst of dreams knows that only the dreamer holds the key to unlock the meaning.

There are certain dream-images recognized to have standard interpretations within a given culture. For example, to dream of physically flying in the air or appearing naked in public usually indicates a desire to be free from some restricting situation. To experience dying often means a new birth of something in one's life.

The dream world is certainly not a logical world; it refuses to be so. And yet it is a world filled with more truth than are many logical minds. Experience indicates the logical mind will accept a lie as truth, whereas the unconscious mind rejects the lie. Dreams are difficult to decipher because the symbolic material is hard to interpret. For example, many different characters may appear in a dream, and yet all the characters may be but different aspects of the dreamer's own character. A person once had a dream in which there appeared a young boy doing something that angered a young man, and an older man came to the defense of the younger boy. Upon analysis, the three people were the dreamer in different stages of development. As a child, the true personality had been suppressed by social pressure (represented by the young man) but now in maturity was being acknowledged and accepted.

Unfortunately not all dreams are as simple to analyze. The more the conscious mind resists the truth, the more the subconscious mind will present the material in complex images, clothed with material from the inanimate and animate world of daily experience. The point we would like to make is that we treat truth this way because we have a need to do so. However, the truth is presented to us because we have a need to know it--if not on the intellectual level, at least on the subconscious level. Existing in the subconscious, the truth will operate in mysterious and devious ways within our life.

This is the way we deal with ourselves; God chooses at times to deal with us in the same way, apparently for the same reasons. We can understand that dreams are presentations of truths, not fantasies--even though they may represent our fantasies about ourselves and come clothed in fantastic images. In the same manner, we may say that the Apocalypse could be looked upon as

Jesus sharing his dreams with us, because they include us and Christian life in this world and the next. Or, if we do not care to think of Jesus as a dreamer, then we may look upon the material of the Apocalypse as truths dreamt by John that he shares with us, for they are our dreams also. They are revealed mysteries that come only partly unveiled.

From religious history we know that God often used the avenue of dreams to impart an inspired message. Sometimes it is the only avenue open for God to communicate with us. The mystical experience of St. Joseph, as recorded in the Gospel, consisted of four dreams. The Book of Daniel really begins with a disturbing dream of King Nebuchadnezzar's, who called all the wise men of his kingdom to interpret his dream. Realizing that wise men are more cunning than wise, the king refused to reveal his dream to them, but insisted that they first reveal his dream to him, and then interpret it. If they could not discern his dream correctly they were to be immediately cut to pieces. It takes a fox to catch a fox. Under such conditions no one ventured to make an analysis, nevertheless they were all condemned to death, Daniel along with them. That night Daniel prayed, and he dreamed the king's dream along with its interpretation. Scripture tells us, "*God gave ... to Daniel the understanding of all visions and dreams*" (Dn.1:17). Analyzing dreams was not always a pleasant ministry. We read:

Daniel had a dream as he lay in bed, and was terrified by the visions of his mind (7:1b). I, Daniel, was weak and ill for some days... I was appalled at the vision, which I could not understand (8:27). I, Daniel, was greatly terrified by my thought, and my face blanched, but I kept the matter to myself (7:28).

Daniel's visions came clothed in material of which bad dreams are made. He dreamed of a lion with wings like an eagle, a bear with three tusks, a leopard possessing four heads and four wings, a great unmentionable beast with great iron teeth and ten horns, one of which had eyes and a mouth that spewed surging streams of fire. In milder visions he beheld rams and he-goats and stars being trampled underfoot. He dreamed of objects made of gold, silver, bronze, iron, stone, and clay. Times and dates were expressed in mystical symbols. Apocalyptic visions are made of all the images from which dreams are made. All that the senses can observe in the created universe are there, however rearranged, and presented by a power that defies logical and natural explanations, finding leopards with four heads and four wings quite adequate expressions of truth.

SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

In the world in which apocalyptic writing was born, numerical annotations had meanings beyond their mathematical significance. They possessed other symbolic meanings capable of expressing the intrinsic nature of a person. Both the Greek and Hebrew alphabets had numerical equivalents. Each letter of the alphabet had a numerical equivalent. In the Hebrew language, which is comprised of 22 letters, all of which are consonants, the first ten letters are numbered one to ten, the next nine are two through ten multiplied by ten giving us 20 to 100; the last three letters are numbered 2 through 4 multiplied by a hundred giving us 200 to 400. Therefore, in the Hebrew alphabet, the enumeration runs from one to four hundred. The numerical equivalent of the Emperor Nero's name in Hebrew is 666. In the Greek language, the numerical equivalent of Jesus' name comes to 888.

The symbolic use of numbers is quite interesting and, of course, indispensable in interpreting apocalyptic writing. As may be expected, the symbolic meaning of numbers does not always follow the logical pattern the western mind would expect. The number 2 signifies witness. Two witnesses were the number of people required for legal testimony. The number 3 was a divine number--apparently even before belief in the Trinity. The number 4 stood for the visible, created universe--the world that encompasses us (four seasons, four winds, four corners of the earth). The number 5, as five fingers of the hand, was considered a natural round number.

To understand the number 6 we need first to understand the number 7. Seven was a combination of three and four--the divine and the natural. The number seven expressed the fulfillment and completion of the divine order. It symbolized perfection and fullness. When the Scriptures tell us that Mary Magdalene had seven devils within her, we are being told that she was a fully bad girl--she was bad in every way. There were seven days, seven plants, seven colors of the rainbow, and seven days of creation. The Scriptures teach that a thousand years are as a day with the Lord, and a day as a thousand years. This has led some to interpret that creation occurred in seven thousand years rather than in seven days. However, the number 1000 signifies an indefinite time--a very long time. On the other hand, the number 6 came to represent that imperfection or disorder that ought not to exist in creation; it came to symbolize evil--the Antichrist.

Another bad number was 3-1/2; being a broken seven, it symbolized an interruption of the divine order by the malice of Satan or evil men. It signified an age of persecution regardless of its length of time. It could also be expressed in the equivalent of 3-1/2 years--1260 days or 42 months. The number also was applied to the Antichrist.

The number 8, being seven plus one, became the symbol of a new creation, a new beginning; the eighth day being the first day of a new week. The number 8 was applied to Jesus. It was believed that the 6th Day of Time would be given over to Satan until God would send the Messiah to usher in the 7th Day of Rest, the thousand years of the millennium, which would be followed by the 8th Day of Timeless Age to Come. Christians saw the Resurrection of Jesus on the first day of the week as the inauguration of the Age to Come, in which they shared through the Eucharistic celebration, which symbolized for them the final messianic banquet.

For the number 9, I found no symbolic significance. The number 10 was a whole natural number (ten fingers) that signified indefiniteness and magnitude--multiplications of ten such as 100 and 1000 were used to dramatically intensify length of time, or magnitude of an event. This would no doubt explain some of the large numbers of battle casualties in the Old Testament accounts.

The number 12 was a divine number and a great symbol. It was 4 times 3 and signified wholeness, unity in diversity, and eschatological perfection. In the Old Testament 12 times 10 was the age of a person's life span. It did not imply the person lived to be 120 years old, but that they lived a good, full, and happy life. The number 40 is a common enumeration in the Scriptures. Israel was in the desert for forty years; Christ fasted for 40 days; the Ascension occurred 40 days after the Resurrection. The number 40 symbolized some occurrence in time of unknown length. "Went forth" tells us that Israel wandered an unknown amount of years in the desert; Christ fasted an indefinite number of days; He remained on earth after His Resurrection an unknown number of days.

Outside of numbers, we have other known symbols of the ancient world. For example, the square was considered a perfect figure, and the cube even more so. A woman could represent a people or a city. An eye symbolized knowledge or insight. In the animal kingdom, wings stood for speed and mobility; horns represented dynastic power and might. In the inanimate world, the trumpet

represented the human voice; the sword was the Word of God; the crown represented dominion and kingship; the palm branch spoke of victory and triumph; the sea was an evil element--a source of insecurity and death. In the realm of color, white stood for the joy of victory; white robes symbolized the world of glory; purple signified luxury and kingship and, of course, black meant death.

Apparently, apocalyptic visions come to the seers in symbols. The symbols themselves do not always remain constant. As in dreams, symbols change, expressing one meaning then another. The human mind perceives reality from different dimensions. A thing can be seen from more than one point of view and yet focus on only one particular aspect. A historical event can be seen, such as an invading army. It can be looked at objectively and reported visually, or it can be seen symbolically where the invading army becomes a lion attacking a gazelle. The same incident can be viewed as a symptom, or a concrete example of the ongoing conflict between good and evil. The incident may be seen as an external expression of the spiritual condition existing in the souls of people or, as with the author of Hebrews, seen as but a shadow or prefiguring of the true spiritual reality. The incident can be viewed from the point of either temporal or eternal effect. When one gets into apocalyptic writings it becomes difficult to know what aspect of conscious awareness the writer is actually focused upon. Therefore, many interpretations can only be tentative.

Most scholars agree that the incidents related cannot be placed in a time sequence corresponding to the actual unfolding of years and centuries. Dramatic scenes and symbolic tableaux become repetitive and go back and forth in time. They resist becoming political commentaries upon world history, yet many actually contain historical references and political perceptions.

It has been asked: Did John expect the end of the world? To answer that question one must distinguish between the present world order and the physical universe. The prophets of the Old Testament predicted the end of the then present world by using images depicting the end of the physical universe. When they spoke of the sun growing dark and the stars falling from place, they foretold the demolition of an old order making way for a new creation. Isaiah saw a new creation for Israel coming to be after the Second Exile. Certainly any historian would agree that a world came to an end with the Roman destruction of the Jewish Temple and the city of Jerusalem. The

Christian Community shared in this new creation through the Eucharistic celebration that resulted in communion with the Risen Christ. But was John actually expecting the physical end of the universe? That is an area in which human curiosity concerns itself with divine business. To such a question Jesus could well reply to John as he did to Peter:

How does that concern you? Your business is to follow me (Jn.21:22). As to the exact day or hour, no one knows it, neither the angels in heaven nor even the Son, but only the Father (Mk.13:32).

And to the Lord, a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day.

The physical construction of the Apocalypse is unique. Some scholars recognize a series of seven sevens in the work. There are seven prophecies to the seven churches (2:1-3:22); there are the seven seals (6:1-11); there are the seven trumpets' sounds (8:6-11, 9:1-15, 11:15); there is the appearance of the seven signs (12:1-14:20); there is the pouring out of the seven bowls of wrath (16:216); there are seven stages in the fall of Babylon (17:1-18,24); and the seven closing scenes (19:11-22:5). Some others have insisted that the original formation was six series of six--a symbolic expression of un-fulfillment.

THE PROLOGUE

Usually a prologue is written when a work has been completed. It briefly captures the heart and essence of the content of the work. It crowns the work. With this background as a way of introduction, let us now begin our study of the text with the reading of the Prologue:

This is the revelation God gave to Jesus Christ, that he might show his servants what must happen very soon. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who in reporting all he saw bears witness to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Happy is the man who reads this prophetic message, and happy are those who hear it and heed what is written in it, for the appointed time is near! (Rv.1:1-3).

As mentioned in the introduction, the Greek text begins with the “*Apocalypse of Jesus Christ.*” This implies Jesus makes known things that have been hidden. These hidden truths Jesus received from the Heavenly Father, and what He received He imparts to the Church. The Gospel of John emphasizes

that Jesus only reflects in this world what the Father willed to be revealed. He says, *“My doctrine is not my own; it comes from him who sent me”* (Jn.7:16). *“I only tell the world what I have heard from Him, the truthful One who sent me”* (8:26). To his disciples, Jesus said, *“I have made known to you all that I heard from my Father”* (15:15). It places the source of revelation to be at the heart of God, and the Word proceeds forth from the Father. Jesus is the Word made Flesh. He is the Revelation and the Father the Revealer.

Jesus used a messenger, an angelic being, to convey the revelations to John. It is the ministry of the angel to assist John in order that he would receive the entire message, explain it clearly, and record all correctly. The angel, like John, is a servant and minister of Jesus. John’s duty is to impart the revelations to the Churches. In the end it will be the Church who will become the Father’s Angel of Revelation in this world. As the revelations proceed, the intermediary is sometimes Jesus Christ, who appears in the guise of an angel, and at other times the intermediary is the angel who appears as Christ, whom he represents. We know that when the “Angel of Yahweh” was spoken of in the Old Testament, the angel was actually a revelation of the invisible God. However, the authors prudently refrained from saying they personally heard or saw God. However, Jesus certainly is not the angel of the Apocalypse. Even though he does appear so at times, the revealing angel is definitely not an object of worship, and Jesus is. Jesus Christ received these revelations; the angel and John are God’s witnesses of this truth to the Church.

The things revealed are events that “must happen very soon.” These things will not flow from blind fate, but will unfold as part of the divine plan. This divine plan has been made possible by the death of Jesus. Jesus Himself will bring to completion within this universe all the decrees of God. The Scriptures tell us that God *“has placed all things under his feet”* (1Cor.15:27). The Apocalypse unveils the mystery of history, which announces the end of the present era and the inauguration of the Kingdom of God.

The time sequence will not be as we record time, but according to God’s time, which properly orders all things in the way befitting God’s own nature. It will always be near, imminent, and close by, because this world is rooted in God’s presence and power. When the fullness of time comes, what has always been present will be visibly manifested. In light of the impending persecutions to come after the death of the last apostle, the Church needed the encouragement of the Apocalypse. It could be the final apostolic revelation to the Church, and it will see the Church through until the End.

John makes it clear that the Apocalypse is not merely a message of consolation, but, as is the entire Gospel, it is a prophetic message from God to His saints on earth. As Paul wrote:

...the gospel which reveals the mystery hidden for many ages but now manifested through the writings of the prophets, and, at the command of the eternal God, makes known to all the Gentiles that they may believe and obey (Rom.16:25-26). I assure you, brothers, the gospel I proclaimed to you is no mere human invention, I did not receive it from any man, nor was I schooled in it. It came by revelation from Jesus Christ (Gal.1:11-12). ...the mystery of Christ, unknown to men in former ages but now revealed by the Spirit to the holy apostles and prophets (Eph.3:4-5).

The first letter of Peter beautifully expresses the prophet's ministry:

This is the salvation which the prophets carefully searched out and examined. They prophesied the divine favor that was destined to be yours. They investigated the times and the circumstances which the Spirit of Christ within them was pointing to, for he predicted the sufferings destined for Christ and the glories that would follow. They knew by revelation that they were providing, not for themselves but for you, what has now been proclaimed to you by those who preach the gospel to you, in the power of the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Into these matters angels long to search (1Pt.1:10-12).

It can certainly be said that John predicted the suffering of the Church and the glories that would follow. He did this, not for himself, but as a prophet for the present and future Church.

Since it was the intention of John that the Apocalypse be heard and not only read, we will seek to comply with his wish and, departing from our usual method of presentation, audibly read each section before giving the commentary. We need, nevertheless, to bear in mind that hearing and reading are not sufficient. We must also "heed what is written in it." St. Luke used the same verb root translated "heed" when he wrote of Mary, "*Mary treasured all these things and reflected on them in her heart*" (Lk.2:19). The Greek verb used implies meditation that leads to action.

John's words apparently imply that the prophetic message was to be read at the liturgical services of the Church addressed. As we already know from the Acts of the Apostles 20:7, the Christians were already meeting on the first day of the week for "the breaking of bread"--the Eucharistic celebration. About fifteen years after the writing of the Apocalypse, St. Ignatius of Antioch, on the way to martyrdom in Rome, wrote the Church at Ephesus, "Meet more often to give thanks and glory to God (in other words, celebrate the Eucharist), for when you meet frequently, Satan's powers are thrown down."

John has told us the origin of his revelation--God the Father; and he told us what was to be the general content of the work—"What must happen very soon." He goes on to identify the recipients of the Apocalypse:

To the seven churches in the province of Asia: John wishes you grace and peace--from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born from the dead and ruler of the kings of earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his own blood, who has made us a royal nation of priests in the service of his God and Father--to him be glory and power forever and ever! Amen!

See, he comes amid the clouds! Every eye shall see him, even of those who pierced him. All the peoples of the earth shall lament him bitterly. So it is to be! Amen!

The Lord God says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the One who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty!" (Rev.1:4-8).

The letter is addressed to the Seven Churches of Asia. John's use of the definite article "the," seemingly implies that only seven churches existed in Asia, or that the seven symbolize the full Church. From actual fact, we know that other churches did exist, some more famous than those mentioned in the letter: Colossae, Troas, Hierapolis, Magnesia. However, as explained above, the use of the number seven is significant. Most of the churches in Asia Minor probably developed out of the missionary work of St. Paul, who worked in the region of Ephesus for over two years. As we read in the Acts 19:10, "*This continued for two years, with the result that all the inhabitants of the Province of Asia, Jews and Greeks alike, heard the word of the Lord.*" It has already been observed that the churches were located strategically within the Province of

Asia for readily spreading the content of the message throughout the Province. The letter is truly catholic in intention--it is being addressed to the entire Christian Church. The problems of the churches named may have symbolically and representatively reflected the general problems faced by the Christian Church in general. Any Christian Community could have discovered its face reflected in one of the letters.

It is the intention of God that the Apocalypse will be a grace within the Church, and will be a means for creating peace within the Community, especially in the days that lie ahead. Ultimately, through the grace of God, the Church will come to peace, but apparently, some individuals within the Church will suffer martyrdom before they come to that peace. John tells his readers that this peace and its grace flow from the Triune God. He speaks of the Father as “who is and who was and who is to come.” This is the standard name for God in the Apocalypse. It is an extension of God’s own identification in Exodus where He identifies Himself as “*Yahweh*”—“*I AM!*” (3:14). John’s title of the Father identifies Him as the Lord of earthly history--a history that unfolds and evolves according to the Divine Will.

The Scriptures endeavor to express the unchangeable eternity of God through its use of human categories of time. The constancy of God’s Will in history ought to be an encouragement to the Church. The title implies that the present and the future can be judged by the past. Nevertheless, identifying God as “who is to come” implies a dynamic God who, though constant, is not static; a God who ever creates and makes all things new. John also identifies the “seven spirits before his throne” as being a source of grace and peace. The seven spirits, placed in a position between the Father and Son, is a symbolic representation of the Holy Spirit. “Seven” implies the fullness of the Spirit. The reference, no doubt, intends to recall the words of Isaiah (recorded in the Septuagint Bible) in which the Spirit of the Lord is identified as:

A spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord, and his delight shall be the fear of the Lord (Is.11:2b-3a).

The Holy Spirit, through the operation of His seven gifts flowing from the throne of grace, will bring the world to its final completion. John goes on to imply the divinity of Jesus when he relates that the same grace and peace that flow from Jesus, flow simultaneously from the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Christ is presented to the Church as the “faithful witness,” called to witness God in this world. The word “witness” in Greek means “martyr.” At that time it would still be a legal term, applying to a person who gives legal evidence in a court of law. Calling Jesus the “faithful witness” no doubt recalls Jesus’ conduct at the time of His trial before the Sanhedrin, and especially before the Roman Procurator. We know from Paul’s letter to Timothy that this image was kept alive within the memory of the Church. Paul writes:

Before God, who gives life to all, and before Christ Jesus, who in bearing witness made his noble profession before Pontius Pilate, I charge you to keep God’s command without blame or reproach until our Lord Jesus Christ shall appear. This appearance God will bring to pass at his chosen time (1Tm.6:13-15a).

In subsequent years, for Christians to bear witness to Christ in court was to sign their own death sentences. Within the Christian Community the word “martyr-witness” came to signify those who shed their blood for their religion. The martyrdom of Jesus Christ is placed before the Church as a model for a Church that would soon stand before the legal courts of Rome and confess its faith in Jesus Christ. The life of Jesus demonstrates that persecution comes in life as a result of being God’s witness to Truth in this world. However, those who witness unto death are guaranteed immortal life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Hebrews believed that the first of a series included the whole. The offering of the first fruits of the field implied the offering of the entire harvest. Jesus’ resurrection was a symbol of the guarantee that the resurrection from the dead of God’s faithful servants had been inaugurated. Death on the Cross gave birth to His immortal life. The faithful shall come to this glorious rebirth through martyrdom. The ultimate victory of Christ encourages perseverance unto the end of earthly life. Paul wrote:

But as it is, Christ is now raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep (1Cor.15:20). It is he who is head of the body, the church--he who is the beginning, the first born of the dead, so that primacy may be his in everything. It pleased God to make absolute fullness reside in him (Col.1:18-19).

If “absolute fullness” resides in Jesus, then “Seven” also symbolizes Jesus.

John goes on to say that Jesus is not only “the first-born of the dead,” but also “*ruler of the kings of earth.*” If Jesus is the ruler of the kings of earth, then the faithful need not wait until the next life to experience the power of the Risen Christ, because it presently exercises itself in this world. This is why Jesus told His disciples not to be afraid or worried about their confession when they would be brought before courts for the sake of His Name. They will be His witnesses and He will give them needed power. Paul writes:

That is why Christ died and came to life again, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living (Rom.14:9), high above every principality, power, virtue, and domination, and every name that can be given in this age or in the age to come (Eph.1:21). So that at Jesus' name every knee must bend in the heavens, on the earth, and under the earth, and every tongue proclaim to the glory of God the Father: JESUS CHRIST IS LORD! (Phil.2:10-11).

The Resurrected Christ proclaimed: “*Full authority (another 7 for Jesus) has been given to me both in heaven and on earth*” (Mt.28:18). That authority is constantly being exercised on this earth, in keeping with the Will of the Father--Jesus is the Executor of the Father's Will. This Will is exercised in keeping with the Nature of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Its operations presently are mysterious, but one day we shall see how this authority has directed the course of the universe--despite appearances to the contrary.

In the one statement, “Jesus Christ the faithful witness,” the prophet role of Jesus is described, and in the phrase, “the first-born of the dead,” we have His priestly role intimated, and the statement, “ruler of the kings of earth,” proclaims his kingship. Jesus appears in the Apocalypse as Prophet, Priest, and King. John sings a doxology of praise to Christ, in which he stresses that Jesus loves us, and that by His death and the shedding of His blood, He freed us from our sins.

It is in consequence of His own death and resurrection that Jesus has inherited the power to “make us a royal nation of priests in the service of his God and Father.” These words recall the words of Yahweh to Moses, “*You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. That is what you must tell the Israelites*” (Ex.19:6). This prophecy comes to fulfillment through Jesus Christ and His Church. John's use of these words confirms that the Christian Church has become the New Israel through the merits of Jesus Christ: “To Him be glory and power forever and ever! Amen!” We know from our study

of Hebrews that being “a holy nation” implies that Christ has not only removed our sins, but He has sanctified us, making us pleasing and acceptable to God. *“It pleased God to make absolute fullness reside in him and, by means of him, to reconcile everything in his person, both on earth and in the heavens, making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col.1:19-20).*

As John begins the Apocalypse, he gives us a glimpse, a preview, of its triumphant conclusion. He calls our attention to the final Parousia. Christ, who departed this earthly life in such a disgraceful fashion as a criminal upon the Cross, shall return. John cries, *“See, he comes amid the clouds!”* These clouds are a symbolic reference to the Shekhina of the Old Testament, in which the Divine Presence is gloriously manifested within a bright cloud (see 1Kgs.8:10). It calls to mind the vision of Daniel, which Jesus personally applied to Himself (see Mk.14:62). We read in Daniel:

As the visions during the night continued, I saw One like a son of man coming, on the clouds of heaven; When he reached the Ancient One and was presented before Him, He received dominion, glory, and kingship; nations and peoples of every language serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not be taken away, his kingship shall not be destroyed (Dn.7:13-14).

The People of Israel were symbolized within this prophecy of Daniel. However, it was to be fulfilled in Jesus Christ and His Church. John now implies that the sufferings of Jesus have made His return to earth triumphant when he writes, *“Every eye shall see him even of those who pierced him.”* Here he recalls again, as he did in the Gospel (Jn.19:37), the prophecy of Zechariah in which we read:

And they shall look on him whom they have thrust through, and they shall mourn for him as one mourns for an only son, and they shall grieve over him as one grieves over a first born (Zec.12:10b).

When John writes “every eye shall see him,” he confirms the general resurrection of all the dead. The Coming of Jesus will herald the end of the world that rejected Him. *“All the peoples of the earth shall lament him bitterly.”* “Peoples of the earth” are all those who have rejected Christ and faith in Him, those who are “of this world” and belong to the Antichrist. They “shall lament him bitterly” because His coming brings an end to their world for which they gave their souls. They will weep for the salvation they spurned,

which is now lost to them. All who have persecuted the Church will be as guilty as those who crucified Jesus, for as persecutors of His Church, they demonstrated their hostility to Christ. Christ Himself made this identification when He said to Paul, who persecuted Christians, "*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*"

We read in St. Matthew:

Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the clans of earth will strike their breasts as they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory (Mt.24:30).

Matthew tells us that before the Son appears "*his sign will appear in the sky.*" This "sign" may well be the Sign of the Cross. The Didache speaks of the Cross as the "accursed." which will first appear in the heavens as the harbinger of Christ's coming. Others have interpreted "accursed" to imply that an image of Christ Crucified will first appear in the sky, causing dismay to His enemies and great joy to His elect. The Apocalypse of Peter, an early second century work, puts these words in the mouth of Christ, "*With my cross going before my face will I come in glory, shining seven times as bright as the sun.*" Saints Cyprian, John Chrysostom, and Jerome drew the conclusion that at the Second Coming the five wounds of Jesus would shine forth as visible marks of his glorify. The vision ends with a double affirmation in Greek and Hebrew: So be it!, and *Amen*--Let it be!

It is interesting to note that the persecution of the early Church foretold in the Apocalypse ended when Constantine assumed power within the Empire. On the night of the decisive battle before the City of Rome, Constantine saw a vision of a cross in the night sky and heard a voice speak to him, "*In Hoc Signo Vincas*"--"In this Sign you will conquer!" That next day Constantine rode to victory and power with the Cross of Christ before his Army. This resulted in the Edict of Milan, granting religious freedom throughout the Empire. Through the power of the Cross, the power of the Ancient Enemy had been crushed...for awhile.

The Prologue ends with the divine testimony: "*The Lord God says, I am the Alpha and the Omega, the One who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty!*"(1:8). The first and last words of the Greek alphabet are applied to

God. To associate the first letter with the last signifies totality. God is the sum of all. He is the first and last word of that which is decreed to happen. Just as the world began at His Word, it will be His Word that brings it to consummation. In Isaiah, Yahweh confirms, *“I, the Lord, am the first, and with the last I will also be (41:4b); I am the first and I am the last; there is no God but me (44:6b); I, it is I who am the first, and also the last am I (48:12b).*

The Apocalypse confirms God is “Almighty,” the *Pantokrator*. The word does not imply one who can do everything, but rather One who holds together and controls all things. In other words, “Almighty” means that God has “got the whole world in the palm of His Hand.” God’s enemies, because of the mystery of free will, may rise in this world and perpetrate evil, but ultimately the power resides with God, who began the history of the universe and who will terminate it with perfect timing. St. John would be in total agreement with First Peter:

You may for a time have to suffer the distress of many trials; but this is so that your faith, which is more precious than the passing splendor of fire-tried gold, may by its genuineness lead to praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ appears... set all your hope on the gift to be conferred on you when Jesus Christ appears. (1Pt.1:6-7,13b).

From the Prologue of the Apocalypse we know that the message of its letter is that Jesus Christ will come in the glory of God, and, as man, all people and kingdoms shall be made subject to Him.

When, finally, all has been subjected to the Son, he will then subject himself to the One who made all things subject to Him, so that God may be all in all (1Cor.15:28).

CHAPTER 3

CHRIST AMONG US

INTRODUCTION

St. John wrote the Apocalypse from the Aegean island of Patmos, a barren rocky, crescent shaped island about ten miles long and five miles wide. The shape of the island forms a natural harbor used by ships as their last stop between the city of Ephesus and Rome. Patmos lies about forty miles southwest of Ephesus. It has been written that the musical voices of many waters echo throughout the island, and the island offers magnificent visages of the Aegean which at setting sun may become a flaming sea of glass. A cave is still shown from which John reportedly wrote the Apocalypse. It has been said that the sights and sounds of the sea still echo in the Apocalypse as within a conch shell. Twenty five times John speaks of the *thalassa*--the sea.

Writers of the early Christian Church--Irenaeus, Eusebius, and Jerome--confirmed the presence of John in Asia, in the city of Ephesus. It has been deduced that John probably arrived in Asia before 70 A.D. Paul describes John as one of the "pillars" of the Jerusalem Church. Most surviving Christians left Jerusalem around 67 A.D., as a result of the Jewish Revolt against Rome. They read the signs of the times foretelling the approaching destruction of Jerusalem. Jerome writes that John was banished to Patmos fourteen years after the death of Nero--in the year 94 A.D., during the reign of Domitian. A Christian legend existed, recorded by Eusebius, relating how John had first been sent to Rome as a prisoner and there condemned to death. Having been plunged into a cauldron of boiling oil, which he survived, he was subsequently banished to Patmos.

The conditions of his life there are uncertain--if he was treated as a political prisoner, he would have had relative freedom upon the island. If he had been sent as a convicted criminal, he would have been subjected to hard labor in the mines or quarries and to brutal treatment. For some, Patmos was a penal colony and a concentration camp. John's banishment ended in 96 A.D., with the death of Domitian. According to the existing tradition, he returned to Ephesus during the reign of the Emperor Nero (96-98 A.D.), and died there at

the beginning of the reign of Trajan (97-117 A.D.).

We read in the Apocalypse:

I, John, your brother who share with you the distress and the kingly reign and the endurance we have in Jesus, found myself on the island called Patmos because I proclaimed God's word and bore witness to Jesus (Rv.1:9).

The Apostle John does not describe himself with a title expressing his authority or ministry within the Christian Community, as does Paul, for good reasons; he simply identifies himself as "brother," which expresses the relationship all the baptized share in common. It is a relationship based upon union with Jesus Christ. It makes no difference who one may be within this Community, all are partners who must first be sharers in the sufferings of Christ, who must endure these sufferings in order to reign with Christ. The Christian Life is essentially expressed in union with Jesus Christ, regardless of what may be the particular circumstances of the moment--whether suffering, reigning, or waiting in Christ.

We read in First Peter:

Do not be surprised, beloved, that a trial by fire is occurring in your midst. It is a test for you, but it should not catch you off guard. Rejoice instead, in the measure that you share Christ's sufferings. When his glory is revealed, you will rejoice exultantly...realizing that the brotherhood of believers is undergoing the same sufferings throughout the world. The God of all grace, who called you to his everlasting glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish those who have suffered a little while (1Pt.4:12-13,5:9-10).

John shares in the sufferings of Christ "because I proclaimed God's word and bore witness to Jesus." This implies that John actively evangelized, which would have been forbidden by Roman Law. As mentioned earlier, no foreign religion could be publicly practiced outside of the region of its origin, with the exception of Judaism. Likewise, a religion was legally forbidden to seek converts outside its native area. First Peter encouraged:

Because of the Lord, be obedient to every human institution, whether to the emperor as sovereign or to the governors he commissions for the punishment of criminals and the recognition of the upright. Such obedience is the will of God (1Pt. 2:13-15).

However, we know from Acts that the Church leaders opted for civil disobedience when it came to proclaiming Jesus Christ. They recognized a mandate from God to do so, in that it placed upon them a responsibility greater than that of civil obedience. As theologians would later write: when two moral obligations appear to conflict one with the other, it is only apparently so. In actual fact, there is no conflict because the lesser obligation has ceased to exist. When Jewish legal authority--the Sanhedrin--forbade the apostles to preach in the name of Jesus, the author of First Peter--Simon Peter--replied on behalf of the Church, "*Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight for us to obey you rather than God. Surely we cannot help speaking of what we have heard and seen*" (Acts 4:19-20). Perhaps it was with this exception in mind that Peter later wrote:

See to it that none of you suffers for being a murderer, a thief, a malefactor, or a destroyer of another's rights. If anyone suffers for being a Christian, however, he ought not to be ashamed. He should, rather, glorify God in virtue of that name (1Pt.4:15-16).

Accordingly, let those who suffer as God's will requires continue in good deeds, and entrust their lives to a faithful Creator (4:19).

Happy are you when you are insulted for the sake of Christ, for then God's Spirit in its glory has come to rest on you (4:14).

Before the Edict of Milan was issued in the fourth century, to be a Christian was to be a civil criminal. To be a Christian and also to evangelize would have been doubly a crime. The Christian martyrs were put to death, as was Jesus, as public criminals. They had defied civil law. The Christian Church, indeed in its primitive years, had a long history of civil disobedience. Again, later theologians would maintain that an unjust law could not be a true law and could not morally oblige obedience. Christians could be defended against the charge of being criminals by demonstrating that the law against Christians was unjust and, therefore, illegal and could not oblige civil obedience. Therefore, the Christians, as was Jesus, were falsely accused of being criminals. Of course, the Roman Empire and the general public would not

have recognized such a deduction. Not only did Rome not recognize God's dominion over mankind, but Rome, in the persons of its emperors, usurped God's position in this world. Those who did recognize God's legitimate claim over mankind could not but be in opposition to Rome.

In the case of Rome vs. the Christian Community, it was indeed Goliath against David. Mortal conflict existed between Imperial Rome and the Christian Church that endured nearly three centuries. The Apocalypse encouraged "little David" to endure, persevere, and ultimately triumph. The survival of the Church in the face of such power and might for so many years was indeed the miraculous triumph of the Christian Faith. It confirmed that the Church established by Jesus Christ would survive until the consummation of the world--the Gates of Hell would not prevail against it. This was not all that apparent when John wrote the Apocalypse.

THE CHRIST OF GLORY

After John identifies himself and his relationship with the Church, he proceeds to relate his first vision which describes Christ, the Divine Mediator, who dramatically appears and commands John to write down all that will be revealed. We read:

On the Lord's Day I was caught up in ecstasy, and I heard behind me a piercing voice like the sound of a trumpet, which said, "Write on a scroll what you now see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea." I turned around to see whose voice it was that spoke to me. When I did so I saw seven lampstands of gold, and among the lampstands, One like a Son of Man wearing an ankle-length robe, with a sash of gold about his breast. The hair of his head was as white as snow-white wool and his eyes blazed like fire. His feet gleamed like polished brass refined in a furnace, and his voice sounded like the roar of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars. A sharp, two-edged sword came out of his mouth, and his face shone like the sun at its brightest. When I caught sight of him I fell down at his feet as though dead. He touched me with his right hand and said: "There is nothing to fear. I am the First and the Last and the One who lives. Once I was dead but now I live--forever and ever. I hold the keys of death and the nether world. Write down, therefore, whatever you see in visions--what you see

now and will see in time to come. This is the secret meaning of the seven stars you saw in my right hand, and of the seven lampstands of gold: the seven stars are the presiding spirits of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches (Rv.1:10-20).

On Sunday, the Lord's Day, John received the first vision. He was at prayer when suddenly the Presence of God so powerfully dominated his conscious awareness that the operations of all his physical faculties were suspended as his spiritual self became absorbed in the Divine Presence. John entered into a state of spiritual ecstasy in which his world ceased to be, and the heavenly world became the only reality. The faculties of the spirit, more powerful than those of the body, are absorbed in the spiritual experience: the eye of the spirit sees with penetrating perceptiveness, and the ear of the spirit hears with great clarity. Paul once wrote of such an experience:

I know a man in Christ who, fourteen years ago, whether he was in or outside his body I cannot say, only God can say... I know that this man...was snatched up to Paradise to hear words which cannot be uttered, words which no man may speak (2Cor.12:2-4).

Fourteen years later the experience was still crystal clear in the mind of Paul. That is the nature of such experiences. Mystical experiences received by and through the physical senses do not maintain the same clarity and depth with the passing of time. Within this state of ecstasy, John received a vision of Jesus Christ. It is Jesus Glorified.

The Gospel account presents an earthly image of Jesus--a man meek and humble of heart, led to His slaughter as a lamb before his shearers. The Apocalypse presents a different image of Jesus. The sound of His voice has the quality of a trumpet that not only pierces the ears, but grasps the very spirit and quickens the heart. As Christ continues to speak, the image of Jesus' voice changes for John; it becomes like the roar of the waves and the pounding sound of the surf that fills the air and drowns out all other sound. Christ commands John to write upon a scroll all that he shall see and hear, and to send the scroll to the seven Churches of Asia.

John's first recorded vision was that of Jesus Christ Himself, a vision that at first sight causes the Seer to swoon in the spirit: "*When I caught sight of Him, I fell down at his feet as though dead*" (Rv.1:17a). When John turned toward

the sound of the voice, he saw Jesus standing in the midst of seven golden lampstands and, in the words of the prophet Daniel, Jesus appeared as “one like a Son of Man.” Jesus wore a long robe reaching down to his ankles with a sash of gold about his breast. The form is at once priestly and kingly. The garment symbolized the robe the high priest wore when he stood before God to expiate the sins of the people, and to offer prayers of praise, petition, and thanksgiving to God for the people. The sash about his breast symbolized the purity and fidelity of his heart. That it was made of gold indicated his royalty.

In ancient times, gold was presented to kings only. We read in First Maccabees that King Alexander presented the Jewish high priest Jonathan with a golden buckler in acknowledgement of his royalty. Jesus wearing the golden sash or girdle about his breast signified that he was active in the roles of priest and king. Jesus’ hair was as “white as snow-white wool.” The description immediately calls to mind Daniel’s vision of “the Ancient One” whose “clothing was snow bright, and the hair of his head as white as wool.” The white was a symbol of eternity and Divine Wisdom. Here the vision indicates the eternal pre-existence of the Son: “*In the beginning was the Word; the Word was in God’s presence, and the Word was God*” (Jn.1:1). The vision recalls the words of Hebrews: “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever*” (Heb.13:8).

It is the eyes of Jesus that command the Seer’s attention, and their gaze causes the spirit of the Seer to grow weak and swoon. “His eyes blazed like fire.” Eyes of flaming fire symbolize spiritual insight. His vision burns through the surface of all appearances. “*It judges the reflections and thoughts of the heart. Nothing is concealed from him; all lies bare and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must render an account*” (Heb.4:12c-13). In the words of Paul, there “is nothing hidden that shall not be revealed.” One day we will all see ourselves in the eyes of Christ. All our shame and pretense will melt away; we will see ourselves in the eyes of God--what we have truly permitted life to make us to be. Who will be able to stand under the light of that gaze? Jesus said to His disciples,

The day I speak of will come upon all who dwell on the face of the earth. So be on the watch. Pray constantly for the strength to escape whatever is in prospect, and to stand secure before the Son of Man (Lk.21:35-36).

John's vision again recalls a description in Daniel:

As I looked up, I saw a man dressed in linen with a belt of fine gold around his waist. His body was like chrysolite [the golden color sheath found on the wings of butterflies], his face shone like lightning, his eyes were like fiery torches, his arms and feet looked like burnished bronze, and his voice sounded like the roar of a multitude (Dn.10:5-6).

On Patmos it was the roar of the sea that so often filled the ears of John. And the voice of Jesus sounded like the roar of rushing waters. The feet of Jesus "gleamed like polished brass refined in a furnace." They had the appearance of a metal heated to white heat. The brass symbolized the stability of Christ and His destructive power "to trample out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored." Jesus will tread upon all that is unholy, which will be consumed by fire. The feet of Jesus are in contrast with feet composed of iron and clay. The words of Jesus proceed from His mouth with the power of a Roman sword--a sword that was short and tongue-like in shape, that could cut both right and left, a powerful weapon to slay the enemy. As John expressed it, "A sharp, two-edged sword came out of his mouth." The author of Hebrews had written:

Indeed, God's word is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates and divides, soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the reflections and thoughts of the heart (Heb.4:12).

From the mouth of Christ shall come the judgment of all--Christians and non-Christians, righteous and unrighteous. The Letter to the Ephesians speaks of the word of God as being the sword of the Spirit, and Paul writes in Thessalonians: "*Thereupon the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will destroy him with the breath of his mouth and annihilate him by manifesting his own presence*" (2Thes.2:8).

Jesus holds in his right hand seven stars. In the ancient world the stars, the heavenly bodies, were believed to have been celestial beings--angelic beings or gods. The stars were believed to be in the Hands of God, and they would fall from the heavens unless supported by God. The Persian deity Mitros and the Caesars were represented with seven stars in their right hand to proclaim their universal rule. The Emperor Domitian's son died in 83 A.D. He had the

boy proclaimed a god and ordered a coin to be minted on which it showed Domitia, the boy's mother, as Queen of Heaven, and the child sitting on the globe of heaven playing with the stars.

John's image of Christ suggests that the same Hand that conserves the universe in existence also holds the Seven Churches within His hand and sustains them in existence. The stars were identified with the Seven Churches. As long as the Church remains in His hand it will be held safely, high above the raging floods that threaten to engulf it. When John tells us that the face of Jesus "shone like the sun at its brightest," he tells us he could no more gaze upon the glorious face of Jesus Christ than he could look straight into the face of the sun at high noon.

The overall impression of the Glorified Jesus is overwhelming and John writes, "*When I caught sight of him I fell down at his feet as though dead*" (Rv.1:17). The vision calls to mind the day John, along with Peter and James, beheld a brief transfiguration of Jesus Christ in which "*His face became as dazzling as the sun*" (Mt.17:2). What was then merely a brief moment in time is now a permanent condition. Jesus is forever transfigured with glory. John's reaction to the vision is similar to that of both Daniel and Ezekiel. In Daniel we read:

While he was speaking thus to me, I fell forward and kept silent. Then something like a man's hand...touched me...saying, "Fear not, beloved, you are safe; take courage and be strong" (Dn.10:15-19).

In Ezekiel we read:

Such was the vision of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I had seen it, I fell upon my face and heard a voice that said to me: Son of Man, stand up! I wish to speak with you. As he spoke to me the spirit entered into me and set me on my feet (Ez.1:28c-2:2a).

John wrote, "*he touched me with his right hand and said: 'There is nothing to fear.'*" On the Mount of Transfiguration we read, "*Jesus came toward them and laying his hand on them, said, 'Get up! Do not be afraid'*" (Mt.17:7). In this regard, glorification has not changed Jesus. He is still the One "who loves us" with a love that casts out fear. The touch of His hand gives strength and courage. He does not want our fear but our love.

THE FIRST AND THE LAST

The visions of Jesus come clothed in the symbols of the Old Testament. These symbols present Jesus Christ robed with divine characteristics. It is this Christ of the Apocalypse that the suffering Church must keep before its eyes, and in whom it must place its trust. The words spoken by Jesus confirm the message of the symbolism, "I am the First and the Last and the One who lives." Jesus appropriates the divine name, "Ego eimi"—"I am!" Saying "I am the First and the Last" is but another way of saying "I am the Alpha and the Omega," in whom totality of being resides.

The Incarnation of the Son of God is confirmed when Jesus says, "Once I was dead but now I live--forever and ever." He became true flesh and suffered death and has now risen from the dead never again to know death. He stands in sharp contrast with the dead emperors of Rome who claimed divinity, and with the inanimate gods of paganism. The early Christian sect called the Docetist maintained that the death of Jesus was only apparent--a divine charade--for they claimed Jesus possessed only the semblance of a human body. The words used in the Greek text stress that Jesus experienced death, not a mere semblance of it. What is being spoken of here is the resurrection of the human life of Jesus; it is not a reference to the divine life. However, from the Resurrection, the human life of Jesus fully shares in the divinity of God's Son. For this reason the humanity of Jesus is a proper object of divine adoration.

The Risen Jesus tells the Church, "*I hold the keys of death and the nether world*" (Rv.1:18c). Another translation for "nether world" would be "Hades." In Greek mythology, Hades was the King of the realm of death. In the ancient world, Death and Hades symbolized powers rather than places. In Judaism, Hades would have been synonymous with Sheol--the place of the dead where the personalities of men existed in some nebulous state. It was from Sheol or Hades that the witch of Endor, on the request of King Saul, called back to earth the spirit of the Prophet Samuel. The Book of Hebrews speaks of the Devil as he who has the power of death (See Heb.2:14). Sin gives Satan the power to produce death. "The sting of death is sin." To have the keys is to be the Master. The rabbis taught, "Three keys has the Holy One kept in his power: the key to the womb, the key to the rain, and the key to the tomb."

When Jesus says, "I hold the keys to death and to Hades," He proclaims that He is master over the region of death. Satan may inflict physical death, but

Christ possesses the power to release from both physical and spiritual death. While on earth, Jesus taught:

I solemnly assure you, an hour is coming, has indeed come, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God and those who have heeded it shall live ... for an hour is coming in which all those in their tombs shall hear his voice and come forth (Jn.5:25,28).

Because Jesus possessed the keys of death, He could tell His disciples, “*I say to you who are my friends: Do not be afraid of those who kill the body and can do no more*” (Lk.12:4). Christians must not be frightened of physical death because Jesus will release them from the nether world and from the power of Satan. Paul wrote in the light of this doctrine:

When the corruptible frame takes on incorruptibility, and the mortal immortality, then will the saying of Scripture be fulfilled: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” ... But thanks be to God who has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1Cor.15:54-57).

Satan’s power over a Christian can only be physical; his power ends with physical death.

For a second time, the Glorified Lord commands John to write down what he will now see “and will see in time to come.” John beheld Jesus standing among seven lampstands, holding seven stars in his right hand. Jesus explains these mysterious symbols to John. He is told that the “seven stars are the presiding spirits of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.” The seven lampstands are made of gold, which symbolizes how precious and valuable they are in the sight of God. It is to be noted that Jesus stands among the lampstands, which emphasizes the constant presence of the Risen Lord within His Church. The Son of Man “*who is to come*” is already and always present. That final coming will be but the unveiling of what has always been. Even though Jesus has physically departed from this earth, the Spirit of Jesus still resides with the Church. The symbol of the Church as lampstands stresses the role of the Church as a witness in this world. Jesus once said to His disciples:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Men do not light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket. They

set it on a stand where it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, your light must shine before men so that they may see goodness in your acts and give praise to your heavenly Father (Mt.5:14-16).

Jesus speaks of the seven stars as being “the presiding spirits” of the seven churches. The Greek word used is *aggelos*, which means “messenger” or “angel.” The Apocalypse uses the word *aggelos* sixty times and it always implies a superhuman being used in the service of God or Satan. Scholars have had much discussion over the meaning of “angel” in this text. Obviously, even after Christ’s explanation, a mystery remains. Some have interpreted the angels to be the bishops, or the elders that presided over the Churches. These angels are held responsible before God for the conduct of the Churches. One of the more satisfactory explanations has been to see the “stars” or “angels” as a spiritual representation of the presiding spirit in each Church. The lampstand expresses the Church as it physically appears upon this earth, and the “presiding spirit” symbolizes the invisible spirit, or spirituality of the Church, visible before the eyes of God. To express it another way, the lampstand is the body of the Church and the angel is the soul of the Church. Even if the letters are addressed to the leaders of the Community, or to its Guardian Angels, its message is intended for the entire community: “Let him who has ears heed the Spirit’s word to the Churches.” The “angels” of the Church--be they church leaders, or heavenly beings--are nevertheless symbols of the congregation itself.

The seven letters follow a stereotypical literary form. Each is addressed to the “angel of the Church.” Each begins with a title of Christ, who speaks. Each title used has already been mentioned in the Prologue, or within the first vision. The message begins with *oida*, translated, “I know,” which emphasizes Christ’s personal knowledge of the situation in which each Church finds itself. The Lord diagnoses each situation, and concludes with praise or warning. Each letter ends with an exhortation. Ephesus, Pergamum, Sardis, and Laodicea are exhorted to change their ways. Smyrna, Thyatira, and Philadelphia are exhorted to persevere in fidelity. The Lord is coming soon and His coming brings a double consequence--grace to some and anathema to others. From his mouth proceeds a two-edged sword that cuts right and left. The Word of God will judge both His disciples and His enemies.

As we can see from the letters, His judgment begins with the Church. The letters end with, “Let him who has ears heed the Spirit’s words to the Churches!” The letters are addressed to each hearer. The Spirit mentioned is

indeed the Spirit of God. These words echo the exhortation that runs through the Letter to the Hebrews (3:7-8), “*Today, if you hear his voice, harden not your hearts!*”

When one looks at the general content of the seven letters, it warns that the greatest danger remains internal--the enemy within--which destroys the Spirit of Christ within the Christian Community. Apparently, in the first century one of the greatest threats to the Church was the Gnostic teachings, with its emphasis upon liberty that had become license. It has been suggested that the pattern of the seven letters may have echoed the style of the imperial edicts of the time.

Ephesus, only forty miles from Patmos, would have been the natural recipient of the first letter. Boats sailing to Asia from Patmos would have landed at Ephesus, the principal seaport on the coast. Ephesus was the natural gateway between East and West. It has been said, “All roads lead to Rome!” Many of the roads coming from the East, as far as the Euphrates and Mesopotamia, converged upon Ephesus on their way to Rome. A few years after the writing of the Apocalypse, Ignatius of Antioch would call Ephesus “the Highway of the Martyrs.” Because of its commercial importance, it was indeed a “queen city” of Asia.

Here in Ephesus was the world famous temple of Artemis (or Diana), the goddess of fertility. Artemis was a symbol for the worship of Mother Earth. The temple of Artemis was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The temple attracted pilgrims from all over the known world, and not only the pious. An area adjoining the temple gave the right of sanctuary to criminals, where they could live unmolested if they had entered within the sanctuary. Cults of magical arts blossomed alongside the cult of Artemis. The city was famous for its Ephesian Letters--collections of amulets, charms, chants, secret potions with powers to cure, and you-name-it. Acts records an incident indicating the effect of these things on the Church in Ephesus:

Many who had become believers came forward and openly confessed their former practices (using spells). A number who had been dealing in magic even collected their books and burned them in public. When the value of these was assessed, it came to fifty thousand silver pieces (Acts 19:18-19).

This gives us some idea of the commercial value of these magical practices.

The city was also the center for the worship of the Roman Emperors. However, it was the worship of Artemis that dominated the population, and apparently contributed great financial support to its merchants. When the Church grew in Ephesus through the ministry of Paul, it became a threat to those who made their living by making miniature shrines of the goddess. We read in Acts that Demetrius, a silversmith, called a meeting of the guilds at which he said:

“Men,” he said, “you know that our prosperity depends on this work. But as you can see and hear for yourselves, not only at Ephesus but throughout most of the province of Asia, this Paul has persuaded great numbers of people to change their religion. He tells them that manmade gods are no gods at all. The danger grows, not only that our trade will be discredited, but even that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will count for nothing. In fact, she whom Asia and all the world reveres may soon be stripped of her magnificence.” When they heard this speech, they were overcome with fury and began to shout, “Long live Artemis of Ephesus!” Before long, confusion spread throughout the city (Acts 19:25-29a).

It resulted in a city riot that subsequently forced Paul to leave. This opposition to the Church would continue. We read in Paul’s letter to Timothy in Ephesus:

Alexander the coppersmith did me a great deal of harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Meanwhile, you too had better be on guard, for he has strongly resisted our preaching (2Tm.4:14-15).

All generally agree that Paul founded the Christian Church at Ephesus around 53 A.D. There he had labored for over two years. He *“held his discussions from day to day in the lecture hall of Tyrannus” (Acts 19:9)*, which resulted in Christianity being spread throughout the province of Asia. Paul later sent Timothy to Ephesus to preside over the community. Ephesus had appeared no more a fertile field for Christianity than had Corinth across the Aegean Sea, but Paul was not afraid to accept a challenge in the name of Jesus Christ. As in Corinth, the Church was established there and it took deep root.

Let us now read the first of the Seven Letters to the Churches--the Letter to the Church in Ephesus:

To the presiding spirit of the church in Ephesus, write this:

“The One who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven lampstands of gold has this to say: I know your deeds, your labors, and your patient endurance. I know you cannot tolerate wicked men; you have tested those self-styled apostles who are nothing of the sort, and discovered that they are impostors. You are patient and endure hardship for my cause. Moreover, you do not become discouraged. I hold this against you, though: you have turned aside from your early love. Keep firmly in mind the heights from which you have fallen. Repent, and return to your former deeds. If you do not repent I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this much in your favor: you detest the practices of the Nicolaitans, just as I do.

Let him who has ears heed the Spirit’s word to the churches! I will see to it that the victor eats from the tree of life which grows in the garden of God” (Rv.2:1-7).

LETTER TO EPHEBUS

The initial title used by Jesus, “The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven lampstands,” expresses an essential truth the Church must always keep within its conscious awareness. Jesus Christ is always present with the Church on earth, and He is always present in power and knowledge: “I know your deeds, your labors and your patient endurance.” What we do and what we are is important to Jesus. Works have their importance. We will one day have to answer to Christ for the work we have done; the work we have not done will certainly be a subject of Christ’s interest at our judgment. We may be more evil in the sight of God for the good we failed to accomplish than for our sins of commission.

It is the power of Christ that sustains the Church, and He alone can lift it safely above the external evils that surround it. However, concerning the internal evil within the Church that is locked into the wills of its members, Jesus deals differently. The Spirit of Jesus exhorts, warns, and threatens the Church to repent or otherwise suffer the consequences. Internal evil will not destroy the Church, though it may destroy a Christian Community. A section

of the Church may be abandoned by Christ. His presence and power will be transferred to those who will bear greater fruit. The Church at Ephesus ultimately died--it died along with the City of Ephesus. Today, only impressive ruins recall its days of former glory.

From its conception, the Church at Ephesus had struggled successfully against its pagan environment. It survived within a sea of heresy and paganism. Paul's last words to the elders of the Church were:

Keep watch over yourselves, and over the whole flock the Holy Spirit has given you to guard. Shepherd the church of God. ... I know that when I am gone, savage wolves will come among you who will not spare the flock. From your own number, men will present themselves distorting the truth and leading astray any who follow them. Be on guard, therefore (Acts 20:28-31).

Paul was prophetic. The wolves came in Christian clothing. To Ephesus he sent Timothy to be the Good Shepherd. Paul wrote Timothy:

I repeat the directions I gave you when I was on my way to Macedonia: stay on in Ephesus in order to warn certain people there against teaching false doctrines and busying themselves with interminable myths and genealogies, which promote idle speculations rather than that training in faith which God requires. What we are aiming at in this warning is the love that springs from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith. Some people have neglected these and instead have turned to meaningless talk, wanting to be teachers of the law but actually not understanding the words they are using, much less the matters they discuss with such assurance (1Tm.1:3-7).

Some men, by rejecting the guidance of conscience, have made a shipwreck of their faith, among them Hymenaeus and Alexander--these I have turned over to Satan so that they may learn not to blaspheme (1Tm.1:19b-20).

This is the case with Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have gone far wide of the truth in saying that the resurrection has already taken place. They are upsetting some people's faith (2Tm.2:17c-18).

Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth--with perverted minds they falsify the faith. But they will not get very far; as with those two men, the stupidity of these will be plain for all to see (2Tm.3:8-9).

Test everything, retain what is good (1Thes.5:21).

John wrote, "Beloved, do not trust every spirit, but put the spirits to a test to see if they belong to God, because many false prophets have appeared in the world (1Jn.4:1).

Jesus said, "You will know them by their deeds. ... You can tell a tree by its fruit" (Mt.7:16,20).

Under the encouragement of Paul, the leadership of Timothy, and later John, the Church at Ephesus nobly survived the attempts of the "wolves in sheep's clothing" to pervert genuine Christian Doctrine. The Lord congratulates the Church at Ephesus. It had demonstrated a virile strength knowing neither fatigue nor discouragement in its defense of orthodoxy. It had tested every spirit present before the Church; unmasked and exposed the false prophets. It particularly recognized the evil in the teachings of the Nicolaitans, whose practices it detested. However, in its fight for orthodoxy, in its defense of truth, something had been lost, something essential to Christian life without which it cannot exist. The Charity of the Community had noticeably decreased. Jesus said, "*I hold this against you though: you have turned aside from your early love*" (Rv.2:4).

Jesus confirmed that the members of the Church were correct to detest evil, to hate that which perverted religious and moral truths, but they were wrong to let hatred enter into their hearts. It is indeed a two-edged sword that can destroy self along with the enemy. Christians were right to hate the heresy, but they were wrong to hate the heretic. Even when the mind can distinguish between the two, it is not always easy for the heart to respect and accept that distinction. Irenaeus, speaking of Polycarp's remembrances of St. John the Apostle, tells us:

There are those who have heard him tell how, when John the disciple of the Lord went to bathe at Ephesus and saw Cerenthus

inside, he rushed out of the bath without washing, but crying out, "let us escape, lest the bath should fall while Cerenthus the enemy of truth is in it." Polycarp himself, when Marcion once met him and said, "Do you know us?" answered, "I know you, the first born of Satan" (Irenaeus).

Irenaeus goes on to say, "The apostles and their disciples took such care not even to engage in conversation with the corruptors of the truth..."

Few Christians could act with the purity of intention of Paul when he wrote concerning Hymenaeus and Alexander, "these I have turned over to Satan so that they may learn not to blaspheme." The Church at Ephesus heard Paul when he said, "*be on your guard*" for those wolves in sheep's clothing, but they did not listen too attentively when he said,

The servant of the Lord must not be quarrelsome but must be kindly toward all. He must be an apt teacher, patiently and gently correcting those who contradict him, in the hope always that God will enable them to repent and know the truth ... they shall escape the devil's trap (2Tm.2:24-26).

Perhaps the spirit that was later criticized by Jesus was well rooted in the Community before the death of Paul. In one of his last letters, Paul wrote, "*You know that all in Asia, including even Phygelus and Hermogenes, have turned their backs on me*" (2Tm.1:15). Jesus once said, "*False prophets will rise in great numbers to mislead many. Because of the increase of evil, the love of most will grow cold. The man who holds out to the end, however, is the one who will see salvation*" (Mt.24:11-13).

Love grown cold will be a problem within and without the Church. For many it is easier to hate than to love. It is easier to stir the fires of hatred within the hearts of men than to enkindle fraternal charity. St. Cyril of Alexandria, who presided over the Council of Ephesus in 432 A.D., was held morally responsible for the death of a pagan philosopher because his own expressed hostility towards those who taught error stirred the hatred of others.

It is reported that the Lady Hypatia, a celebrated and honored pagan philosopher within the city of Alexandria, was dragged to the steps of a church in Alexandria by a mob of Christians, and there stripped naked and

chopped to pieces with the sharp edges of roofing tiles. Historians have reflected that if Cyril had treated Nestorius with kindness and consideration, Nestorianism may not have become a heresy within the Church, causing a schism. It was once said of a French convent of Nuns, "They are as pure as angels, but as proud as devils."

Jesus calls the Church to remembrance. They are to remember what they were when Paul had been among them. Paul had maintained a balance between truth and love. The people of the Church were to see what they had become through their zeal for truth at the expense of charity. We know from Paul's account of his encounter with Jesus on the Road to Damascus, that Jesus identifies with those Christians we may hate, despise, or persecute. He considers the behavior directed towards them as personally directed towards Him. He asked the persecutor of others, "Why do you persecute me?" This remembrance--the examination of conscience--must awaken repentance: "Return to your former deeds!" Their faith was solid, but it would not save unless infused once again with charity.

"You have turned aside from your first love." The love that is spoken of is *agape*--the very love of God itself poured out into the hearts of Christians through the Holy Spirit. The condemnation implies that this quality of love had greatly decreased within the Christian Community. It was not as it had been in the days of Paul. In the very first message to the Church, the Lord stresses this essential dimension of Christian life without which Christian life does not exist. The very end of a Christian life is union with God, who is defined in the Scriptures as *agape*--Love! This union implies being one with God--being one in Love. Love is at the heart of being. Love is of the will.

True love is expressed, not essentially in feelings and emotions, but in good will. The loving heart is the heart that truly seeks nothing but the good of the beloved, and will even sacrifice its own life for that good. A good will is rightly and correctly directed by Truth, which is Light on Love's path. When truth directs hatred and evil, it has been perverted. Love is God's own life. Love that grows, grows into God, and will endure forever and forever. This is what Jesus implies when he teaches, *"I will see to it that the victor eats from the tree of life which grows in the garden of God."* The "tree of life" is eternal life achieved through a union of mind and heart with God. The decree once given in Genesis concerning the Tree of Life, *"You shall not eat it or even touch it, lest you die"* (Gen.3:3), has been rescinded through Jesus Christ for those who achieve the victory.

Jesus speaks of the victory of the one who conquers. The terminology implies Christian life is a battlefield and the greatest battles will always be fought in the souls of individual Christians. Each must achieve his or her own personal victory and be supported by Christ and the Church. “The one who holds out to the end is the one who will see salvation.” However, victory over evil must never be at the price of Christian Charity.

This first message to the Church has two concepts important for all ages: Jesus is forever present within His Church, and if individuals of the Church will to be ever present with Jesus, they will abide always in faith, hope and love, and they will know “the greatest of these is love.” Christians must hear and heed the words of the Apostle:

If I have the gift of prophecy and, with full knowledge, comprehend all mysteries, if I have faith great enough to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give everything I have to feed the poor and hand over my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing (1Cor.13:2-3).

CHAPTER 4

A SEASON FOR REPENTANCE

INTRODUCTION

In the presentation of the first vision, the Apocalypse has presented a dramatic portrait of Jesus of Nazareth clothed in divine majesty. It indicates that the Glorified Christ's presence and power remain with the Church on earth. With both Presence and Power Jesus is always present, and a visible in-break on earth of His power and presence remains imminent. He stands behind the veil--hidden both to earth and to Hell. The eye of faith alone detects His presence and beholds His power. When the moment of the fullness of time comes, the Christ of Glory will be manifested visibly before all creation. His visible Presence will be Judgment. Within the light of His presence all creation will stand judged. Recall that judgment declares primarily who is righteous, and only secondarily who may be condemned. It is the work of the Judge to declare righteousness. The presence of Jesus vindicates the saints, declaring and confirming their righteousness.

For those others? The sinfulness and evilness of their being becomes crystal clear before all. Evil will be no more, for the Presence of Christ will annihilate it as the coming sun eliminates the darkness of night. Speaking of the "*lawless one*," Paul wrote, "*The Lord Jesus will destroy him with the breath of his mouth and annihilate him by manifesting his own presence*" (2Thes.2:8b). Those who have made evil their fundamental option and are confirmed in evil will be eternally lost. In Second Peter we read:

The present heavens and earth are reserved by God's word for fire; they are kept for the day of judgment, the day when godless men will be destroyed. ... The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and on that day the heavens will vanish with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and all its deeds will be made manifest (2Pt.3:7,10).

The saints will shine in the reflected glory of Christ as the stars of the Heavens. We read in Daniel:

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake; some shall live forever, others shall be an everlasting horror and disgrace. But the wise shall shine brightly like the splendor of the firmament, and those who lead the many to justice shall be like the stars forever (Dn.12:2-3).

It has been said that the Apocalypse reveals what will occur before Christ steps beyond the veil and what follows after He does. Presently He tarries; He delays in order to grant a season of repentance. Peter preached in Jerusalem:

Therefore, reform your lives! Turn to God, that your sins may be wiped away! Thus may a season of refreshment be granted you by the Lord when he sends you Jesus, already designated as your Messiah. Jesus must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration which God spoke of long ago through his holy prophets (Acts 3:19-21).

It is written in Second Peter that sneering and mocking men will come and they will ask: *“Where is that promised coming of his? Our forefathers have been laid to rest, but everything stays just as it was when the world was created” (2Pt.3:4).*

The author of Second Peter responds:

This point must not be overlooked, dear friends. In the Lord’s eyes, one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years are as a day. The Lord does not delay in keeping his promise--though some consider it “delay.” Rather, he shows you generous patience, since he wants none to perish but all to come to repentance (2Pt.3:8-9).

The present time is the season for repentance. For those who repent and persevere within it, a season of refreshment will come. The seven Churches of the Apocalypse represent the Church. The seven messages are for all. The content of the messages is Jesus’ analysis of the state of the Church. It is a prelude to the final Judgment.

As a loving brother, Jesus comes and assesses the Church’s condition. It is an analysis that will have continuous validity. Through what Jesus praises and encourages within the Church, He indicates what will lead to the final and eternal declaration of righteousness. Through what Jesus warns against and

condemns within the Church, He indicates what will lead to a final condemnation on Judgment Day. Beforehand, Jesus distinguishes what is weed and what is wheat. The weeds will be removed from the Church and subjected to condemnation. The Scriptures indicate a severe judgment upon them. We read in the Scriptures:

When men have fled a polluted world by recognizing the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and then are caught up and overcome in pollution once more, their last condition is worse than their first. It would have been better for them not to have recognized the road to holiness than to have turned their backs on the holy law handed on to them, once they had known it. How well the proverb fits them: "The dog returns to its vomit," and, "A sow bathes by wallowing in the mire" (2Pt.2:20-22).

Jesus spoke of the "weeds":

The weeds are the followers of the evil one and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. ... Just as weeds are collected and burned, so will it be at the end of the world. The Son of Man will dispatch his angels to collect from his kingdom all who draw others to apostasy, and all evildoers. The angels will hurl them into the fiery furnace where they will wail and grind their teeth. Then the saints will shine like the sun in their Father's kingdom (Mt.13:38-43).

The Book of Hebrews spoke of the final end of those who apostasize from the Christian Religion:

For when men have once been enlightened and have tasted the heavenly gift and become sharers in the Holy Spirit, when they have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to make them repent again, since they are crucifying the Son of God for themselves and holding him up to contempt. Ground which drinks in the rain falling on it again and again, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whom it is cultivated, receives the blessing of God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless; it is soon cursed, and finally is burned (Heb.6:4-8).

As mentioned earlier, Ephesus would have been the ideal recipient of the first letter because of its proximity to Patmos and its cultural prominence. However, from the spiritual point of view, it was an even more ideal recipient of this letter. It served as an example for the Lord to emphasize the essentials of the Christian Religion. It is vitally important that the Church teaches correct religious doctrines. It must recognize, declare, and reject false prophets, apostles, and teachers. However, it is vitally important that the Church manifest the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of both Truth and Love. The members of the Church must not only put on the Mind of Christ, but likewise the Heart of Christ. A Community--or individual--that has received an out-pouring of the Love of God and does not manifest this Love is spiritually dead. The spiritually dead can be discerned by the absence of Joy. Paul said, "*Rejoice in the Lord always! I say it again. Rejoice!*" (Phil.4:4). That is impossible for those in whose hearts the Holy Spirit's Love finds no room for expression. Christians who only open their minds to the Holy Spirit become spiritual monstrosities.

LETTER TO SMYRNA

Let us now continue to follow the messenger from Patmos as he makes his rounds of the six remaining churches. Let us hear what the Spirit says to the Church. Let us pray for the grace to heed what we hear! The next letter is addressed to the Church at Smyrna which lies along the coast about forty miles north of Ephesus. Smyrna and Ephesus were like two beautiful sisters who lived in jealous rivalry of one another. Both vied for the commerce of the East and West and recognition of Rome. The city rests at the foot of Mt. Pagos and looked out upon a long, narrow gulf which formed an excellent harbor before the city--one easily defended. The city had been destroyed in 600 B.C. After the time of Alexander, it rose from oblivion to become the "fairest city of Ionia."

The poet Aristides compared it to the mythical Phoenix because it, too, arose like a bird out of its ashes to new vigor, beauty, and life. Above the city rested beautiful temples and buildings, which were called the crown of Smyrna. The corona was a city symbol. Smyrna was a city rooted in attachment to Rome. As far back as 195 B.C., the city erected a temple to the goddess Roma. Later it won the coveted choice as the site for the temple of Tiberius Caesar and Livia. Within the Roman Empire, it was the city of fidelity. However, the

name Smyrna means myrrh, which symbolizes suffering. Myrrh was used in the burial of Jesus. Perhaps its name signified a city of suffering--one that suffered death and arose to newness of life. One is left with the impression that the City of Smyrna represented Christ and His Church. Of all the cities addressed in the seven letters, only in the city of Smyrna did Christianity strongly survive. At the beginning of the 20th century, about half of the population of the city still remained Christian. Today Smyrna is called "Izmir." From Izmir one can presently take a bus tour to review the remains of Ephesus--her once proud rival. Let us now read the letter to the Church at Smyrna.

To the presiding spirit of the Church in Smyrna, write this:

"The First and the Last who once died but now lives has this to say: I know of your tribulation and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander you endure from self-styled Jews who are nothing other than members of Satan's assembly. Have no fear of the sufferings to come. The devil will indeed cast some of you into prison to put you to the test--you will be tried over a period of ten days. Remain faithful until death and I will give you the crown of life.

*Let him who has ears heed the Spirit's word to the churches!
The victor shall never be harmed by the second death" (Rev.2:8-10).*

The Church in Smyrna is one who knows the experience of suffering for its faith in Jesus Christ. To the Church, Jesus identifies Himself as "*The First and the Last who once died but now lives.*" Through this title Jesus associates Himself with suffering humanity. He has indeed entered into glory but its entrance was through the door of human suffering. The Scriptures confirm to the Church that Jesus is the "*leader in the work of salvation,*" and he was made perfect through "*what he suffered; and when perfected, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him*" (Heb.5:8c-9). Scripture stresses, "*Jesus likewise had a full share in ours, that by his death he might rob the devil, the prince of death, of his power*" (Heb.2:2:14). He is able to save those who approach God through Him, since He forever lives to make intercession for them. Jesus Christ is He "*who once died but now lives.*"

At times the members of the Church will suffer in this world. By their suffering, they will conform more to the image of Jesus Christ. Smyrna becomes the symbol of the suffering Church. It suffers first from "*tribulations*" (*thlipsis*). The word implies being crushed beneath a heavy

weight. The word may denote both internal and external oppression. In the Scriptures the word became synonymous for the oppressions suffered by the righteous in this world. These tribulations of the righteous would herald the “End of Times.” The Church at Smyrna presently suffers oppression. Likewise it is a Church in poverty.

Two words can be used in the Greek to express a state of poverty. *Penia* would be used to describe those who depend upon their daily toil in order to live, and who possess no reserve of goods. *Ptocheia* could be used to express poverty that implies destitution.

The Christian Church in Smyrna suffered destitution within a city of great wealth. However this economic poverty has not impoverished their spirits. The Lord acknowledges that they possess moral and spiritual richness, and this makes them rich in the sight of God. The Church may have been poor because many members came from the poor, but this state of destitution implies something more. It appears to be a result of religious persecution. It was customary at the time for mobs to pillage the homes of those convicted of crimes. The letter implies that the Jews of the city were at the root of the sufferings: *“I know the slander you endure from self-styled Jews who are nothing other than members of Satan’s assembly.”* The word “slander” can imply verbal abuse, but also defamation of character. The Jews probably stirred up the Roman magistrates and populace against the Christians. The Acts of the Apostles confirm that persecution first came to the Christian Community from the Jewish leaders, both in Jerusalem and in foreign cities.

The death of Stephen, according to Acts, inaugurated the first persecution of the Church: *“That day saw the beginning of a great persecution of the church in Jerusalem. All except the Apostles scattered throughout the countryside”*(8:1). When Paul and Barnabas were working in the Galatian country which borders the Province of Asia, we read that in Antioch Pisidia:

When the Jews saw the crowds, they became very jealous and countered whatever Paul said with violent abuse (Acts 13:45). But some of the Jews stirred up their influential women sympathizers and the leading men of the town, and in that way got a persecution started against Paul and Barnabas. The Jews finally expelled them from their territory (Acts 13:50).

When they went to Iconium we read:

The Jews ... stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers ... A move was made by Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to abuse and stone them (Acts 14:2,5).

When they went to Lystra, we read:

Some Jews from Antioch and Iconium arrived and won the people over. They stoned Paul and dragged him out of the town, leaving him there for dead (Acts 14:19).

The account given concerning the Jews in Thessalonica may well summarize their tactics against the Church. Acts speaks of certain Jews being converted along with a great number of God-fearing Gentiles and numerous prominent women. This only aroused the resentment of the Jews, however, who engaged loafers from the public square to form a mob and start a riot in the town. They marched on the house of Jason in an attempt to bring Paul and Silas before the people's assembly. When they could not find them there, they dragged Jason himself and some of the brothers to the town magistrates, shouting:

These men have been creating a disturbance all over the place. Now they come here and Jason has taken them in. To a man, they disregard the Emperor's decrees and claim instead that a certain Jesus is king. In this way they stirred up the crowd...(Acts 17:5-8).

Such accusations, if taken seriously, could have deadly consequences for the Christian People. Apparently the accusations were taken seriously, as we can see by the words of the author of Hebrews to a Christian Community:

Recall the days gone by when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a great contest of suffering. At times you were publicly exposed to insult and trial; at other times you associated yourselves with those who were being so dealt with. You even joined in the sufferings of those who were in prison and joyfully assented to the confiscation of your goods, knowing that you had better and more permanent possessions. Do not, then, surrender your confidence; it will have great reward. You need patience to do God's will and receive what he has promised (Heb.10:32-36).

Jesus once told His disciples they could not be above Him. If they have done these things to Him, they too would undergo the same sufferings. At the trial of Jesus, the Jews said to Pilate: “*If you free this man you are no “Friend of Caesar.” Anyone who makes himself a king becomes Caesar’s rival.*” ... Pilate exclaimed, ‘*Shall I crucify your king?*’ The chief priests replied, ‘*We have no king but Caesar*’” (Jn.19:12b,15b).

The letter said such Jews were only “self-styled Jews.” Christian Jews considered themselves to be true Jews and the Christian Church to be the New Israel. St. Paul had written:

Appearance does not make a Jew. True circumcision is not a sign in the flesh. He is a real Jew who is one inwardly, and true circumcision is of the heart; its source is the spirit, not the letter. Such a one receives his praise, not from men, but from God (Rom.2:28-29).

When Paul speaks of praise, he is playing on the word “Jew” or *Yehudi*. The word comes from “Judah” (*Yehudah*) which means, “He praises,” which implies “God praises.” A Jew, or a *Yehudi*, was a member of the tribe of Judah. The title survived on in the Southern Kingdom of Judea, with Jerusalem at its center, after the fall of the kingdom of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, in 721 B.C. After the Babylonian Exile ended, it was primarily the tribe of Judah that returned to Palestine.

The name Jew came to be applied to all the surviving members of the tribes of Israel. The word Jew came to designate a people, and the word Israel came to mean a religious community. The word Israel means “He rules”—“God Rules.” Often the Jew called himself an Israelite, and the Gentiles called him a Jew. Outside of Palestine, Jew became the popular title for both the people and the religion. The word Israel was restricted to prayer: “the God of Israel.” Outside of Palestine, the Jews were also called Hebrews, which was an archaic expression of Judean--it referred primarily to the language spoken by the Jews.

When the Lord refers to the Jews of Smyrna as “*self-styled Jews*,” he implies such men do not receive praise from God but from each other; and Yahweh does not rule their lives, but rather their lives are ruled by Satan. They are referred to as the “Synagogue of Satan.” These concepts are echoes of a former dialogue Jesus had with the Jews. There Jesus said to them:

I realize you are of Abraham's stock. Nonetheless, you are trying to kill me because my word finds no hearing among you. ... If you were Abraham's children, you would be following Abraham's example. ... Were God your father you would love me, for I came forth from God, and am here. ... The father you spring from is the devil, and willingly you carry out his wishes (Jn.8:37,39,42,44a).

According to Eusebius, around 160 A.D., the Jewish citizens of Smyrna assisted the Roman authorities in convicting and executing some Christians, including Polycarp, the bishop of the Church. Polycarp would have been about twenty-five years old when the letter was first read at the Church in Smyrna. He was eighty-six when martyred. In the account that has come down to us, he was to be burned alive at the public games. It says "...and the Jews, even though they were breaking the Sabbath law by carrying such burdens, were foremost in bringing wood for the fire."

It was the firm belief of the early Church that its Jewish and pagan adversaries were inspired by Satan and acted as his agents. The letter implies that certain members of the Church will suffer martyrdom, however they are to *"have no fear of the sufferings to come. The devil will indeed cast some of you into prison to put you to the test"* (Rv.2:10). People were placed in prison prior to their trial and punishment. The "test" would demand that they decide between Christ and Caesar. Their decision would come from the level at which they lived--depending whether their lives were dominated by the physical, psychic, or spiritual. This persecution would endure for some time, but God had set a limit. This is implied in the words, *"You will be tried over a period of ten days."* It recalls the words of Daniel, *"Please test your servants for ten days"* (1:12). The use of the number ten can signify a lengthy but limited time. Jesus encourages the Christians in Smyrna to accept martyrdom, *"Remain faithful until death and I will give you the crown of life."* Regardless of the time of suffering, it is short when compared with the reward received. Paul writes:

The present burden of our trial is light enough, and earns for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. We do not fix our gaze on what is seen but on what is unseen. What is seen is transitory--what is unseen lasts forever (2Cor.4:17-18).

St. James writes:

Happy the man who holds out to the end through trial! Once he has been proved, he will receive the crown of life the Lord has promised to those who love him (Jas.1:12).

There is a crown, a diadem symbolizing power and authority worn by kings. Here the letter refers to the crown called *stephanos*, which was placed upon the head of the victorious--it symbolized the joy of victory. In the case of the martyrs, the crown may well have represented the crown of light, the halo that symbolizes the eternal presence of God that forever abides within His saints. Jesus assures the martyrs of Smyrna that they surely shall rise out of their ashes as a Phoenix to a glorious eternal life, "*The victor shall never be harmed by the second death*" (Rv.2:11). Perhaps it was to this second death that Jesus referred when he told His disciples:

I say to you who are my friends: Do not be afraid of those who kill the body and can do no more. I will show you whom you ought to fear. Fear him who has power to cast into Gehenna after he has killed. Yes, I tell you, fear him (Lk.12:4-5).

LETTER TO PERGAMUM

The third letter was directed to the city of Pergamum in north-east Asia Minor. If Ephesus and Smyrna could be considered queen cities of Asia, then Pergamum could be considered the kingly city of Asia. The city rested upon a hill a thousand feet in height. From the city the sea could be viewed fifteen miles away. In 282 B.C., it became the capital of the Seleucid kingdom, and when the territory passed under Roman domination at the death of King Attalus, it became the capital of the Province of Asia. Pergamum could not compete with harbor cities for commerce, but it surpassed them in culture. Its library nearly rivaled that of Alexandria. Parchment for writing was invented in Pergamum.

Culture in the ancient world could not be separated from religion. With its famous temple to Zeus and the temple of Rome that Augustus erected in 29 B.C., Pergamum was a center for pagan worship. The city held the power to execute the decrees of Rome because it was the center of the Roman administration. The Roman Governor of the province possessed the *jus gladii*

(the right of sword), which signified that he possessed the power to administer capital punishment. Let us now read the letter to the Church at Pergamum:

To the presiding spirit of the church in Pergamum, write this:

“The One with the sharp, two-edged sword has this to say: I know you live in the very place where Satan’s throne is erected; and I know you hold fast to my name and have not denied the faith you have in me, not even at the time when Antipas, my faithful witness, was martyred in your city where Satan has his home. Nevertheless I hold a few matters against you: there are some among you who follow the teaching of Balaam, who instructed Balak to throw a stumbling block in the way of the Israelites by tempting them to eat food sacrificed to idols and to practice fornication. Yes, you too have those among you who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent! If you do not, I will come to you soon and fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

Let him who has ears heed the Spirit’s word to the churches! To the victor I will give the hidden manna; I will also give him a white stone upon which is inscribed a new name, to be known only by him who receives it” (Rv.2:12-17).

The city of Pergamum was Satan’s throne and home. The Early Christians believed that Satan had granted Imperial Rome his satanic power, and that Rome ruled in Satan’s name. The Lord speaks of the Church of Pergamum as living “in the very place where Satan’s throne is erected.” In Pergamum, Satan is at home. Hell is where the devil dwells!

Already a member of the Christian Community, Antipas had died as a “faithful witness” for Christ. He was martyred for his refusal to worship the emperor. Tertullian related that Antipas was martyred by being roasted in a brazen bull. Jesus implied Antipas’ complete identity with Himself when He applied His own title to him—“faithful witness.” Even though the Lord acknowledges that the Christian Community of Pergamum resides at the very throne of Satan and within a city called his home, there is no exhortation for them to abandon the city. They are praised for their fidelity to His Name. They are encouraged to be His witnesses in Pergamum as was Antipas. The Kingdom of God will not be established by Christians leaving the scene of crime, but by a courageous stand for truth and moral right. They are the light in the darkness and that light must shine. Wherever they may be, they must

be God's faithful witness. The Lord demands this witness of His disciples even unto death. Christians are "to bloom where planted."

Christians often face the temptation to establish the kingdom of God on earth through human prudence, but more often than not it becomes human imprudence. "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build." The classical Christian example of such imprudence would be Peter's action of cutting off the ear of the servant of the high priest in the Garden of Gethsemani. His action briefly delayed the coming of the kingdom as Jesus had to stop and undo Peter's work. One does not fight hell-fire with hell-fire unless one is engaged in "in-fighting." It is Heavenly fire that destroys the kingdom of darkness.

Christians often seek to prudently live in two worlds--to have the best of both worlds. Certainly this was impossible in pagan Rome, which was deeply immersed in idolatry and immorality. Gentiles who converted to Christianity faced a real conscience problem when shopping for their groceries. The meat sold at market had previously been sacrificed to some pagan god. Another aspect of the same problem faced them in social life when they attended public affairs or private banquets, for such meat would be served. Paul dealt with this problem in First Corinthians. There he made the distinction between buying the meat in the marketplace and partaking of this meat in some religious context—the first he tolerated if it was not a source of scandal to weaker members in the faith; the other he forbade with the explanation:

What am I saying--that meat offered to an idol is really offered to that idol, or that an idol is a reality? No, I mean that the Gentiles sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to become sharers with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and also the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and likewise the table of demons. Do we mean to provoke the Lord to jealous anger? Surely we are not stronger than he! (1Cor.10:19-22).

Apparently the same conditions existed in the Asian churches, and practices were being advocated contrary to the Christian Religion. The problem involved more than the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. There was a real question of idolatry and sexual immorality involved. Those advocating these practices were called Nicolaitans. Perhaps we find a few of their often repeated quotes in Corinthians, "Everything is lawful for me." "Food is for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will do away with them both

in the end.” Such an established principle could be applied to any natural appetite and seemingly was applied to the sexual appetite. Paul countered with, *“But the body is not for immorality; it is for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body. God, who raised up the Lord, will raise us also by his power”* (1Cor.6:12-14).

The teachings of the Nicolaitans are compared to those of Balaam of the Old Testament. Balaam was a prophet hired by Balak, king of Moab, to curse the Israelites (see Num.22:1ff). The incident recorded in Num 25:1-9, is attributed to Balaam’s influence over Israel and to his advice to King Balak:

While Israel was living at Shittim, the people degraded themselves by having illicit relations with the Moabite women. These then invited the people to the sacrifices of their god, and the people ate of the sacrifices and worshiped their god (Nm.25:1-2).

In Israel, Balaam became the symbol for those false prophets who led Israel from true devotion. Both Balaam and Balak appear in Rv. 13.

Early Christian writers maintain that the founder of the Nicolaitans was Nicholas of Antioch, one of the Seven ordained by the Apostles. Hippolytus said that Nicholas “departed from correct doctrine, and was in the habit of inculcating indifference of food and life.” Clement of Alexandria says of the Nicolaitans that they “abandon themselves to pleasure like goats--leading a life of self-indulgence.” Scholars have been quick to note the significance between the names of Balaam and Nicholas. In Hebrew, Balaam is a combination of *bela* meaning to conquer, and *ha’am* meaning the people. In the Greek, Nicholas is a combination of *nika*, which means to conquer and *laos*, which means the people. Both names signify people who conquer others. In the Scriptures, they symbolize false prophets who overcome the true religion and worship by teaching false doctrines. The real evil of such sects is that they endeavor to alter the Christian Religion through the introduction of alien ideas and practices that are essentially contrary to the Christian Religion. If they succeeded they would substantially change the religion--destroy what it was intended to be. This is why Paul tells the elders of Ephesus:

Keep watch over yourselves, and over the whole flock the Holy Spirit has given you to guard. Shepherd the church of God. ... From your

own number, men will present themselves distorting the truth and leading astray any who follow them (Acts 20:28-30).

Those who are led astray are the material of which Christian sects are made. The Church rejects them as part of herself. They survive for a time as separate entities or religions. They themselves usually spawn other heretical sects.

Jesus calls the Nicolaitans “to repent”--to return to sound doctrine, which is the foundation of sound Christian morals. A “season of repentance” is granted, however if they persist in their erroneous ways, Jesus will fight against them: “*I will come to you soon and fight against them with the sword of my mouth*” (Rv.2:16). Jesus will come with the *jus gladii*--the right of sword. He distinguishes between the wheat and the weeds. The weeds he will uproot and destroy. The sword of the Spirit is Truth. Jesus will raise up his prophets, who will destroy the hold of the weeds over people with the power of truth.

The spirit of man was made for Truth. When the heart is sincere, it will recognize the truth. For the sincere who have been deluded, it is important that Truth be proclaimed. For those who are perverted in spirit, the Truth will evoke only blasphemy and ridicule. However, those “called according to God’s purposes” will hear and heed; they will repent and be converted. Christian people must never forget their responsibility for the spiritual salvation of others. As Paul taught, “*Faith, then, comes through hearing. ... And how can they hear unless there is someone to preach?*” (Rom.10:17,14c). It is important that we speak and teach the truth--it is important that we do so in love. The reaction of people to the truth is their responsibility. Our responsibility is to prudently proclaim...

To those who remain faithful to Christ in a world given over to evil--in which the devil makes his home--they will receive “the hidden manna.” *Manna* would be food from heaven--called “bread of angels” by the psalmist. The Jews believed this bread, now “hidden” in heaven, would once again be given in the Messianic Age. To receive “the hidden manna” would signify sharing in the joys and glory of Messiah’s reign. It would be the reward of those who abstained from partaking of the sinful pleasures of this life for the sake of Jesus Christ. Jesus confirmed that he was “*the bread come down from heaven.*” With the victor Jesus will share his very life. To the victor Jesus also promises “*a white stone upon which is inscribed a new name,*” a name

unknown to any but the recipient. This will be given to those who hold fast to His name and do not deny their faith in Him.

There appears to be a connection between holding fast to the Name of Jesus and the reception of a new name by the Christian. "Holding fast" to His Name implies confessing that His Name is above every name: Jesus is Lord--Caesar is not. Jesus speaks of a "white stone" upon which a new name will be inscribed. Speaking of the stone as "white" signifies it will possess a quality of star-like brilliance. Scholars have pointed out that inscribed stones were common in ancient times. There was the *tessera*, an inscribed stone, which entitled the holder to certain "freebies" from the government or from a certain wealthy household. Then, there was the white stone in the ballot-box that signified a vote of affirmation. Most common would have been a stone amulet inscribed with the secret name of a god that protected the bearer from evil. Again, the white stone would signify something the victor shares with Jesus Christ.

The Scriptures teach that Jesus is "the stone"--which the builders rejected--that became the cornerstone of a new edifice. God is building His temple and Jesus is the foundation stone. To place one's entire faith in Jesus is to build one's life upon his life. Therefore, the victor becomes a stone in God's Temple. It signifies a new relationship with Christ and the Eternal Father. Peter writes:

Come to Him, a living stone, rejected by men but approved, nonetheless, and precious in God's eyes. You too are living stones, built as an edifice of spirit, into a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifice acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For the Scripture has it: "See, I am laying a cornerstone in Zion, an approved stone, and precious. He who puts his faith in it shall not be shaken." The stone is of value for you who have faith (Pt.2:4-7).

To receive a new name implies a new life--a new creation, a new relationship with Jesus Christ and the Father. The word *kainos* means not only newness but uniqueness. Jesus teaches: "Everything has been given over to me by my Father. No one knows the Son but the Father, and no one knows the Father but the Son--and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal Him" (Mt.11:27).

It was widely held in the ancient world that each thing had an inner self, which a secret name expressed. To have knowledge of this name gave one

power over the being. Christ, by his union with a person, creates within the person a new self known only to Him and the Christian. No external power can ever come between the Christian soul and the love of God that comes to it through Christ Jesus, its Lord. Christ's words to the victor recall those written in Isaiah:

My servant shall be called by another name by which he will be blessed. ...you shall be called by a new name pronounced by the mouth of the Lord. You shall be a glorious crown in the hand of the Lord, a royal diadem held by your God. No more shall men call you "Forsaken" (Is.65:15c-16a; 62:2b-4a).

LETTER TO THYATIRA

The next letter was addressed to the Church at Thyatira. The city itself was located in Lydia on the road over which the Roman couriers traveled from Pergamum to Sardis. Originally erected as a garrison to protect Pergamum, it possessed no military importance other than being a stumbling block in the path of an army advancing against the capital.

Thyatira was a city dedicated to business. It was an industrial and manufacturing center producing dyes, wool, leather, linen, and ceramic products. The Church in Thyatira was not in the political arena, as in Pergamum, nor was the Church a great center of religious culture, as in Ephesus and Smyrna. It was the Church involved in business and commerce. It dealt with Christians working in this world for their daily bread, and the Lord of the Church was interested in the methods used by Christians to earn their living. The city had many guilds dedicated to the preservation and improvement of their products and crafts. For a business person not to be a member of a guild would have been tantamount to economic suicide. The guild members regularly met for communal meals often held in a temple area. These would have involved some religious ceremony to honor the patron god or goddess of the guild.

Paul's first convert in Macedonia was Lydia from Thyatira--a wealthy merchant who dealt in purple dyes. Apparently some Christians in Thyatira had worked out a convenient compromise by which they remained Christians and still participated in the guild activities. They kept their eyes more upon their profit than upon their Lord. However, their Lord kept His eyes upon them. In Thyatira, Jesus entered into business.

The Scriptures make clear the position of Christians in the world. It is not one of conformity to this world. The Lord wills His disciples to be in the world but not of the world: *“Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you may judge what is God’s will, what is good, pleasing and perfect” (Rom.12:2).*

There is a faith that must be confessed in this world--a faith confessed in three words: “Jesus is Lord!” Christ will be ashamed before His Father and the angels of those who are ashamed to confess His Lordship before men. Nevertheless, Christian profession is not enough. There is Christian practice. Christianity is also a matter of heart. The Christian Faith demands action that expresses the Lordship of Jesus Christ in one’s daily walk--within the province of one’s daily life. Jesus not only demands that His disciples die a certain way, but also that they live a certain way. The Sermon on the Mount outlines and summarizes the moral standards for the Christian Life. The Last Judgment scene depicted by St. Matthew emphasizes the life-and-death importance of works and deeds. Let us now read the Letter to the Church at Thyatira:

To the presiding spirit of the church in Thyatira, write this:

“The son of God, whose eyes blaze like fire and whose feet gleam like polished brass, has this to say: I know your deeds--your love and faith and service--as well as your patient endurance; I know also that your efforts of recent times are greater than ever.

Nevertheless I hold this against you: you tolerate a Jezebel--that self-styled prophetess who seduces my servants by teaching them to practice lewdness and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I have given her a chance to repent but she refuses to turn from her lewdness. I mean to cast her down on a bed of pain; her companions in sin I will plunge into intense suffering unless they repent of their sins with her, and her children I will put to death. Thus shall all the churches come to know that I am the searcher of hearts and minds, and that I will give each of you what your conduct deserves. And now I address myself to you others in Thyatira who do not uphold this teaching and know nothing of the so-called ‘deep secrets’ of Satan; on you I place no further burden. In any case, hold fast to what you have until I come. To the one who wins the victory, who keeps to my ways till the end, I will give authority over the nations--the same I received from my Father. He shall rule them with a rod

of iron and shatter them like crockery and I will give him the morning star.

Let him who has ears heed the Spirit's Word to the Churches!" (Rv.2:18-29).

Jesus praises the Church first for its state of progress. Jesus places first things first--it is love, faith, and then action. Love and faith produce sustained action--this equals patient endurance, which may be translated as "loyalty." In fact, Jesus may be taking what may have been the ideals fostered by the local guilds for its members--devotion, fidelity, service, and loyalty--and transformed them into expressions of Christian virtues. These are virtues that must be practiced by those who have joined themselves to Christ--who have joined the Christian Guild. However, the Church is not a Club. Its primary concern is not the here and now welfare of its members--that has an importance but it is of secondary importance. The primary concern is the eternal welfare of its members.

The particular problem within the Church of Thyatira is a distinctive woman, who appears as a Christian prophetess, but teaches a Nicolaitan Doctrine. Jesus sees the Church as harboring within its bosom an enemy of Christianity. The woman no doubt commands attention by the power of her speech and the force of her personality. She plays the role of a Noon Day Devil within the Church. With seductive teachings, she leads Christians into lewd and immoral conduct, wrecking their Christian Faith. In the Scriptures, sexual immorality often symbolized spiritual infidelity. In this case, it is probably both sexual immorality and spiritual perversion. Her "lovers" would be those attracted to her doctrine. Her "children" would be those who adhered to it. Calling her a "Jezebel" implies a resemblance between the wicked pagan queen of the Old Testament--Jezebel, the wife of the Jewish King Ahab. Some have suggested that she may have been the bishop's wife. Jezebel of old did not consciously intend to destroy the religion of Israel, but to combine it with the worship of Baal and Astarte. Calling the woman at Thyatira "Jezebel" signified that she was an evil leaven corrupting the true religious spirit of the Community. Apparently, she encouraged her disciples in the knowledge of the "deep secrets of Satan." It is conjectured that she encouraged Christians to enter into the "dark forest of evil," and therefore taste of all its evil fruits as a test of their faith in the power of Christ, to prove that the grace of Christ was stronger than the evil of Satan. One plumbed the depths of evil and still walked out of "the forest" spiritually untouched by the glory of Christ.

Paul had already foreseen the roots of this heresy springing up in the Christian Community. Its seeds were already in the pagan air that surrounded the Church. Paul taught:

The tendency of the flesh is towards death. ...The flesh in its tendency is at enmity with God. ...those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ... If you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the evil deeds of the body, you will live (Rom.8:6-8,13).

The Jezebel of Thyatira and her disciples call to mind the little ditties: "Mr. Business went to Church on Sunday. Mr. Business died and went to Hell for what he did on Monday!" Jesus announced that a season of repentance had been granted but refused. Now, punishment would be administered to the woman, her lovers and her children. The punishment would come in the form of sickness, intense suffering and death. *"Thus shall all the churches come to know that I am the searcher of hearts and minds and that I will give each of you what your conduct deserves" (Rv.2: 23).*

It is not given to Christians to decide the moment of their deaths. Christians do not decide the time of their judgment, but they do decide the verdict of judgment. Each Christian has the power to decide how they will live life here and now. There are certain standards by which all men will know that a person is a disciple of Jesus Christ. Living out one's daily life according to these standards makes the Christian a witness for Christ--the Light of the World. Christ demands no more, nor will He accept anything less. If a person acknowledges Christ in word and deed, Christ will acknowledge that person when He comes in glory.

Jesus promised His faithful disciples that they would be victorious over the pagan world--not by joining it but by opposing it. They will receive "the morning star." The morning star appears when the night has ended. The name of Satan is *Lucifer*, which means "light-bringer" or "morning star." However, the morning star is but a reflected light before the dawn. It is the rising sun that is the "true morning star." Jesus Christ said: *"I am the Light of the World!" (Jn.8:12).* Jesus Christ is *"the Morning Star shining bright" (Rv.22:16)*, who bestows His light upon the victorious who, in truth, become the light of the world. *"The wise shall shine brightly like the splendor of the firmament, and those who lead the many to justice shall be like the stars forever" (Dn.12:3).*

*To the presiding spirit of the Church in Sardis, write this:
“The One who holds the seven spirits of God, the seven stars, has this to say:’ I know your conduct; I know the reputation you have of being alive, when in fact you are dead! Wake up, and strengthen what remains before it dies. I find that the sum of your deeds is less than complete in the sight of God. Call to mind how you accepted what you heard; keep to it, and repent. If you do not rouse yourselves I will come upon you like a thief, at a time you cannot know. I realize that you have in Sardis a few persons who have not soiled their garments; these shall walk with me in white because they are worthy.’*

The victor shall go clothed in white. I will never erase his name from the book of the living, but will acknowledge him in the presence of my Father and his angels.’

*Let him who has ears heed the Spirit’s word to the churches!”
(Rv.3:1-6).*

Jesus introduces Himself as, “*the One who holds the seven spirits of God, the seven stars.*” As we have already seen, the seven spirits of God are a symbolic representation of the Holy Spirit, and the seven stars represent the seven presiding spirits of the churches. There is a correlation between the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. The glory of these seven stars will depend upon their relationship to the Seven Spirits of God--the Holy Spirit of God. The Gift of the Holy Spirit rests within the Hands of Christ and He gives this Holy Spirit to the Church. The Spirit of God is its very life.

From the Scriptures we know that Jesus, upon His death, became the Dispenser of the Holy Spirit. At His baptism Jesus became, in a unique way, the Receptor of the Holy Spirit. John teaches this when he writes, “*I saw the Spirit descend like a dove from the sky, and it came to rest on him*” (Jn.1:32). The word “*rest*” implies a permanent residence. Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as coming from the Father as the One “*whom I myself will send from the Father*” (Jn.15:26). He told His disciples:

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes down on you~ then you are to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, yes, even to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Jesus totally submitted His earthly life to the Holy Spirit. His entire ministry was empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ humanity could be

said to have incarnated the Holy Spirit to such a degree that Jesus truly became the Ikon of the Holy Spirit. It flows that the Holy Spirit is the Source of Christian power. It enables a person to be a witness for Christ--not only in word but in deed. It is the essence of the Christian Life to be, in some degree, "Christ." There can be nothing of Christ in a person who is not of the Holy Spirit. What is of Christ in the Christian is of the Holy Spirit. There is nothing rightly called "Christian" that is not empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Source of Christian spiritual life.

What is meant by a spiritual life? A spiritual life implies that the deeds of that life primarily flow from a spiritual source as its force of motivation and power. A life motivated purely by biology or psychology cannot be a spiritual life. It may be a "nice" life and, relatively, a "good" life, but it is not a spiritual life. The foundations of a spiritual life called "Christian" are the three divinely infused powers of faith, hope, and love (*agape*). In the eyes of the Heavenly Father, a Christian only becomes "beloved" and one "in whom I am well pleased" when the Holy Spirit is the enkindling Flame that consumes the time and energy of human existence--when the Holy Spirit is the motivating power for the good deeds done. We are the candle--He is the Flame!

To all outward appearances, the Church at Sardis looked reasonably Christian. However, He with the eyes of fire that search hearts and minds looked into the soul of the Community and found a deficit. They were not people inflamed and activated by the Holy Spirit. Their works did not stem from faith, hope and agape-love. And so Jesus declared, "*I know the reputation you have of being alive, when in fact you are dead.*" Christianity had become a facade, a veneer, in Sardis. Paul had written to Timothy:

Do not forget this: there will be terrible times in the last days. Men will be lovers of self and of money...they make a pretense of religion but negate its power...always learning but never able to reach knowledge of the truth (2Tm.3:1-7).

They do not possess truth because their spirits have alienated the Holy Spirit of Truth.

The words of Jesus are calculated to produce a shock reaction. The fire has been extinguished!--that fire which Jesus once enkindled within them. "*I find that the sum of your deeds is less than complete in the sight of my God.*" These words of Jesus recall the words of God's judgment upon King Belshazzar,

“You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting” (Dn.5:27). The Community at Sardis is not without works, but the quality of their works makes them unacceptable to God. The Church at Sardis does not rate a “7,” but rather a “6” or “3 1/2.” The Church is like a tree planted by God and it must bear the fruit God wills or it remains “less than complete” in the sight of God--it becomes unacceptable.

Jesus’ subsequent words imply the fire had not completely been extinguished. Some embers still glow. Unless fanned into flame, death is imminent. It is a community suffering from a deadly spiritual anemia. It is never Jesus’ intention to deprive the Church of hope and leave it in despair. He does not come to produce guilt but repentance. Guilt is for the unrepentant. Until “He Comes,” there is still time to change. It is still the season of repentance. Scripture teaches that God does not desire the death of any sinner, but rather that the sinner repent and come to life. We read in Ezekiel:

Do I indeed derive any pleasure from the death of the wicked? says the Lord God. Do I not rather rejoice when he turns from his evil way that he may live? ... For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies, says the Lord God. Return and live! (Ez.18:23,32)

The Lord gives the Church at Sardis hope when He commands, *“Wake up, and strengthen what remains before it dies.”* Jesus does not demand the impossible. He prudently advises them to start with what still remains. From where they are, they must begin again. Something still remains from the better days--those greener years. Trying to foster the remaining life may bring a dormant spirituality to rebirth. To concentrate on evil in the world or within a human life can cause moral paralysis. Paul encourages, *“Overcome evil by doing good!”* Persevere in doing good and evil will eventually be overcome. The Lord encourages accenting the positive. However, general intentions to do good rarely produce much good. Real growth can ultimately be achieved only by the moral effort to develop one virtue and persevere in its perfection. Paul taught that personified evil would be destroyed by the appearance of personified goodness.

Jesus asked the Christians at Sardis to reflect upon what they had once been--to recall the days of their conversion and what they then had committed to Him. *“Keep to it,”* he says. *“Repent!”* The memory of what they had once been, in light of what they have become, could lead to repentance.

Once at a priest's retreat, the retreat master (a man close to seventy) related in a conference how a few years before he stumbled across an old trunk in the attic of the seminary. It was his trunk from seminarian days. Upon opening the trunk he found a notebook he had kept as a novice over forty years ago. As he began to read through its pages, the beautiful thoughts and sentiments expressed in those "green-years" of first fervor moved him to tears. Later, he took the book from the attic and put it into the incinerator. He could not bear to ever again so vividly recall the promises made in greater fervor but never kept--the dreams in the spirit never realized. They had filled him with such shame.

Perhaps Jesus had the memory of Sardis' history in mind when he said, "*If you do not rouse yourselves, I will come upon you like a thief, at a time you cannot know.*" Cyrus, the Mede, who took the kingdom from Belshazzar--the one judged "wanting"--likewise came like a thief in the night; his men scaled the 1500 foot cliff and discovered the city unguarded, and destroyed the kingdom of Croesus. Jesus warns that He will come when least expected, like the thief in the night. When Jesus comes, the season of repentance ends. It gives way to the Day of Judgment. On that day Jesus says, "*I will give to each of you what your conduct deserves.*" All the opportunities to change will have passed. On that day, may a person be able to rejoice in what one has become. Judgment Day will never be a question of going back over the past; every past deed stands present in what one presently is. We can only hope that the grace of Christ sanctifies the entire mess...

Jesus confirmed that not all the Christians in Sardis were spiritually dead; there were a "*few persons who have not soiled their garments.*" Those "garments" symbolized the new life received at Baptism. Some Christians guarded and preserved their life in Christ. However, the majority had soiled their garments with heathen impurities. They lost the holiness needed for accessibility to God through their contaminating association with the world. Soiled garments symbolized an indifference to the dirt and mire of the environment--morally, they symbolized an indifference to sin. Even the pagan forbade soiled garments in the temple as they made a person unworthy to render worship to the gods.

When Jesus said that those who had kept themselves "unspotted from this world" will walk with Him in white, He indicated that they would one day abide with Him in joy and glory. They would wear joy and glory like a full length and flowing robe. They would be deemed worthy of Jesus'

companionship for they had chosen Him above the world. All other disciples were unworthy of Him. He taught: *“Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter, more than me is not worthy of me. He who will not take up his cross and come after me is not worthy of me” (Mt.10:37).*

Roman emperors wore white on days of triumph, for it symbolized the joy of victory. The Lord leaves the Church at Sardis on a note of encouragement and hope: those who repent and become victorious will also be clothed in white. They will enter into a permanent state of joy and glory. He promised: *“I will never erase his name from the book of the living.”* In ancient times, a city register contained only the names of living citizens. Those inscribed could share in the goods of the Community. Those who died or had been banished from the city had their names blotted out of the book of the living. This text signifies that Jesus holds in His hand the Book of Life. He possesses the keys of life and death. When the apostles returned in joy from their first missionary experience, the Lord said to them: *“Nevertheless, do not rejoice so much in the fact that the devils are subjected to you as that your names are inscribed in heaven” (Lk.10:20).* Paul spoke of those comrades who *“struggled at my side in promoting the gospel”* have their names recorded *“in the book of life” (Phil.4:3).* The last promise Jesus made to victors of the Church at Sardis was that *“I will acknowledge him in the presence of my Father and his angels.”* This promise could indicate that the major problem of the Church at Sardis had been a failure to express publicly its faith in Christ.

We read from the Gospels of Luke and Matthew:

But the man who has disowned me in the presence of men will be disowned in the presence of the angels of God (Lk.12:9).

Whoever acknowledges me before men I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven. Whoever disowns me before men I will disown before my Father in heaven (Mt.10:32-33).

LETTER TO PHILADELPHIA

From Sardis, the messenger of the Apocalypse would have to travel only a little less than thirty miles southeast to deliver his sixth letter to the Church at Philadelphia. The number “six” in no way symbolizes the Church of Philadelphia or the content of the message. Attalus II, with colonists from Pergamum, founded the city around 159 B.C. The intention was to establish a

Greek center of culture in the Province of Lydia from which the Greek language and culture could be diffused throughout the Lydian and Phrygian areas. It was a missionary city for Hellenistic culture and it successfully accomplished its mission through peaceful means. Philadelphia was known as "little Athens." The city received its name after Attalus, who was called "Philadelphos" (Philadelphia meaning "brotherly love"), because of his great personal love for his brother, Eumenes.

When the city was destroyed by the great earthquake of 17 A.D., Tiberius helped in the restoration of the city. In gratitude, the city was re-named "Neocaesarea" in his honor. (Nero later restored its former name.) It was changed to "Flavia" in the time of Vespasian. It was a city accustomed to name changes and earthquakes. Many of the people in Philadelphia dwelt outside the city away from buildings and high walls--they lived in constant fear of earthquakes. Essentially the Letter to the Church at Philadelphia is a message of praise, exhortation and encouragement.

The contents of the letter suggest that a strong Jewish background existed in the Christian Community at Philadelphia. When St. Ignatius of Antioch was on his way to be martyred in Rome, he passed through the city of Philadelphia. Later from Troas, he wrote to the Christians at Philadelphia. Ignatius was martyred in the Coliseum at Rome during the reign of Trajan between 98-117 A.D. Ignatius' letter to the Philadelphians gives us a good insight into this Christian Community. He reflected upon the Community which, less than twenty years earlier, had received one of the letters of the Apocalypse. Ignatius spoke of the Church at Philadelphia as being

...an object of the divine mercy and firmly knit in godly unity. Yours is a deep abiding joy in the Passion of our Lord; and by his overflowing mercy you are truly convinced of his resurrection. You are the very personification of eternal and perpetual joy. This is especially true if you are one with the bishop, the presbyters anddeacons who are on his side and who have been appointed by the will of Jesus Christ.

One of the problems facing the Church at that time was the presence of so-called "Judaizers" within the Church. Certain members of the Church were called Judaizers because, as the name implies, they sought to Judaize Christianity. Apparently, most of these were of Gentile origin. They had been persuaded by the arguments of the Jews that salvation could not be achieved

outside of Judaism. The Judaizers found strong support for their arguments in the Old Testament. Even though by this time the New Testament Scriptures existed, many of these inspired writings would not have been available in many of the Churches. Ignatius wrote:

Now, if anyone preaches Judaism to you, pay no attention to him. For it is better to hear about Christianity from one of the circumcised than Judaism from a Gentile. If both, moreover, fail to talk about Jesus Christ, they are to me tombstones and graves of the dead, on which only human names are inscribed.

Apparently, the Judaizers in Philadelphia were insisting on celebrating the Eucharist on Saturday instead of Sunday. (Now this does not imply Saturday night--that would have been considered as Sunday, for the Jew the Sabbath began and ended with sunset.) Ignatius wrote: *“Be careful, then, to observe a single Eucharist. Since you are children of the light of truth, flee from schism and false doctrine.”* Ignatius also wrote a letter to the sister-city of Magnesia. In this letter, he said that Christians

...ceased to keep the Sabbath and lived by the Lord’s Day... It is monstrous to talk Jesus Christ and to live like a Jew. For Christianity did not believe in Judaism, but Judaism in Christianity. Do not be led astray by wrong views or by outmoded tales (apocryphal Jewish legends and allegorical interpretations of the Old Testament). For if we still go on observing Judaism, we admit we never received grace.

The Judaizers within the Church did not accept the divinity of Jesus Christ. They insisted He was the last of the prophets. For Ignatius of Antioch, Jesus Christ “is our God.”

We know that around 80 A.D., the Jews of Jamnia, under the direction of the Sanhedrin, introduced into their liturgy a curse upon Christians. It is still incorporated within the eighteen Benedictions of the Jewish liturgy: *“May the Nazarene and the minim (heretic) perish suddenly and be blotted out from the book of life and with the righteous may they not be inscribed.”* Needless to say that such a spirit of prayer has never improved the relationship between Jews and Christians. At the time of the writing of the Apocalypse, more than a few Christians were being upset both by the Jews outside and the Judaizers inside the Church.

These Christians our Lord seeks to comfort and strengthen in the letter to the Philadelphians. Let us now read this message:

To the presiding spirit of the Church in Philadelphia, write this:

“The holy One, the true, who wields David’s key, who opens and no one can close, who closes and no one can open, has this to say: ‘I know your deeds; that is why I have left an open door before you which no one can close. I know that your strength is limited; yet you have held fast to my word and have not denied my name. I mean to make some of Satan’s assembly, those self-styled Jews who are not really Jews but frauds, come and fall down at your feet; they will learn of my love for you in that way. Because you have kept my plea to stand fast, I will keep you safe in the time of trial which is coming on the whole world, to test all men on earth. I am coming soon. Hold fast to what you have lest someone rob you of your crown. I will make the victor a pillar in the temple of my God and he shall never leave it. I will inscribe on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem which he will send down from heaven, and my own name which is new.’

Let him who has ears heed the Spirit’s word to the churches!”
(Rev.3: 7-13).

Jesus immediately introduces Himself with two obviously divine titles: “*The holy One, the true.*” The introductory title definitely recalls God’s words in Isaiah:

To whom can you liken me as an equal? says the Holy One... I am the Lord, your Holy One, the creator of Israel, your King. Thus says the Lord, who opens a way in the sea and a path in the mighty waters (Is.40:25; 43:15-16).

Jesus says He is the “True.” The Greek word signifies “real.” Jesus is the Real Holy One of Israel. The words of the title go on to imply that Jesus is the Lord of Israel. He possesses authority—“*who wields David’s key, who opens and no one can close, who closes and no one can open.*” These words imply the authority of Jesus in the Kingdom of God. Most agree that they are a reference to chapter twenty-two of Isaiah in which God decrees that Shebna, master of the palace, will be replaced by Eliakim. The Lord says:

On that day I will summon my servant Eliakim, son of Hilkiyah; I will clothe him with your robe, and gird him with your sash, and give over to him your authority. He shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. I will place the key of the House of David on his shoulder; when he opens, no one shall shut, when he shuts, no one shall open. I will fix him like a peg in a sure spot, to be a place of honor for his family; On him shall hang all the glory of his family: descendants and offspring, all the little dishes, from bowls to jugs (Is.22:20-24).

The reference implies that Jesus has been made “master of the palace.” He alone has free access into the Lord’s presence. The power resides within Jesus Christ to admit or exclude whomsoever He wills from the kingdom of God. The prophetic promises made to David find fulfillment in Jesus. The disciples of Jesus are not barred from the presence of God as the Jews taught and prayed. For them Christ has opened a door that no one can close. It has been opened by the Holy One “*who opens a way in the sea, and a path in the mighty water*” for those who hold fast to His word and have not denied His Name. As we read in Hebrews: “*He is always able to save those who approach God through him, since he forever lives to make intercession for them*” (7:25).

The Christians are slandered and ridiculed by the Jews for their faith in Jesus as King and Lord. Jesus foretells the conversion of the Jews. This conversion will be symbolized in the conversion of certain of the Jews who harass the Church. It is a confirmation of Paul’s teaching:

Brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery lest you be conceited: blindness has come upon part of Israel until the full number of Gentiles enter in, and then all Israel will be saved (Rom.11:25).

Those prophetic promises made to the Jewish people can only be fulfilled now through the Messianic People. The Jews as a nation forfeited these blessings when they rejected Jesus as the Messiah. The Gospel of John symbolizes the alienation of Israel’s will from God in the apostasy spoken by the high priest before Pilate, “*We have no king but Caesar!*” This represents the repudiation of Yahweh’s rule over the Jewish Nation, which had occurred in the rejection of the Messiah sent by Yahweh. The Apocalypse implies that the words spoken in Isaiah will be fulfilled in the New Israel:

The children of your oppressors shall come, bowing low before you; all those who despised you shall fall prostrate at your feet. They shall call you "City of the Lord," "Zion of the Holy One of Israel" (Is.60:14).

The Church at Philadelphia represents the faithful Christian Community that lives in this uncertain world in which nothing is stable. Christians live in a world in which things can quickly be destroyed for them. If they have true supernatural faith in Jesus Christ, they have rooted their lives in a n unshakable foundation. They will endure. They have established themselves upon the Rock that cannot be shaken. Christians are not supermen or wonder women—"I know that your strength is limited." Jesus assures His disciples, "You will not be tested beyond your strength." "I will keep you safe in the time of trial which is coming on the whole world, to test all men on earth." The Greek text stresses this test will come upon all who "dwell upon the face of the earth." This expression generally signifies those persons alienated from Christ--those earthbound souls who follow the beast, the powers of this world. The words of the Lord imply that the faithful will not be exempt from the trial, but rather they will be kept safe. Even when the earth moves beneath their feet, they will be delivered from the Evil One.

Again Jesus emphasizes endurance and perseverance until the end. The crown of life belongs to the true disciples of Jesus Christ. However, there is always the danger that in times of trial the Christian may grow weary and say, "I cannot take any more." In truth the decision is, "I will not take any more," which always implies that one does not think the prize is worth the price being paid. Faith, hope and love fail.

The tale is told of forty martyrs of a Roman Legion: Forty soldiers of a Roman Legion refused to worship the emperor and were condemned to die by being frozen to death on a lake of ice. Reprieves were offered to any who would apostasize. Fire and hot baths were waiting on the shore. When the forty soldiers marched out upon the ice they chanted: "Forty have entered the arena. May forty win the crown." During the deathwatch, one soldier on duty heard a sound in the sky. When he looked up he beheld a vision of angels coming in the heavens bearing crowns--forty crowns. Suddenly, one of the forty recanted and abandoned his place on the ice. The soldier who witnessed the vision immediately took his place. Forty entered the arena and forty won the crown--but one lost his crown. The grace of martyrdom had been granted to another.

Most scholars agree that the Church at Philadelphia not only revealed that the Church stood firm in its commitment to the Lord, but that it was a church that had been obedient to its commission to go forth and preach the gospel--to be a witness to Christ in this world. The city was a missionary city for Hellenistic culture, and the Church of Philadelphia--the Church of brotherly love--was a missionary Church for the kingdom of God. Jesus had nothing but praise and promises for its members. They will possess a permanent place in the City of God; not only a place but one of glory. This permanence was symbolically expressed in the words: *"I will make the victor a pillar in the temple of my God and he shall never leave it."*

In ancient times it was customary to erect within the temple a pillar to commemorate the life of a worthy priest who had faithfully served the temple all his days. Upon the pillar were inscribed the name of the priest and his father. This was done to glorify the priest and his family.

The name, "City of God," is synonymous for Temple of God—God's dwelling place. The City of God is a living Temple in which the "faithful witnesses" become "living stones." Paul wrote:

You are the temple of the living God... You form a building which rises on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone. Through him the whole structure is fitted together and takes shape as a holy temple in the Lord, in him you are being built into this temple, to become a dwelling place for God in the Spirit (2Cor.6:16; Eph.2:20-22).

As an artist entitles his masterpiece and signs it, so shall the victorious Christians be inscribed as the "temple of God," and bear the name of their Lord--a new name that fully expresses the glorified Christ in relationship with His glorified Body, the Church. Perhaps the new name will express the identification that shall exist forever between Jesus and His faithful followers. The Father's name shall be inscribed upon the "living stone" and this will truly identify who is the Father of this Christian Child who shall dwell in the House of the Father forever. The Lord said, *"I will inscribe on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem which he will send down from heaven, and my own name which is new."*

LETTER TO LAODICIA

The Church at Laodicea received the seventh message. In its own eyes, it may have been a “7,” but in the eyes of the Lord it was indeed something less. The city was located on the Lycus River, about forty miles southeast of Philadelphia. It was founded by Antiochus II and named after his wife Laodice. Since he divorced her in 240 B.C., the presumption is that the city was founded prior to that date. The prime importance of the city came from being situated on the road over which the traffic to and from Rome and Syria traversed. Laodicea was famous for its products made from the raven black wool produced by the sheep of the area. Likewise, it produced a popular small cheap cloak called the *laodicia*.

Laodicia was noted for its medical center and famous doctors. It produced the “Phrygian powder” used to make healing ointment for eyes and ears. It was a trading city and banking center. There was a large concentration of Jews within the city. It is estimated, from the temple-tax sent to Jerusalem, that 7,500 Jews lived in Laodicea. Laodicea was wealthy and independent. When the city was destroyed by earthquake in 60 A.D., it refused any financial help from Rome. The city was restored at its own expense. However, water was a problem in the area. The water supply for the city came by an aqueduct fed from a spring five miles away in Denizli. It arrived in the city warm and tepid. The city of Hierapolis, located six miles away, was noted for its hot waters and baths. Ten miles west was Colossus, furnished with water from cold springs.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians, he also told them to have the letter read in Laodicea:

Once this letter has been read to you, see that it is read in the assembly of the Laodiceans as well, and that you yourselves read the letter that is coming from Laodicea (Col.4:16).

The other letter mentioned by Paul may have been coming from Ephesus and is the present letter to the Ephesians. Eusebius writes that Epaphras founded the churches in this area. Paul makes references to Epaphras in his letter to the Colossians. Speaking of their faith, he writes: “*This has been the case from the day you first heard it and comprehended God's gracious intention through the instructions of Epaphras*” (Col.1:6c-7a). When closing the letter Paul says: “*Epaphras, who is one of you, sends greetings... I can certainly testify how solicitous he is for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis*” (Co1.4:12-13).

We know from Paul's own words that he did not personally establish the churches in this area. In his letter he wrote: *"I want you to know how hard I am struggling for you and for the Laodiceans and the many others who have never seen me in the flesh"* (Col.2:1).

Eusebius recorded that Archippus was the first bishop of Laodicea. In his letter, Paul had sent this message to him: *"To Archippus say, 'take care to discharge the ministry you have received in the Lord'"* (Co1.4:17). Paul's words seem to be an admonition to Archippus for being a somewhat careless shepherd. This could indicate that the roots of the Church's problem in Laodicea stem back to its beginnings with a careless shepherd.

The Church did not possess any obvious grave fault as had been noted in the other churches. However, it was the one Church of which Jesus had nothing good to say. This community received the most severe reprimand. It was threatened with total rejection--with divorce. Let us read this last of the seven messages:

To the presiding Spirit of the Church in Laodicea, write this:

"The Amen, the faithful Witness and true, the Source of God's creation, has this to say: 'I know your deeds; I know you are neither hot nor cold. How I wish you were one or the other--hot or cold! But because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spew you out of my mouth! You keep saying, "I am so rich and secure that I want for nothing." Little do you realize how wretched you are, how pitiable and poor, how blind and naked! Take my advice. Buy from me gold refined by fire if you would be truly rich. Buy white garments in which to be clothed, if the shame of your nakedness is to be covered. Buy ointment to smear on your eyes, if you would see once more. Whoever is dear to me I reprove and chastise. Be earnest about it, therefore. Repent!

'Here I stand, knocking at the door. If anyone hears me calling and opens the door, I will enter his house and have supper with him, and he with me. I will give the victor the right to sit with me on my throne, as I myself won the victory and took my seat beside my Father on his throne.'

Let him who has ears heed the Spirit's word to the churches"
(Rv.3:14-22).

Jesus speaks of Himself as “the Amen.” In Greek, *amen* signifies “truly.” This signifies that the very nature and character of the person speaking guarantees the truth of the testimony. He is the “faithful witness.” The usage of this title here invokes the image of a court in session at which Jesus will bear witness to truth; He who is the Source of God’s creation. Hebrews 1:2, spoke of the son “*through whom he first created the universe.*” Paul writes to the Colossians:

In him everything in heaven and on earth was created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominations, principalities or powers; all were created through him, and in him (Col.1:16).

Court is in session and the Church at Laodicea stands before the divine judgment seat. The Judge is the Son of God whose eyes blaze like fire--he searches their hearts and minds and gives each what their conduct deserves. If this Church had examined its conscience in the light of the other messages to the churches, it would not have accused itself of sin. It harbored no Nicolaitans, nor did it nourish a Jezebel; it preached no false gospel nor had it burned any heretics. It was a Community complacent and content with self. It had not suffered the misfortunes of other Christian Communities. They had indeed been blessed by God. It was a fat and fine Christian Community and in its own words: “*We are rich and secure and want for nothing.*”

The searing words spoken by Jesus would have struck like bolts of lightning: Wretched people! Destitute! Blind! Your whole spiritual lives are like the water of your city--tepid. Would that you were like the waters of Hierapolis or Colossae--hot or cold. You are nauseating to me. I will spew you out of my mouth!

Jesus creates an image of forceful rejection. Within the Church at Laodicea was a spirit of spiritual inertia, sloth and indifference. It had never been persecuted, for it never took a stand for Christ. They were unwilling to pay the cost of discipleship. Christ saw the Church at Laodicea as a community of religious indifference. The glow of the Spirit had grown dull grey. It was a malady of heart.

The opposite of love is not hate but indifference. Hate implies love of something. One who can vehemently hate can vehemently love. “*Be hot or cold!*” He says. The Lord will take a Saul of Tarsus any day. With such material you have a chance to make Paul an Apostle, but what can you do

with the indifferent soul who doesn't even have the heart to care. Laodicea was a community without religious zeal. What could be said of such a community by One of whom, in His own lifetime had said, *"The zeal for thy house consumes me!"* other than, *"You disgust me."* Jesus had nothing in common with the indifferent. If any Christian continued in this spiritual state, Jesus would abandon him.

These people possessed gold, and there was nothing they valued more. Jesus said they were poor. He urged them to buy from Him gold refined by fire. It is a witnessing faith--the faith of discipleship--tried and tested through trials and tribulations. Peter said of such faith: *"Your faith, which is more precious than the passing splendor of fire-tried gold, may by its genuineness lead to praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ appears"* (1Pt.1:7).

The Christians of Laodicea wear clothes of raven black wool, and Jesus sees them naked and stripped of good works and deeds. Their souls are bare. St. James said: *"Your wealth has rotted, your fine wardrobe has grown moth-eaten, your gold and silver have corroded... See what you have stored up for yourselves against the last days"* (Jas.5:2-3).

Jesus encourages them to make garments for themselves that do not grow old and moths do not consume:

Do not lay up for yourselves an earthly treasure. Moths and rust corrode; thieves break in and steal. Make it your practice instead to store up heavenly treasure, which neither moths nor rust corrode nor thieves break in and steal. Remember, where your treasure is, there your heart is also (Mt.6:19-21).

The Laodiceans have been invited to a grand wedding banquet and have failed to provide wedding garments for themselves. They will be rejected from the banquet unless properly clothed. These garments which express the joy of Christian victory are purchased through lives of good deeds--lives that give faithful witness in this world. These people boast of their great vision and Jesus says they are blind: *"If your eyes are bad, your body will be in darkness. And if your light is darkness, how deep will the darkness be!"* (Mt.6:23).

Jesus urges them to seek the anointing of the Holy Spirit that removes the spiritual blindness of self-deception and restores insight and spiritual vision.

Jesus makes it clear to the Christians of Laodicea that their lives, free of trials and tribulations, are not signs of God's favor but are signs of rejection. They are not being treated as children of God. Those who are His children, He reproves and chastises.

The message to the Church draws to a close. These seven letters are filled with rich details. The Lord has given His analysis of the Church. He has delivered His address on the state of the Christian Church. Those eyes of fire have discerned everything--from the general to the minutest particulars. Smyrna and Philadelphia receive unqualified approval; Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira receive commendations with reservations and warnings; Sardis is saved from total condemnation because of a few faithful; Laodicea receives only censure. Nothing has escaped the eyes of Christ which searches the hearts and minds of men and churches. The Church has received a prelude to its Final Judgment.

However, even for those Christians of whom Jesus had nothing good to say--it is still the season of repentance. The Gates of God's Heart have not been closed. The love of God still flows towards all mankind through the love of Jesus Christ. Those harsh words of rebuke that were spoken to the Church of Laodicea flow from a heart of love. Jesus said, "*Whoever is dear to me I reprove and chastise.*" Jesus speaks of His personal love and he uses the word *philo* instead of *agape*. *Agape* is divine love that is essentially expressed by an unconquerable good will that persists in the face of all evil. *Agape*-love does not destroy human love, but rather perfects it. It brings the human heart to perfection. It perfects everything that is good and beautiful in human love without loosening a thread of it. *Philo* signifies love infused with the warmth and fire of human emotion--a force that sweeps the lover along paths of deep concern. In Jesus Christ the love of God becomes filial through which it completely identifies with humanity. It is because of filial love that Jesus can say, "*I not only love you as your Lord but as your best friend!*" Such love can never seek anything but the good of the beloved.

In the infinite wisdom of God, angels and human beings have been created with freedom of will. God wills that we have the freedom of choice. It is His perfect will that we use this gift to freely choose good. "*I have set before you this day both good and evil. Choose good and live!*" However, it is within His permissive will that we still retain this gift even when we freely choose evil. The freedom of the will is an irrevocable divine gift! Most human beings, sooner or later, make a deep down choice within the depths of their being

called “a fundamental option” in which God is chosen or rejected. On the surface of human existence, this option will be expressed in various and numerous ways. Our fundamental option will largely determine our final judgment.

God does not force the choice of Himself upon His creatures. Perfect love leaves the beloved perfectly free. This freedom does not imply that love never exhorts, encourages, pleads; love does whatever possible within the limits of respect for human freedom. Love may become saddened and angered. It will point out a bad choice and its evil consequences. It will seek that the beloved reconsider and repent. However, the characteristic that distinguishes Christian love from all other loves is its blessed inability to be conquered by evil. Despite the angers, hurts, humiliations and sadness, agape-love never withdraws itself from the beloved but continues in goodwill towards the loved one. Sin will kill love in the heart of the sinner, but sin cannot kill love in the Heart of God for the sinner; nor will sin destroy love in the human heart matured in Christian Love as is the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

The Lord discovers much to be displeased with in the Church and with individuals within the Christian Community. The season of repentance will soon end, giving way to Judgment Day--the hour of final reward. There is still time to accept the Gift of God--to change a fundamental option. In this season, the Lover actively seeks the beloved even when the beloved has other loves. The newspapers, not too long ago, ran an account of a man spending thousands of dollars to have people carry signs in front of the place where his beloved worked. The signs requested and urged her to marry him. We may think him foolish, yet such foolishness is the foolishness of God. Jesus says, “*I stand at the door and I knock and when I get no answer, I call.*” Jesus can be so persistent in knocking and calling that one of His hounded loves referred to Him as “the Hound of Heaven.” Those who open to Him will find not only their Saving Lord, but their Friend who will come in and sit down and dine with them.

The Door to the Father’s House still remains open and Jesus is still the Good Shepherd seeking the lost sheep. Still, many doors remain closed and locked. While there is still time, Jesus stands at these doors. He knocks and He calls:

LET HIM OR HER WHO HAS EARS HEED THE SPIRIT’S WORD TO THE CHURCHES!

CHAPTER 6

EARTH IN PROPER FOCUS

INTRODUCTION

The first vision of the Apocalypse is an awesome presentation. Jesus Christ appears in glory clothed in symbols of divinity. The Son of God is One in Nature with the Father. The word is God and indeed took flesh and dwelt among us--suffered among us and died for us. From the dead He arose in the flesh and entered into glory where He assumed His rightful place on the throne of God. There *“He is always able to save those who approach God through him since he forever lives to make intercession for them” (Heb.7:25)*. Jesus Christ is the Source of Life for all who believe in Him. Jesus is not a savior in this world. Jesus is The Savior of the World. *“There is no salvation in anyone else, for there is no other name in the whole world given to men by which we are to be saved” (Acts 4:12)*.

All life on earth is present to Jesus Christ. Not only is He the Savior of the World, but He is the Judge and the Judgment of the World.

The Father himself judges no one, but has assigned all judgment to the Son, so that all men may honor the Son just as they honor the Father... The Father has given over to him power to pass judgment because he is Son of Man (Jn.5:22-23,27).

Jesus is judgment in that they *“refuse to believe” (Jn.10:26a)*. *“The judgment of condemnation is this: the light came into the world, but men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were wicked” (Jn.3:18)*.

The Judge is one of our own. He knows where we come from because He has been there. He knows what to expect from us. He knows what He should find in us, and if not, why not. *“Thus shall all the Churches come to know that I am the searcher of hearts and minds, and that I give to each of you what your conduct deserves” (Rv.2:23)*. *“Now has judgment come upon this world, now will the world’s prince be driven out...for the prince of this world has been condemned” (Jn.12:31;16:11)*.

The earthly life of Jesus has brought forth judgment, condemnation and conquest. Jesus loves the Church. The Church is people. The People of the Church are not a mass conglomeration of humanity. The Church is a holy assembly of individual persons. Jesus loves, rules, and judges individuals. Each person is solely responsible to the Lord. *“Both in life and in death we are the Lord’s” (Rom.14:8).*

To each the Spirit has been given; His gifts have been given to each. For every talent, every person will render an account.

Are not two sparrows sold for next to nothing? Yet not a single sparrow falls to the ground without your Father’s consent. As for you, every hair of your head has been counted; so do not be afraid of anything. You are worth more than an entire flock of sparrows (Mt.10:29-31).

In order that Jesus will not one day have to say to us, *“I find that the sum of your deeds is less than complete in the sight of my God,”* He has come as the Inspector General and inventoried the Christian Community. The assets and liabilities of the Church have been noted. One can list twelve blessed fruits observed by the Lord to be flourishing within the Christian Community: patience, endurance of hardships, non-toleration of wicked men and false prophets, testing all spirits, courageousness, enduring tribulations, enduring poverty, holding fast to His Name, faithfulness in persecution, displaying love, living a life of faith and service. These can be condensed into seven deeds or characteristics that, woven together, produce the ideal garment that will assure entrance into the wedding feast of the Lamb. The presence of all these ingredients guarantees that the sum of one’s deeds will not be less than complete in the eyes of God.

The scales of divine judgment will be balanced. According to the assessment of the Lord, a person must first and foremost be a faithful witness to Christ in this world unto death. The first incorporates the following six qualities without which the first could not be. Second: patient endurance amidst tribulations in the world regardless of the form that they may assume--poverty or persecution. In a word, perseverance is demanded. Third: perseverance that displays a courageous hope manifested by spiritual joy that rises above the afflictions of body and soul. Fourth: faith that confesses the Name, Person, and Power of Christ. Fifth: a spirit of truth that guards and preserves the Christian Truth in the Church; a spirit that discerns error and

rejects false prophets and their doctrines and remains the Light of the World. Sixth: a spirit of agape-love that motivates all deeds and actions. Seventh: Christian life that flowers in constant Christian service that expels the evil spirits of inertia and sloth. All seven of these elements, woven together, fashion the true *“Christian disciple.”* Such have bought gold from the Lord and a garment *“dazzlingly white--whiter than the work of any bleacher could make them”* (Mk.9:3), *“as radiant as light”* (Mt.17:2c). Such Christians rate a *“7”* and a *“Well done good and faithful servant! Come share your master’s joy!”* (See Mt.25:21). Jesus calls such a Christian a victor. To the victor go the spoils.

The Lord lists twelve blessings to be bestowed upon the victorious: they will eat of the Tree of Life in the Garden of God; be saved from the second death; receive the crown of life; the morning star; an inscribed white stone; they will be given authority of the nations; walk in white with Christ; be acknowledged before the Father and His angels; inscribed in the Book of Life; they will be made a permanent pillar in the temple of God; thrice inscribed; and they will share the throne of Christ in glory. These twelve blessings can also be summarized under seven gifts:

First and foremost is union with God through union with Jesus Christ. *“Anyone who loves me... my Father will love him; we will come to him and make our dwelling place with him... Where I am, there will my servant be”* (Jn.14:23; 12:26).

From this union flows the remaining six blessings; the second is eternal life. *“Whoever believes in him may not die but may have eternal life... My sheep...I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish”* (Jn.3:16c; 10:27-28a)

Third, a personal and unique perfection will be achieved. *“A new name, to be known only by him who receives it... But the wise shall shine brightly like the splendor of the firmament...shall be like the stars forever”* (Rev.2:17d; Dn.12:3).

Fourth, they shall experience the fullness of Joy. *“All this I tell you that my joy may be yours and your joy may be complete... I shall see you again; then your hearts will rejoice with a joy no one can take from you”* (Jn.15:11; 16:22).

Fifth, they shall share in the glory of God. *“I have given them the glory you gave me that they may be one as we are one--I living in them, you living in me”*

“When Christ our life appears, then you shall appear with him in glory.” (Jn.17:22-23; Col.3:4).

Sixth, they shall share in the priesthood of Christ. *“Who has made us a royal nation of priests in the service of his God and Father” “...you too are living stones, built as an edifice of spirit, into a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (Rv.1:6;1Pt.2:5).*

Seventh, they shall share in the kingship of Jesus Christ. *“I will give the victor the right to sit with me on my throne, as I myself won the victory and took my seat beside my Father on his throne.” “Make your lives worthy of the God who calls you to his kingship and glory” (Rv.3:21; 1Thes.2:12b)*

The victor enters into all this when a life of faithful witness ends upon this earth. All these victories are scattered among the symbolic promises made by Jesus to the victorious.

THE WAR FOR THE EARTH

The scene within the Apocalypse now dramatically shifts from Christ's presence with the Church on earth to a vision of heaven. The curtain that separates the visible from the invisible parts, and the Seer beholds mysterious realities that he shares with the Church on earth. From this point on we move into the deeper more mysterious waters of revelation. Before we proceed, an observation is in order. Certain Scripture scholars, because of their myopic or tunnel vision, limit the scope of the revelations within the Apocalypse to the Church of the first century. Concentrating on the literary form of the work, which is apocalyptic, they have deduced from other examples of apocalyptic writings, which were limited in scope to a particular moment in religious history, that the same is true of the Apocalypse written by John. Their deduction certainly has merit from a natural point of view. However, they are wrong to limit these revelations as solely revealing truths about the Church in the first century. Unlike other apocalyptic works, John deals with the Final Age.

With the establishment of the Christian Church on earth, the End Times had come. John describes in the Apocalypse the inauguration of a struggle that, once begun, would continue to its consummation. The incidents revealed by John in the Apocalypse would become patterns of behavior often to be repeated as the centuries unfolded. A cosmic struggle has already been

inaugurated between two opposing Kingdoms. This world is both the battle ground and the prize of victory. We read: *“Yes, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son... God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (Jn.3:16-17).*

The Scriptures confirm the lordship of God over the earth: *“The Lord’s are the earth and its fullness” (Ps.24:1).* Nevertheless, the Scriptures also declare that Satan is “at home” on this earth: *“Here, he erected his throne” (Rv.2:13),* and *“the whole world is under the evil one” (1Jn.5:19b).*

As previously studied, Satan assumed this dominion when mankind forfeited it by succumbing to Satan through sin. Satan proved the stronger and despoiled the weaker. However, when Jesus of Nazareth remained faithful to the Will of God unto death, He achieved a major and decisive victory over Satan. Jesus’ death destroyed the power of Satan over humanity in and through Jesus. Jesus became the victor. The war goes on even though the decisive battle has been won. Many more battles will be fought; many more victories will be achieved; many more persons will be victorious; many losses will be suffered before the war ends. It is a heavenly war with the intention of re-establishing, through Jesus Christ and His Church, the reign of God on this earth. Satan vehemently resists the coming of this reign. When the earth is lost to him, only the Abyss awaits him and his followers. The demons of Gerasene said to Jesus: *“Why meddle with us, Son of God? Have you come to torture us before the appointed time?” “They pleaded with him not to order them back to the abyss” (Mt.8:29; Lk.8:31).*

The Kingdom of Heaven came on earth in Jesus Christ and continues on earth through His Church. Jesus preached: *“Reform your lives! The kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt.4:17).* The Church, empowered with the Holy Spirit, is God’s means through which the reign of God will be re-established on the earth. Since each person baptized into the Christian Church has been incorporated into Jesus Christ, Jesus continues the struggle through the members of the Church.

Of necessity, Satan directs his vehement hatred towards the Church. His most obvious tactic of attack has been to divide and conquer. This has rendered him considerable success and granted him essential delays. Satan lives, rules, and has his own “incarnation” through human beings. They are his hold upon the earth. Satan reigns in his subjects. They are the instruments of his power.

They are his victories and trophies. These he has robbed from God and His Christ. He intends to possess them eternally. The Scripture warns the Church:

Our battle is not against human forces but against the principalities and powers, the rulers of this world of darkness, the evil spirits in regions above... Your opponent the devil is prowling like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, solid in your faith, realizing that the brotherhood of believers is undergoing the same sufferings throughout the world (Eph.6:12; 1Pt.5:8-9).

The Apocalypse presents the War of the Kingdoms. It demonstrates the nature of the war and its final outcome. What is actually historic has timeless value. The historical incidents are patterns of behavior. The same means and methods used will surface and re-surface until the reign of God is eternally established and the Evil One and his followers are annihilated from the face of the earth. Let us now read the second vision recorded in the Apocalypse:

After this I had another vision: above me there was an open door to heaven, and I heard the trumpet-like voice which had spoken to me before. It said, "Come up here and I will show you what must take place in time to come." At once I was caught up in ecstasy. A throne was standing there in heaven, and on the throne was seated One whose appearance had a gemlike sparkle as of jasper and carnelian. Around the throne was a rainbow as brilliant as emerald. Surrounding this throne were twenty-four other thrones upon which were seated twenty-four elders; they were clothed in white garments and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning and peals of thunder; before it burned seven flaming torches, the seven spirits of God. The floor around the throne was like a sea of glass that was crystal clear. At the very center, around the throne itself, stood four living creatures covered with eyes front and back. The first creature resembled a lion, the second an ox, the third had the face of a man, while the fourth looked like an eagle in flight. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and eyes all over, inside and out.

Day and night, without pause, they sing: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, He who was, and who is, and who is to come!"

Whenever these creatures give glory and honor and praise to the One seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-

four elders fall down before the One seated on the throne, and worship him who lives forever and ever. They throw down their crowns before the throne and sing: "O Lord our God, you are worthy to receive glory and honor and power! For you have created all things; by your will they came to be and were made!" (Rv.4:1-11).

Before beginning the interpretation of this vision, it will be useful for us to recall the ancient Hebrew concept of creation. In the ancient world in which Judaism was born, the world was considered to be flat. The earth rested upon six great pillars, the columns of the earth. Deep within the heart of the earth was Sheol, the place of the dead. Beneath the columns of the earth rested the Abyss. Around and beneath the earth was water.

Above the earth was the sky, called the firmament. The firmament was conceived as an inverted bowl composed of a thinly beaten metal that formed a solid dome over the earth and rested upon the horizon. Above the firmament was a celestial ocean. There were flood-gates in the firmament which God could open and permit rain to fall on the earth. At God's will, these could be "shut-up." The firmament was the field upon which God placed the sun, the moon and the stars.

Within the pagan world, the stars were considered to be divine beings~ the Hebrews accepted them as angelic beings. God's throne was established on the other side of the firmament--above the celestial sea. Psalm 150 speaks of the celestial firmament as being the sanctuary of the Lord: "*Praise the Lord in his sanctuary, praise him in the firmament of his strength*" (Ps.150:1). In later Judaism, the firmament was believed to be of crystal instead of metal. In the Book of Ezekiel we read that the firmament was supported by "*four living creatures.*" Ezekiel wrote:

Above the firmament over their heads something like a throne could be seen, looking like sapphire. Upon it was seated, up above, one who had the appearance of a man. Upward from what resembled his waist I saw what gleamed like electrum; downward from what resembled his waist I saw what looked like fire; he was surrounded with splendor. Like the bow which appears in the clouds on a rainy day was the splendor that surrounded him. Such was the vision of the likeness of the glory of the Lord (Ez.1:26-27).

In describing a court scene in heaven, Daniel wrote:

Thrones were set up and the Ancient One took his throne. His clothing was snow bright, and the hair on his head as white as wool; His throne was flames of fire, with wheels of burning fire. A surging stream of fire flowed out from where he sat. Thousands upon thousands were ministering to him, and myriads upon myriads attended him (Dn.7:9-10).

Later Rabbis taught of different levels existing in heaven. Some maintained that God's throne was upon the seventh level. Others believed there were only three levels and God's throne was erected upon the third. St. Paul spoke of himself as "*a man who was snatched up to the third heaven*" (2Cor.12:2).

There was a teaching among the Jewish rabbis that seven things existed before the world began: The Torah--the supreme source of instructions for mankind; repentance--in recognition of future human error, which would give fallen people the opportunity to rise again; the Garden of Eden and Gehenna--a place of reward and punishment for human beings; the Throne of God--the symbol of God's reign over the heavens; the Temple--which symbolized that the goal of creation was for the Kingdom of God to be established upon earth as in heaven; the Name of the Messiah--this symbolized that God's purpose on earth would ultimately be achieved. It is possible that the author of the Apocalypse was influenced by this belief.

The Scripture makes it clear that neither the heavens nor the earth can contain the Lord. It speaks to us in metaphors and similes in an effort to describe the transcendency of God--the utter unlikeness of God to anything created. However, an explanation of God is impossible without reference to created things. God is related to what we comprehend in order to present Him to ourselves in some understandable fashion. Nevertheless, we must keep in mind that the expressions are poetical, figurative, and colorful, and only intend to hint to us about God, not describe Him for us. The descriptions give the senses something to cling to, but the intention of the authors is not that the mind come to an understanding of God from analyzing similes and images but rather from distilling from them the religious truths being conveyed within the colorful expressions. It is the intention of the writers that the readers--in a Mary-like fashion--meditate within their hearts upon those non-created truths revealed with the help of created images.

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

When the Scriptures speak of heaven, they present a concept of heaven in keeping with that possessed by the people of their time. With our knowledge of the universe today, these ancient accounts offer little foundation for creating an adequate concept of heaven in our minds. We certainly need to ask ourselves, "What is heaven? Where is heaven," since we are supposedly directing our time and energy towards the possession of heaven. Is heaven a place as depicted in the Old Testament, or is heaven a state of existence? Since persons must exist in a place, the assumption would be that heaven is both a state of existence and a place. However, the state and the place may be one and the same.

When the Scriptures speak of the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven, we first need to remember that heaven would be synonymous with God. There was reluctance among Jewish people to use the name of God. Secondly, the word kingdom signified more jurisdiction than territorial. The extent of one's kingdom was regulated by the extent of one's power to rule others. The kingdom of a person was co-extensive with the ability to command others and have them obey. The reign of a King depended on how far he could enforce his will. Of course when a person only ruled by force of arms, his rule extended as far as his arms could extend. In the case of Alexander the Great, he ruled from Macedonia to Egypt.

When the Scriptures speak of God's throne being erected or set up, it is a figurative way of expressing the fact of God's dominion. Therefore, heaven would be synonymous with the reign of God. Heaven would be wherever God's will would be accomplished. Where the perfect will of God is completely accomplished, there is the fullness of heaven. This is the heaven Paul spoke of when he wrote: "*Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it so much dawned on man what God has prepared for those who love him*" (1Cor.2:9). Therefore heaven can be on this earth in the degree that God rules--in the degree that His perfect will is fulfilled. God rules always in the sense that nothing occurs that is not allowed by the permissive Will of God. However, heaven only comes in its fullness when the perfect will of God is accomplished in all things.

We ought not to image heaven and earth as diametrically opposed to each other. Even the Scriptures speak of the correlation between heaven and earth when it speaks of heaven being the throne of God, and the earth being His

footstool. The Kingdom of Heaven came on earth in the life of Jesus Christ. God ruled the life of Jesus Christ completely. Even though heaven came in Jesus, Jesus did not experience heaven on earth during His earthly life to that degree--He experienced it after His death. Here on this earth He dwelt within an environment alien to the perfect will of God. In the living of His life on earth, Jesus experienced much that was not of heaven: tribulations of various kinds and degrees, ultimate physical torture and death. However, under ideal divine conditions, the fullness of heaven could be experienced on earth. It could be the Garden of Eden!--the problem being that Satan not only is "at home" on earth, but he has erected his throne here. As we will read later in the Apocalypse: *"But woe to you, earth and sea, for the devil has come down upon you! His fury knows no limits, for he knows his time is short"* (Rev.12:12).

Satan has established his rule over the lives of human beings. This rule completely opposes the will of God and hinders the accomplishment of the divine will. As long as this reign of evil holds sway over the lives of people, life on earth can never be all that God wills for it to be.

The Church is rightly spoken of as the Kingdom of Heaven. Ideally the Will of God should rule in the Church as in Christ. In the degree that God rules in the life of the Church and its individuals, heaven is present. It may not be the heaven of our imagination or the heaven that will be when "all is well," but it is heaven presently on earth. A true Christian is always in heaven. It certainly may not be in the heaven of our dreams, but it is the only heaven that can presently be experienced while heaven and hell are locked in lethal struggle. True Christians are in heaven at the battle front--the Church Militant! Within our very being, the war is fought--either heaven or hell wins a victory and claims an everlasting trophy. Perhaps we could say that being a member of the Church on earth is living on the rough side of heaven--we are living on the wrong side of the firmament. We are living on God's battle front and Christ the Leader encourages heroic action. It is good to keep in mind that all the glories to be received on the "other side" are won on the rough side of heaven: *"Remain faithful until death and I will give you the crown of life... these shall walk with me in white because they are worthy"* (Rv.2:10c, 3:4).

What is heaven? Heaven is the realm in which God rules. Where is heaven? Heaven is wherever God rules!

CREATION IN GLORY

After this vision of the Glorified Christ walking amidst the Church on earth, the Seer now presents a vision of the Court of Heaven. John begins with “after this I saw,” which is an introductory phrase indicating that a revelation of special importance will follow. This vision and the one to follow are closely related; they are a preparation for the opening of the seven seals. The author first beholds an “open door” to heaven. This recalls the words to the Church at Philadelphia, *“I have left an open door before you which no one can close.”* All heaven is not open. A single door is open, which implies access to God. This door has been opened by Jesus Christ. He referred to Himself as “the door” through which the sheep would enter. He taught that only through Him is there access to God.

The voice of Jesus now calls John: *“And I heard the trumpetlike voice which had spoken to me before. It said, ‘Come up here and I will show you what must take place in time to come.’”* This second vision pertains to matters deeper and more mysterious than the first. He is to behold that which transcends time and earth. He beholds eternal realities. This vision is the nature of that experienced by Paul, of which he wrote, *“I was snatched up to Paradise to hear words which cannot be uttered, words which no man may speak” (2Cor.12:4).*

Such expressions show the hiatus existing between heaven and earth. Only by divine intervention can a person enter such a celestial realm. John writes, *“At once I was caught up in ecstasy.”* This religious experience is of the highest quality. Human faculties are left behind--too frail for the experience. The Seer stands before the door of heaven; he does not enter, but he sees and hears. The presence of the throne of God indicates a vision of heaven. Heaven stands in contrast with earth where the throne of Satan presently stands.

In keeping with the Old Testament custom, God is depicted with gem-like brilliance. The Scriptures spoke of God as reigning “in inaccessible light.” In the vision already quoted, Ezekiel spoke of a sapphire-like quality of light above the throne. He described God as gleaming “like electrum,” “like fire,” “surrounded with splendor.” John saw *“on the throne was seated One whose appearance had a gem-like sparkle as of jasper and carnelian.”* The Lord being seated invokes the image of King and Judge; it is a vision of the heavenly court in session. The combination of the colors of the jasper and carnelian would create an image suffused with a warm orange-red light such as displayed by the rising sun. The image around the throne would be tempered

by the surrounding emerald-green rainbow. *“Around the throne was a rainbow as brilliant as emerald.”*

For many, the presence of the rainbow has conjured up the covenant of enduring mercy established with Noah. However, this may not be the intention of the author. He uses the rainbow iris, which means a halo or radiance. In the account in Genesis (9:13) and in Ezekiel, the word *toxon* appears which means a “war-bow.” The rabbis taught that the rainbow symbolized that God had set aside His war-bow, hung it in the sky as a sign His anger had ended. Some other rabbis maintained it hung there as a constant reminder to sinful earth that a day of judgment will come. However, since green is a common symbol of eternal life, the emerald rainbow most likely symbolizes that God is the primary source of all life. It is the Throne of Yahweh, the God of the Living. Andrew of Caesarea wrote, “The Divine Nature is evergreen and flowering.”

Many have found it of interest that the three gems mentioned are gems that symbolized the first and last tribe of Israel and the tribe of Judah. On the breastplate of the high priest were arranged four rows of three stones; each stone represented one of the 12 tribes: sardius (carnelian), topaz, carbuncle, emerald, sapphire, diamond, jacinth, agate, amethyst, beryl, onyx, and jasper. Of all the tribes of Israel, Judah (symbolized by the emerald) was the only one that survived as a tribe.

Around the throne, John beheld “twenty-four elders” seated, clothed in white with crowns of gold on their heads. Jesus promised the faithful witnesses that they would receive the crown of eternal life, they would walk in white, they would receive the right to sit with him upon his throne--the divine throne. These twenty-four elders have been identified as everything from ministering angels to the twenty-four astral divinities of Babylon. Some of the more acceptable identifications have been with Old Testament personages. However, in the light of Jesus’ messages to the Churches, the most obvious interpretation would be that the twenty-four represent the victorious faithful witnesses. They wear *stephanous* crowns of victory rather than diadems; the gold would symbolize their faith that led to eternal life; being called elders symbolized their wisdom; being seated signified they shared in kingship and judgment as Jesus promised.

The very appearance of the saints with God in glory will be a judgment against the people of the earth. Their victory was achieved amidst the same

circumstances in which others were lost. Their lives are judgments against those who rejected God and His Christ. The number "24" may possibly indicate faithful witness of both the Old and New Testaments. "2" is the number for witness. Both the Old and the New Testaments witness to Christ. The number "12" is a round natural number (3x4) capable of signifying an indefinite number. The "24" symbolically represents the future glorification of the People of God. Later we will see that they fulfill the priestly office of offering praise to God and offering the prayers of the saints.

John indicates a theophany--a manifestation of the Divine Presence--when he writes, *"From the throne came flashes of lightning and peals of thunder: before it burned seven flaming torches, the seven spirits of God."* Such signs traditionally expressed the Presence of God, as we saw with God's manifestation to the Jews on Mt. Sinai (Ex.19:16). The "seven spirits of God" indicate the Holy Spirit of God. The separation of the seven flaming torches from the throne itself, the source of the lightning and peals of thunder, indicate a real distinction between the Persons of the Father and the Holy Spirit.

John relates that *"the floor around the throne was like a sea of glass that was crystal clear."* This crystal sea may symbolize God transcending all limits; His total separation from all creation. It appears to be a standard symbol of divine manifestation. We read in Exodus:

Moses then went up with Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel, and they beheld the God of Israel. Under his feet there appeared to be sapphire tilework, as clear as the sky itself (Ex. 24: 9? 10).

Ezekiel says, stretched straight above the heads of the four creatures, *"some? thing like a firmament could be seen, seeming like glittering crystal" (1:22).* It is said that the glass before the throne of Solomon was so clear that when the Queen of Sheba approached the throne, she lifted her skirts thinking it was water. The Seer now relates a most mysterious dimension of his vision which closely resembles the vision of Ezekiel:

At the very center, around the throne itself, stood four living creatures covered with eyes front and back. The first creature

resembled a lion, the second an ox: the third had the face of a man, while the fourth looked like an eagle in flight. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and eyes allover, inside and ou. (Rv.4:6-8).

The simplest and best explanation of the four creatures is that they represent created nature. What is so powerfully and beautifully expressed in this aspect of the vision is God's relationship with all creation. The four creatures are described to be "at the very center, around the throne itself," which indicates immediate contact with God. It signifies the Divine Eminence in creation. It reveals the Divine Providence that constantly governs and sustains the universe. The four creatures represent what is most splendid in animated life. The lion equals nobility, the bull equals strength, the man equals intelligence and the eagle equals freedom. The creatures being "full of eyes in front and back" express the total knowledge and vigilance of God (The sparrow does not fall unnoticed from the sky). The total, universal consciousness of God is signified. The six wings indicate the swiftness with which the Will of God is executed in nature.

The Presence of God the Creator is unceasingly made visible in the created universe. Of this Creator, the Book of Wisdom says: "*For you love all things that are and loathe nothing that you have made... And how could a thing remain unless you willed it... your imperishable spirit is in all things! (Wis.11:24-12:1).* All created nature constantly sings forth the praise of its Creator. The Apocalypse reveals this truth.

We read of the four living creatures: "*Day and night, without pause, they sing: 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, He who was, and who is, and who is to come!'" (4:8).* The voice of praise is inaudible--it is the soundless sound--yet it loudly proclaims, both night and day, the all holiness of God. Nature's very being proclaims God. A poet once wrote, "If eyes were made for seeing--then beauty is its own excuse for being." And another said, "God is not dumb that He should speak no more. If you hear not His Voice, tis thy soul that's poor." And so the psalmist sang:

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day pours out the word to day and night to night imparts knowledge. Not a word nor a discourse whose voice is not heard. Through all the earth their voice resounds, and to the ends of the world, their message (Ps.19:1-5).

For those who cannot find God in this world, the Book of Wisdom reflects:

For all men were by nature foolish who were in ignorance of God, and who from the good things seen did not succeed in knowing him who is, and from studying the works did not discern the artisan... For from the greatness and the beauty of created things their original author, by analogy, is seen (Wis.13:1,5)

St. Paul wrote:

In fact, whatever can be known about God is clear to them; he himself made it so. Since the creation of the world, invisible realities, God's eternal power and divinity have become visible, recognized through the things he has made (Rom.1:19-20).

It is the saints on earth who must give audible sound to the soundless praise of inanimate and muted nature. When the saints behold the beauty, wonder, might, and energy of creation, they behold the invisible God within His visible creation, and they acknowledge and praise Him. We read in the Apocalypse:

Whenever these creatures give glory and honor and praise to the One seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before the One seated on the throne, and worship him who lives forever and ever. They throw down their crowns before the throne and sing: "O Lord our God, you are worthy to receive glory and honor and power! For you have created all things; by your will they came to be and were made!" (Rv.4:9-11).

Even though God be in all--and even though the saints share in the very eternal life of God--God transcends all. The saints throw down their crowns and fall down in worship before Him in the name of all creation.

We have seen a vision of creation properly ordered towards God. It is Creation's hymn of praise to its Creator. Such a meditation cannot but stimulate a greater love of the created universe. of the Creator, unfortunately desecrated by sin. It is indeed the Sacrament.

VISION OF REDEMPTION

The third vision completes and crowns the heavenly presentation. We read:

In the right hand of the One who sat on the throne I saw a scroll. It had writing on both sides and was sealed with seven seals. Then I saw a mighty angel who proclaimed in a loud voice: "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could be found to open the scroll or examine its contents. I wept bitterly because no one could be found worthy to open or examine the scroll. One of the elders said to me: "Do not weep. The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has won the right by his victory to open the scroll with the seven seals" (Rv. 5:1-5).

A sealed scroll appears in the right hand of God. The scroll represents the secret and hidden will of God that still awaits execution. John beholds an official document of divine decrees. God's ministering spirits executed those decrees.

The seven seals signify that at present the Will of God remains completely hidden. It has not yet been made manifest. The present condition on earth gives evidence to this. God's Will is impeded through Satan's dominion. A mighty angel, representing the powers of creation, asks who is capable of opening the sealed scroll--who can execute the divine plan in the universe? Who is worthy? Who is qualified to put into execution God's plan of universal salvation? In all creation, no power can respond. At this the Seer begins to weep despairingly, for the earth is doomed under the dominion of the evil one. When evil appears to rage unhindered on earth, the rabbis speak of God as being asleep. They seek to awaken Him with shouts: "Arise O Lord! Awake! Come to our aid!" In all of heaven, no one can arise to the task of saving the world. One of the elders addresses John.

This address symbolizes the encouragement that the saints of heaven are offering to the afflicted Church on earth: *"Do not weep. The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has won the right by his victory to open the scroll with the seven seals."* The One found worthy is from the earth. The title implies a king out of Judah fulfills the promises of the Old Testament:

But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse (David's father), and from his roots a bud shall blossom. The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him... On that day the root of Jesse, set up as a signal for the nations... (Is.11:1-2a,10).

Paul adds: *"In him the Gentiles will find hope" (Rom.15:12).*

In the next scene, the Seer beholds the One worthy and understands why He is so worthy. We read:

Then, between the throne with the four living creatures and the elders, I saw a Lamb standing, a Lamb that had been slain. He had seven horns and seven eyes; these eyes are the seven spirits of God, sent to all parts of the world. The Lamb came and received the scroll from the right hand of the One who sat on the throne. When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Along with their harps, the elders were holding vessels of gold filled with aromatic spices, which were the prayers of God's holy people. This is the new hymn they sang: "Worthy are you to receive the scroll and break open its seals, for you were slain. With your blood you purchased for God men of every race and tongue, of every people and nation. You made of them a kingdom, and priests to serve our God and they shall reign on the earth" (Rv.5:6-10).

John identifies Jesus as the Lamb. Twenty-eight times he will confer this title on Jesus. The Lamb is situated between the throne and the elders. This symbolizes His unique position with God whose knowledge and power He shares and also His continuous association with His Church. The Lamb appears alive, standing. However, He bears scars of sufferings. Like a quick flashback, the death of the Lamb is recalled: He *"had been slain."* It recalls the words of the first vision: *"Once I was dead but now I live--forever and ever."* John the Baptist says of Jesus: *"Look! There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn.1:29).*

The sacrificial death of the Lamb is signified. God has decreed that, because of His sacrificial death, Jesus has the power to bring the course of history to a successful conclusion. This sacrificial death makes Jesus worthy to set in motion the fore-ordained Will of God. Receiving it from the *"right hand of God"* symbolizes that Jesus is filled with Divine Power. All the redeemed

acknowledge the Lamb to be Lord and Savior of the World. The saints in heaven offer to the Lamb the prayers of praise, thanksgiving, and petition of the saints on earth. A new song is sung. The term “*new song*” indicates a special hymn of praise is created to celebrate an extraordinary event. The Saints of Heaven sing the Song of Redemption. All earthly creation sees salvation in the Lamb. From the death of the Lamb--from the blood of the Lamb--flows the graces of redemption and ultimately perfection. The Scriptures intimate that salvation will be extended to all creation and earth will become a heaven: “*You made of them a kingdom, and this gives priests to serve our God, and they shall reign on the earth.*” (Rv.5:10).

The redemption of the earth is symbolized in the four living creatures joining with the twenty-four elders in praise of the Lamb, confirmation to those mysterious words written by Paul in Romans:

Indeed, the whole created world eagerly awaits the revelation of the sons of God. Creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord, but by him who once subjected it; yet not without hope, because the world itself will be freed from its slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. Yes, we know that all creation groans and is in agony even until now (Rom.8:19-22).

To these terrestrial voices, the angelic voices add their praise of the Lamb. We read:

As my vision continued, I heard the voices of many angels who surrounded the throne and the living creatures and the elders. They were countless in number, thousands and tens of thousands, and they all cried out: “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches, wisdom and strength, honor and glory and praise!” Then I heard the voices of every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea; everything in the universe cried aloud: “To the One seated on the throne and to the Lamb, be praise and honor, glory and might, forever and ever!” The four living creatures answered, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped (Rv.5:11-14).

The angels of Heaven acknowledge the Lamb is worthy to receive divinity. The celestial and terrestrial join in a symphony of praise to Jesus Christ. The

heavenly scene concludes in silent adoration of God and the Lamb. It is the most dramatic proclamation of the Divinity of Jesus Christ to be found in the New Testament. It is a heavenly presentation and production of Paul's proclamation:

Because of this, God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every other name, so that at Jesus' name every knee must bend in the heavens, on the earth, and under the earth, and every tongue proclaim to the glory of God the Father: JESUS CHRIST IS LORD! (Phil.2:9-11).

CHAPTER 7

A TIME OF WRATH

INTRODUCTION

The preceding picture presented in the Apocalypse has endeavored to prepare the Christian Community for what is to come. The picture that unfolds is not pleasant. However, these terrible things must precede the glorious Parousia of the Lord Jesus Christ. Within the first five chapters, the Church has been assured of the lordship of Jesus Christ and of His constant Presence within the Church on earth. The Lord has revealed that the essence of Christian Discipleship is being a faithful witness until death. Tribulations on this earth test and perfect the Christian witness. The gold of discipleship is tested and tried in the fires of persecution. In the midst of earthly tribulations, a Christian discovers where the Lord stands with them. These tribulations manifest the degree to which the Christian walks in the Spirit of Christ, or is in the flesh and walks in the spirit of the world. Tribulation shatters the facade and veneer of Christianity and manifests the inner person. It reveals whether one stands with the kingdom of heaven or with the kingdom of the earth. Glory cannot come to any Christian unless trials and tribulations come first. The promised “crown” follows the accepted “cross.” The crown follows a cross willingly accepted as proof of discipleship: *“He who will not take up his cross and come after me is not worthy of me” (Mt.10:38).*

The Lord can no more save us from tribulations in this world than He could save Himself from them. *“No pupil outranks his teacher, no slave his master” (Mt.10:24).* Jesus summed up His own earthly life: *“The Son of man must suffer many things and be rejected...and be killed, and after three days rise again,”* and the message was plain. The worldly reaction to this prophecy was expressed by Peter in these words:

“Master! God forbid that any such thing ever happen to you!” Jesus reacted violently to Peter’s response: “Get out of my sight, you satan! You are trying to make me trip and fall. You are not judging by God’s standards but by mans” (See Mt.16:22-23).

Jesus sets the divine will and the human will in their proper perspective. Even if we are good people and disciples of Jesus, our thoughts and desires run counter to those of God. Often God's ways in our lives can only be known and accepted--but not understood.

Jesus has not left His disciples in the dark regarding their life on earth. They must remain in the world without becoming part of the world:

I do not ask you to take them out of the world, but to guard them from the evil one. They are not of the world, any more than I belong to the world... As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world... I gave them your word, and the world has hated them for it" (Jn.17:15-16,18,14).

If you find that the world hates you, know it has hated me before you. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own; the reason it hates you is that you do not belong to the world... They will harry you as they harried me (Jn.15:18-20b).

Jesus' words become more explicit in the accounts of Matthew and Mark:

They will hale you into court, they will flog you in their synagogues. You will be brought to trial before rulers and kings, to give witness before them and before the Gentiles on my account... Brother will hand over brother to death, and the father his child; children will turn against parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by all on account of me (Mt.10:17-22a).

They will hand you over to torture and kill you. Indeed, you will be hated by all nations on my account. Many will falter then, betraying and hating one another. False prophets will rise in great numbers to mislead many. Because of the increase of evil, the love of most will grow cold. The man who holds out to the end, however, is the one who will see salvation (Mt.24:9-13).

If they call the head of the house Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household! (Mt.10:25b).

Blest are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of slander against you because of me. Be glad and rejoice, for your reward is great in heaven; they persecuted the prophets before you in the very same way (Mt.5:11-12).

Jesus makes it clear that being a disciple is not going to be a cause of peace in this world, nor will it bring a disciple peace in this world: *“Do not suppose that my mission on earth is to spread peace. My mission is to spread, not peace, but division” (Mt.10:34)*. This emphasizes that Jesus’ coming into the world inaugurates a state of war against the Prince of this World--against the kingdom of darkness whose throne is erected upon this earth.

Jesus continues this war through His Church. For this reason, Jesus tells His disciples, *“What I am doing is sending you out like sheep among wolves.”* However, Jesus does not desire His disciples to be like dumb sheep in this world, unable to discern danger and the enemy. Jesus encourages prudence, *“You must be clever as snakes and innocent as doves. Be on your guard with respect to others” (Mt.10:16-17a)*. Look how guarded Jesus was, even with Peter! Jesus goes on to teach:

Do not let them intimidate you... Do not fear those who deprive the body of life but cannot destroy the soul... Be on your guard! Let no one mislead you. Many will come attempting to impersonate me. “I am the Messiah,” they will claim, and they will deceive many... False messiahs and false prophets will appear, performing signs and wonders so great as to mislead even the chosen if that were possible (Mt.10:26a,28a; 24:4-5,24).

Jesus teaches that the persecution of His disciples and the Church are things that must come to be before the end of this world comes. Likewise false prophets and messiahs must come and seek to counteract the effects of Christ and His Church in this world.

We read in Matthew that social chaos in the world will be another sign.

You will hear of wars and rumors of wars. Do not be alarmed, such things are bound to happen, but that is not yet the end. Nation will rise against nation, one kingdom against another. There will be famine and pestilence and earthquakes in many places. These are the early stages of the birth pangs... This good news of the kingdom

will be proclaimed throughout the world as a witness to all the nations. Only after that will the end come... As the lightning from the east flashes to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be. (Mt.24:6-8,14,27).

We read in Mark:

When you hear about wars and threats of war, do not yield to panic. Such things are bound to happen, but this is not yet the end. Nation will rise against nation, one kingdom against another. There will be earthquakes in various places and there will be famine. This is but the onset of the pains of labor... But the good news must first be proclaimed to all the Gentiles (Mk.13:7-8,10).

Both Matthew and Mark speak of all these social disturbances and horrors as but “the early stages” and the “onset of the pains of labor.” Mark goes on to speak of the second stage that must occur before the End:

During that period after trials of every sort the sun will be darkened, the moon will not shed its light, stars will fallout of the skies, and the heavenly hosts will be shaken. Then men will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. He will dispatch his angels and assemble his chosen from the four winds, from the farthest bounds of earth and sky... As to the exact day or hour, no one knows it, neither the angels in heaven nor even the Son, but only the Father. Be constantly on the watch! Stay awake! You do not know when the appointed time will come... What I say to you, I say to all: Be on guard! (Mk.13:24-27,32-33,37).

The Evangelists speak of persecutions, wars, and social upheavals. As these things are viewed from here on earth, they appear to be a “normal” part of human existence. People war with each other as individuals or nations for one reason or another. Such activities appear to be part of the dark side of human nature. The Scriptures, likewise, speak of natural disasters, such as earthquakes, famine, pestilence. Again, we on earth attribute these things to the natural operations of nature. These are normal occurrences for life upon this planet. The Apocalypse deals with these incidents that occur on earth, but presents them all as the direct effects of the Divine Will. They occur because God wills them to be. These catastrophes that affect the political and social order of life on earth are of such a magnitude that they cannot be attributed

purely to human agents and accidents of nature. They are the beginnings of the Eschatological War in which the godly and the ungodly encounter one another.

Within the second vision presented in the Apocalypse, we behold the harmony existing between God the Creator and the created universe. This vision emphasizes the Presence of God in all creation, and how all the created universe, properly ordered towards God, unceasingly proclaims and glorifies God. Nothing occurs in the world outside of the Will of God. The catastrophes now to befall the earth are permitted by God. *“These are early stages of the birth pangs”* of a new creation. Chapter six of the Apocalypse takes us behind the scene of earth’s stage. There the Lamb has been proclaimed by all creation as worthy to receive the scroll from the right hand of God and break open its seals. The Lamb has received *“the power and riches, wisdom and strength”* to reveal and to execute the hidden and mysterious Will of God in the universe. Jesus Christ, the Lamb, will bring God’s will for creation to perfect fulfillment. The Seer now relates:

Then I watched while the Lamb broke open the first of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures cry out in a voice like thunder, “Come forward!” To my surprise I saw a white horse; its rider had a bow, and he was given a crown. He rode forth victorious, to conquer yet again.

When the Lamb broke open the second seal, I heard the second living creature cry out, “Come forward!” Another horse came forth, a red one. Its rider was given power to rob the earth of peace by allowing men to slaughter one another. For this he was given a huge sword.

When the Lamb broke open the third seal, I heard the third living creature cry out, “Come forward!” This time I saw a black horse, the rider of which held a pair of scales in his hand. I heard what seemed to be a voice coming from in among the four living creatures. It said: “A day’s pay for a ration of wheat and the same for three of barley! But spare the olive oil and the wine!”

When the Lamb broke open the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature cry out, “Come forward!” Now I saw a horse sickly green in color. Its rider was named Death, and the nether world was in his train. These four were given authority over one quarter of the earth, to kill with sword and famine and plague and the wild beasts of the earth (Rev.6:1-8).

We mentioned earlier that St. Jerome wrote in a letter that the Apocalypse possessed as many mysteries as words. To that statement Jerome added: "That is putting it mildly! There are dozens of mysteries in each word." In the mind of Jerome, the Apocalypse is almost impossible to interpret and it certainly opens itself to various interpretations--none of which may be wrong, or all of them may be wrong.

One author noted that Jerome's statement applies with vengeance to the three series of seven now to be recounted in the Apocalypse--the seals, the trumpets and the bowls. As the number seven indicates, all three series are complete within themselves. Each contains within itself the complete revelation. They ought not to be viewed as twenty-one different elements to be identified. The three are not sequels to each other, but rather the same revelation expressed differently. Each of the series begins with four of a kind, with an interlude between the next three elements. In all three cases, the revelation of the seventh element is delayed. This builds up the reader's suspense and then, when revealed, leaves the conviction that there is nothing to be added; the whole of history has been revealed.

We need to keep in mind that by the nature of the sealed scroll nothing could be known until the final seal was broken; only then could the contents of the scroll be revealed. Therefore, the reader ought not to imagine that the breaking of the seals and the revealing of certain acts represent the gradual unfolding of future events. The Seer presents to his reader and listeners the complete revelation in parts.

The use of the word *erchou*, translated "come forth," indicates a public appearance. Here, it signifies a divine epiphany or manifestation. In this case, the Divine Wrath is being revealed upon the earth. This Divine Wrath is being executed in nature and through nature. In each case, one of the four living creatures calls forth a particular manifestation of God's Wrath. We saw in chapter five of the Apocalypse that God controls the powers of nature. What we witness is God's partial withdrawal of control over nature, permitting nature, perverted, to follow its own destructive course. The concept of God's Wrath is analyzed in Paul's letter to the Romans. There the anger of God is seen not so much as a personal characteristic of God, but rather as a negative aspect of God's love. The Wrath of God is seen as God's abandonment of men to follow the paths of their own evil wills. Men reject God and God honors the rejection! God withdraws His influence over their lives--to a degree. This permits their evil wills to run their course and bear the bitterest fruits. In his

sermon before the Sanhedrin, Stephen speaks of God's Wrath in these terms, *"But God turned away from them and abandoned them to the worship of the galaxies in the heavens"* (Acts:7:42).

In this text, the "galaxies" would refer to pagan deities or evil spirits. Because of God's elect, His abandonment of the wicked is only partial. In other words, the saints upon the earth prevent it from becoming complete Hell on earth. For their sakes, God constrains evil and its consequences upon this earth.

The writers of the Old Testament made no distinction between the perfect will of God and His permissive will. God directly wills good. He willed the good of personal freedom. God permits evil. When evil flows from the misuse of personal freedom, it is said to flow from the permissive will of God. In this sense, all that occurs is attributed to the will of God, but we need to keep the distinction between "perfect" and "permissive" will of God in mind. However, the men of the Old Testament--in order to avoid the heresy of a God of Good and a God of Evil--attributed everything, good and evil, to the expressed will of Yahweh. They attributed evil on earth directly to God. It was the Wrath of God.

THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE

In order to keep a balanced picture, we must also keep in mind that God is Just. Justice is a good. Justice gives to each what is their due. Our author appears to reflect something of the Old Testament theology. The prophets of the Old Testament certainly inspired the author's presentations. Habakkuk writes of God's dealings with those who persecute the People of God. Since our author echoes many of the concepts of the prophet, let us read his words:

God comes... Covered are the heavens with his glory, and with his praise the earth is filled. His splendor spreads like the light; rays shine forth from beside him, where his power is concealed. [John presented this picture in chapter four.] Before him goes pestilence, and the plague follows in his steps. He pauses to survey the earth; his look makes the nations tremble. The eternal mountains are shattered, the age-old hills bow low along his ancient ways... Is your anger against the streams, O Lord? Is your wrath against the streams, your rage against the sea, that you drive the steeds of your victorious chariot? Bared and ready is your bow, filled with arrows is your quiver... A torrent of rain descends; the ocean gives forth its

roar. The sun forgets to rise, the moon remains in its shelter, At the light of your flying arrows, at the gleam of your flashing spear. In wrath you bestride the earth, in fury you trample the nations. You come forth to save your people, to save your anointed one. You crush the heads of the wicked... You pierce with your shafts the heads of their princes... You tread the sea with your steeds amid the churning of the deep waters. I hear, and my body trembles... I await the day of distress that will come upon the people who attack us. For though the fig tree blossom not nor fruit be on the vines, though the yield of the olive fail and the terraces produce no nourishment, though the flocks disappear from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, Yet will I rejoice in the Lord and exult in my saving God. God, my Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet swift as those of hinds and enables me to go upon the heights (Hab.3:3-19).

In the Apocalypse, the Wrath of God arrives first upon this earth within the famous symbolism of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Four horsemen come forth riding horses of different colors: white, red, black and yellowish-green. In the Scriptures, horses are primarily war-animals.

Throughout the Apocalypse, colors are not without significance. As already mentioned, white signifies victory or conquest. The word for white is *leukas*, which signifies anything from white to grey. Without some qualifying adjective, such as dazzlingly, we are in doubt whether the first horse of the Apocalypse is white or grey. Here the word for red is *purros*, which signifies red as fire. This color signifies bloodshed, violence, war. It is the color of the Dragon which appears in chapter twelve. The color black symbolizes famine, mourning, affliction. The word describing the fourth horse is *chloros*, which can describe anything from the light green of a plant to the color of a corpse. This color indicates decay, plague, pestilence, death and hell. The symbolism of the heavenly horsemen is not unique to the Apocalypse. They likewise appear in the writing of the Prophet Zechariah where we read:

I had a vision during the night. There appeared the driver of a red horse, standing among myrtle trees in a shady place, and behind him were red, sorrel, and white horses. Then I asked, "What are these, my Lord" And the angel who spoke with me answered me, "I will show you what these are." The man who was standing among the myrtle trees spoke up and said, "These are they whom the Lord

has sent to patrol the earth.” “We have patrolled the earth; see, the whole earth is tranquil and at rest!”

Again I raised my eyes and saw four chariots coming out from between two mountains; and the mountains were of bronze. The first chariot had red horses, the second chariot black horses, the third chariot white horses, and the fourth chariot spotted horses--all of them strong horses. I asked the angel who spoke with me, “What are these, my Lord?” The angel said to me in reply, “These are the four winds of the heavens, which are coming forth after being reviewed by the Lord of all the earth.” ...As these strong horses emerged, eager to set about patrolling the earth, he said, “Go, patrol the earth!” Then, as they patrolled the earth, he called out to me and said, “See, they that go forth to the land of the north will make my spirit rest in the land of the north” (Zec.1:8-11; 6:1-8).

The author of Second Maccabees sees angelic horsemen who fight on the side of Israel. He relates:

But just as he (Heliodorus) was approaching the treasury with his bodyguards, the Lord of spirits who holds all power manifested himself in so striking a way that those who had been bold enough to follow Heliodorus were panic-stricken at God’s power and fainted away in terror. There appeared to them a richly caparisoned horse, mounted by a dreadful rider. Charging furiously, the horse attacked Heliodorus with its front hoofs. The rider was seen to be wearing golden armor.

In the midst of the fierce battle, there appeared to the enemy from the heavens five majestic men riding on golden-bridled horses, who led the Jews on. They surrounded Maccabeus, and shielding him with their own armor, kept him from being wounded. They shot arrows and hurled thunderbolts at the enemy, who were bewildered and blinded, thrown into confusion and routed. (2Mc.3:24-25; 10:29-30)

When the Scriptures speak of the four charioteers as being “*the four winds of the heavens,*” wind would be *pneuma*--the same word used for spirit. The four winds would symbolize angelic beings who executed God’s will upon this earth. The winds in the Old Testament were not considered inanimate forces or powers. The author of Sirach speaks of them as instruments of divine chastisement on the earth:

There are storm winds created to punish, which in their fury can dislodge mountains; when destruction must be, they hurl all their force and appease the anger of their Maker. In his treasury also, kept for the proper time, are fire and hail, famine, disease, ravenous beasts, scorpions, vipers, and the avenging sword to exterminate the wicked; In doing his bidding they rejoice, in their assignments they disobey not his command (Sir.39:28-31).

These texts should aid our interpretation of this section of the Apocalypse. They seem to suggest that the riders are angelic spirits, and the horses are great powers and forces of nature. The spirits represent God's dominion over the earth. The angelic beings appear as powerful spirits to execute the Will of God. They control the present peace and harmony on earth, and they possess the power to release chaos and destruction upon the earth. By their power they presently hold back and limit the working of the spirits of evil on earth. This seems to be verified in chapter seven where we read: *"I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth; they held in check the earth's four winds so that no wind blew on land or sea or through any tree" (Rv.7: 1).*

The four winds of the earth would represent evil forces. The significance of the white horse and its rider in the Apocalypse has been a subject of much dispute. Even as far back as Irenaeus, the first rider has been identified as the Word of God (the Gospel) that must go forth over the entire world before the End of the World comes. Some identify this horseman with Christ because the horse is white and the rider wears a crown of victory. Nevertheless, the interpretation given in verse eight of this chapter seems to preclude these interpretations, *"These four were given authority over one quarter of the earth, to kill with sword and famine and plague and the wild beasts of the earth" (Rv.6:8).*

This excludes the white horse and its rider from being either the Gospel or Christ. The unlimited power of the Lamb was declared in chapter five. The Lamb possesses Divine Power. This first horseman seems to signify the spirit of aggressive imperialism that comes to its victory through force of arms and conquest. The apparition on the white horse carries a bow--a war-bow.

A common interpretation has been that for John, the rider represents the Parthian Army. At that time in history, the Parthians symbolized the aggressive imperialism rising from the East as a threat to Roman peace. The Eastern boundaries of the Roman Empire ended at the Euphrates River;

behind this border stood the famous Parthian Cavalry--famous bowmen who shot from horseback. They were magnificent bowmen who were famous for being able to ride and shoot over their backs at the same time. These cavalymen had long flowing hair and rode white horses into battle. In 62 A.D., they defeated a Roman legion. They constituted a constant threat to the Roman Empire.

It was rumored that it was to these that Nero fled, and that one day he would return, leading them on to Rome. As the years faded, the Nero-rumors took a new twist: Nero would return, but from the bottomless pit, at the head of a demonic army, and he would be called "Destruction." In the Parthians, the Christians saw an answer to the prayers of the martyrs. However, this did not imply they were a godly force--only an instrument of divine retribution for the crimes against the saints.

The rider of the red horse symbolizes the aggressive imperialism established by war. We are told that the rider was given power to rob the earth of peace by allowing men to slaughter one another. This may have been seen as a barbarian invasion of the Empire. For this purpose, the rider "*was given a huge sword.*" The sword was a *rhomphia*--a large broad sword used by the barbarian peoples. It symbolizes great pain and anguish. Just such a sword, Simeon prophesied, would pierce the soul of the Virgin Mary.

The power to kill one another can also be interpreted to mean civil war. Civil war plagued the Roman Empire. In the reign of Claudius (45-54 A.D.), war broke out in Britain, Germany, Armenia, and Parthia. The Jewish wars began in the reign of Nero in 66 A.D. The death of Nero resulted in civil wars that saw three emperors in rapid succession: Otho, Galba, and Vitallius. This "*great sword*" of the Apocalypse indicates that something more than human took part in these conflicts.

Famine is often the sister of war. The rider on the black horse carrying a set of scales symbolizes famine. The price of bread illustrates a famine condition. A silver denarius--about twenty cents--was a laborer's daily wage. Under normal conditions, a denarius purchased thirteen quarts of wheat. Now it could purchase only one quart, considered a man's daily ration of bread; or, it could purchase three quarts of barley, from which was made the cheapest bread. According to the prophecy, bread would be about twelve times the normal price; human beings would be reduced to a bare subsistence level. However, the extent of this famine has been limited by God. This is indicated

by the command to preserve such essential commodities as oil and wine. We read in Sirach:

Chief of all needs for human life are water and fire, iron and salt, The heart of the wheat, milk and honey, the blood of the grape, and oil, and cloth; For the good all these are good, but for the wicked they turn out evil (Sir.39:26-27).

During the conquest of Jerusalem, Titus commanded his soldiers to spare the olive trees and the vineyards. Some of the present olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemani are reported to be over three thousand years old and are still producing fruit. As a consequence of war and famine come diseases, plagues, pestilence, and men who become like wild beasts. Death becomes inevitable.

The fourth horseman on the yellowish-green horse is identified as *Thanatos*, which is Death. Thanatos does not ride alone. In his train is Hades--the Second Death. Ezekiel prophesied that God would send such horrors upon this earth to punish men for their idolatry:

Therefore, as I live, says the Lord God, because you have defiled my sanctuary with all your detestable abominations, I swear to cut you down. I will not look upon you with pity nor have mercy. A third of your people shall die of pestilence and perish of hunger within you; another third shall fall by the sword all around you; and a third I will scatter in every direction, and I will pursue them with the sword. When I loose against you the cruel, destructive arrows of hunger, I will break your staff of bread; I will send famine against you, and wild beasts that shall rob you of your children. Pestilence and bloodshed shall stalk through you, and I will bring the sword upon you. I, the Lord, have spoken! ...cry "Alas!" because of all the abominations of the house of Israel, for which they shall fall by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence. He that is far off shall die of pestilence, he that is near shall fall by the sword, and he that is besieged shall perish by famine; so will I spend my fury upon them (Ez.5:11-17; 6:11-12).

These prophecies were completely fulfilled during the siege and destruction of Jerusalem under the Romans in 70 A.D.

The breaking of the first four seals has manifested the sufferings that must come upon all who live upon the earth because the earth has become idolatrous. As man turns against God, God permits nature to turn against man. Our Lord told the saints in Philadelphia: *“Because you have kept my plea to stand fast, I will keep you safe in the time of trial which is coming on the whole world, to test all men on earth” (Rv.3:10)*. That does not imply that Christians would be spared sufferings during the time of tribulations, but rather they would be kept safe from the evil one. To the Church at Smyrna, our Lord spoke of the sufferings to be endured by the saints: *“Have no fear of the sufferings to come. ...remain faithful until death and I will give you the crown of life” (Rv.2:10)*.

At times, it seems that upon this earth the saints die, and heaven remains unmoved. Yes, they receive their reward in heaven, but what of those who destroyed the saints? How often they appear to merely go their way--and often a prosperous way at that. Where is the justice of God? It appears so hidden. This problem troubles the faith of the saints on earth. It is dealt with under the fifth seal. We read:

When the Lamb broke open the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the spirits of those who had been martyred because of the witness they bore to the word of God. They cried out at the top of their voices:

“How long will it be, Master, holy and true, before you judge our cause and avenge our blood among the inhabitants of the earth?” Each of the martyrs was given a long white robe, and they were told to be patient a little while longer until the quota was filled of their fellow servants and brothers to be slain, as they had been. (Rv.6:9-11).

THE FIFTH SEAL

The opening of the fifth seal emphasizes the power of the prayers of the saints. Heaven cannot shut out the prayers of the saints; they are “a loud cry” that pierces the heavens. We read in Genesis that the blood of Abel in the earth cried to the heavens. The author of Hebrews asked: What of the blood of Christ, *“which speaks more eloquently than that of Abel?” (Heb.12:24)*. God hears the call of the saints--their blood calls from the earth. It is not a call for vengeance but for vindication and justice. The cry of the martyrs is truly a prayer that the kingdom of God will come quickly on earth as it is in heaven.

What truly calls so loudly to God is the sacrificial lives of His saints. They are martyrs, not so much for what they suffered, but because of what they believed (*echein*)--because of the profession of their faith: *"I know that your strength is limited; yet you have held fast to my word and have not denied my name... Because you have kept my plea to stand fast"* (Rv.3:8b,10a). Their white robes show that the martyrs have already entered into triumph and "walk with Christ."

"*How long*" is a dramatic inquiry and formula used in the Old Testament. We read in Zechariah:

Then the angel of the Lord spoke out and said, "O Lord of hosts, how long will you be without mercy for Jerusalem and the cities of Judah that have felt your anger these seventy years?"...Thus says the Lord of hosts: I am deeply moved for the sake of Jerusalem and Zion, and I am exceedingly angry with the complacent nations~ whereas I was but a little angry, they added to the harm (Zec.1:12,14-15).

The Apocalypse says that the Christian martyrs cried out at the top of their voices: *"How long will it be, O Master, holy and true, before you judge our cause and avenge our blood among the inhabitants of the earth?"* (Rv.6:10). Their plea appears to be rising from an altar on earth. Their deaths are presented as sacrificial offerings as was the death of Jesus. The blood of the sacrificial victims flowed down beneath the altar. Blood symbolizes life and these sacrificial lives call from beneath the altar of the earth. The reference is probably to those who died in Nero's persecution. We know that early on, the persecuted Church began to celebrate the Christian liturgy at the tombs of the martyrs. Their blood has not been shed in vain. *"Will not God vindicate his elect who cry to him day and night?"*

The prayers of the martyrs are heard, but they are not immediately granted. Divine Wisdom delays answering them because of God's own plan of salvation. The opening of the fifth seal reveals that God has set limits to the evil and sufferings that will come to be on earth. Out of this will come the full number of the elect. This must all come to be before Christ and His Church will be vindicated on earth. The Church must learn to be patient with God's purposes: *"They were told to be patient a little while longer until the quota was filled of their fellow servants and brothers to be slain, as they had been"* (Rv.6:11). As we read in Second Peter:

The Lord does not delay in keeping his promise--though some consider it "delay." Rather, he shows you generous patience, since he wants none to perish but all to come to repentance (2Pt.3:9).

We read in Ezekiel:

Thus says the Lord God: Even though I send Jerusalem my four cruel punishments, the sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence, to cut off from it man and beast, still some survivors shall be left in it who will bring out sons and daughters; when they come out to you, you shall see their conduct and their actions and be consoled regarding the evil I have brought on Jerusalem... They shall console you when you see their conduct and actions, for you shall then know that it was not without reason that I did to it what I did, says the Lord God (Ez.14:21-23).

The death of the martyrs and the cries of the saints hasten the Day of the Lord because the merits of their lives and their deaths cause many to repent. Second Peter goes on to say that in God's own hour:

The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and on that day the heavens will vanish with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and all its deeds will be made manifest (2Pt.3:10).

THE SIXTH SEAL

The opening of the sixth seal dramatically confirms the word of Second Peter.

When I saw the Lamb break open the sixth seal, there was a violent earthquake; the sun turned black as a goat's hair tent cloth and the moon grew red as blood. The stars in the sky fell crashing to earth like figs shaken loose by a mighty wind. Then the sky disappeared as if it were a scroll being rolled up; every mountain and island was uprooted from its base. The kings of the earth, the nobles and those in command, the wealthy and powerful, the slave and the free--all hid themselves in caves and mountain crags. They cried out to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us! Hide us from the face of the One who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! The great day of their vengeance has come. Who can withstand it? (Rv.6:12-17).

The scene described in the opening of the sixth seal is one of universal upheaval. Nothing remains unmoved. Seven parts of creation are named, and the order in which they are named approximates the order of creation in Genesis: earth, sun, moon, stars, sky, mountains, and islands. The upheaval affects seven categories of people: kings, great men, generals, the rich, the strong, slave, and free. All mankind is aghast at the upheaval in nature. The fear to be experienced by mankind recalls the fear of Adam and Eve who sought to hide from God because of their sins. All these categories of people have rejected God and His Christ. This is not a reference to the elect. All of these seek to hide from God and the wrath of the Lamb. This introduces a picture of Jesus Christ that is strongly intimated in the Gospels. The Apocalypse speaks of "*The great day of vengeance has come.*" While on earth, Jesus said, "*When that day comes, many will plead with me... I will declare to them solemnly, 'I never knew you. Out of my sight, you evildoers!'*" (Mt. 7:22-23).

On the road to Calvary--on the way to death--Jesus declared to the women of Jerusalem that this day of wrath would come:

Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me. Weep for yourselves and for your children. The days are coming when they will say, "Happy are the sterile, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed." Then they will begin saying to the mountains, "Fall on us," and to the hills, "Cover us." If they do these things in the green wood, what will happen in the dry? (Lk.23:28-31).

Scholars agree that the language is symbolic and ought not to be interpreted literally. There are sufficient examples within the Old Testament to demonstrate that language expressing cosmic catastrophes was used to express tremendous social and political upheavals. At the Assyrian Invasion and the Fall of Edom in the eighth century, Hosea said, "*Then they shall cry out to the mountains, 'Cover us!' and to the hills, 'Fall upon us!'*" (Hos.10:8). At the same time Isaiah wrote:

For the Lord of hosts will have his day against all that is proud and arrogant, all that is high, and it will be brought low... Human pride will be abased, the arrogance of men brought low, and the Lord alone will be exalted, on that day. The idols will perish forever. Men will go into caves in the rocks and into holes in the earth, From the terror of the Lord and the splendor of his majesty, when he arises to

overawe the earth... They go into caverns in the rocks and into crevices in the cliffs, from the terror of the Lord and the splendor of his majesty, when he arises to overawe the earth (Is.2:12,17-21).

I will make mortals more rare than pure gold... For this I will make the heavens tremble and the earth shall be shaken from its place, At the wrath of the Lord of hosts on the day of his burning anger (Is.13:12-13).

The prophet Nahum spoke of the Fall of Nineveh:

The Lord is slow to anger, yet great in power, and the Lord never leaves the guilty unpunished. In hurricane and tempest is his path, and clouds are the dust at his feet: He rebukes the sea and leaves it dry, and all the rivers he dries up... The mountains quake before him, and the hills dissolve: The earth is laid waste before him, the world and all who dwell in it. Before his wrath, who can stand firm, and who can face his blazing anger? His fury is poured out like fire, and the rocks are rent asunder before him (Na.1:3-6).

Jeremiah wrote at the Babylonian Invasion:

I looked at the earth, and it was waste and void: at the heavens, and their light had gone out! I looked at the mountains, and they were trembling, and all the hills were crumbling! I looked and behold, there was no man: even the birds of the air had flown away! I looked and behold, the garden land was a desert, with all its cities destroyed before the Lord, before his blazing wrath (Jer.4:23-26).

The only correct way to interpret the symbolic language of the Apocalypse is in light of the Old Testament. As we can see, it was customary to use such language to depict an “end of the world” or a social order. We are being told in the Apocalypse: our world will fall apart, all our earthly security totally destroyed.

Apparently, these occurrences are the last pains of labor that will bring forth a New Creation. For the faithful it should not be a time of fear but rejoicing. We read in Luke:

There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish, distraught at the roaring of the sea and the waves. Men will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the earth. The powers in the heavens will be shaken. After that, men will see the Son of Man coming on a cloud with great power and glory. When these things begin to happen, stand erect and hold your heads high, for your deliverance is near at hand (Lk.2:15-28).

THE SEALING OF THE ELECT

Before the Apocalypse presents the final consummation of the world, the Seer pauses between the sixth and seventh seals. In the face of the catastrophes revealed and those still to come, the Seer knows assurance is needed in that the elect will be gathered from “the four winds” and spared. Instead of the opening of the seventh seal, we are told that the elect of God are now “sealed.”

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth; they held in check the earth's four winds so that no wind blew on land or sea or through any tree. I saw another angel come up from the east holding the seal of the living God. He cried out at the top of his voice to the four angels who were given power to ravage the land and the sea, “Do no harm to the land or the sea or the trees until we imprint this seal on the foreheads of the servants of God.” I heard the number of those who were so marked--one hundred and forty four thousand from every tribe of Israel: twelve thousand from the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand from the tribe of Reuben, twelve thousand from the tribe of Gad, twelve thousand from the tribe of Asher, twelve thousand from the tribe of Naphtali, twelve thousand from the tribe of Manasseh, twelve thousand from the tribe of Simeon, twelve thousand from the tribe of Levi, twelve thousand from the tribe of Issachar, twelve thousand from the tribe of Zebulun, twelve thousand from the tribe of Joseph, and twelve thousand from the tribe of Benjamin (Rv.7:1-8).

In ancient times, the world was believed to be both flat and rectangular. The winds that blew from the sides of the earth were considered as favorable winds, but those which blew from the corners of the earth were ill winds--evil spiritual forces. These four winds of the earth blowing out of the four corners of the earth represented the evil forces about to bring destruction upon the

face of the earth. They are held in check by Divine Power until the number of the elect has been fulfilled. The “trees” on the face of the earth symbolize all living beings on earth.

The angel coming from the east may represent Christ whose coming is spoken of as the rising of the sun in the east and the coming of the morning star; or it could represent the redemption flowing from Jesus Christ. The elect of God are stamped on their foreheads with a seal that designates them as “the servants of our God.” In the ancient days, the seal of a lord placed upon an object or person symbolized ownership and designated the thing as of special concern and under the protection of the lord. This incident recalls the scene from Ezekiel when God ordered the idolaters of Jerusalem to be slaughtered but the faithful to be spared. We read in Ezekiel:

Then he cried loud for me to hear: Come, you scourges of the city! With that I saw six men coming from the direction of the upper gate which faces the north, each with a destroying weapon in his hand. In their midst was a man dressed in linen with a writer's case at his waist. They entered and stood beside the bronze altar. Then he called to the man dressed in linen with the writer's case at his waist, saying to him: Pass through the city [through Jerusalem] and mark an X on the foreheads of those who moan and groan over all the abominations that are practiced within it. To the others I heard him say: Pass through the city after him and strike! Do not look on them with pity nor show any mercy! Old men, youths and maidens, women and children--wipe them out! But do not touch any marked with the X; begin at my sanctuary... I, however, will not look upon them with pity, nor show any mercy. I will bring down their conduct upon their heads (Ez.9:1-6,10)

When the Lord cleans house, He begins with His own house first--the Church, His Sanctuary.

The faithful of the city were marked with a *tau*, the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The *tau* symbolized Yahweh. In the time of Ezekiel, it was written as a cross (X or +). Those marked with the cross were to be preserved from evil. It was customary in Christian baptism to sign, in oil, a Christian on the forehead with the *tau* as a symbol of belonging to God through the Cross of Christ. They were signed with the Cross, which symbolized dying with Christ. This sign implied that the Christian was committed to witnessing Christ in

this world. Very early in the Church, this signing of the Christian in baptism was related to the reception of the Holy Spirit--the cause of Sanctifying Grace in the soul. It was spoken of as being sealed (*sphragis*) with the Holy Spirit. Paul wrote: *“God is the one who firmly establishes us along with you in Christ, it is he who anointed us and has sealed us, thereby depositing the first payment, the Spirit, in our hearts” (2Cor.1:21-22).*

Paul spoke of being *“sealed with the Holy Spirit who had been promised.”* The promise of *“full redemption of a people God has made his own, to praise his glory” (Eph.1:13,14).* *“Do nothing to sadden the Holy Spirit with whom you were sealed against the day of redemption” (Eph.4:30).*

The seal mentioned in the Apocalypse is more than a physical sign. It has a spiritual reality. The sign is the Cross and the seal is the Presence of the Holy Spirit and the effects of His Presence. By such, a person is identified as a true disciple of Jesus Christ and a child of the heavenly Father. Such a Presence protected the Christians, not from physical affliction on earth, but delivered them from the power of the evil one. One cannot help but recall the words to Constantine when he beheld the Cross in the sky: *“By this sign-- + --you will conquer.”*

We are told that the number sealed was 144,000. The number “12” symbolizes perfection, especially in the physical world. The square of 12 would be 144. This would stress and emphasize the perfection. To multiply this number by one thousand would symbolize an innumerable amount of people. No one could number the number of the sealed: it is the New Israel that is symbolized. This is implied by placing the tribe of Judah before that of Reuben. It is the followers of Christ—*“The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David”*--that are being sealed. It is all the faithful witnesses of both the Old and New Testaments. It is of interest that the tribe of Dan was omitted and replaced by Manasseh. It has been interpreted from Genesis 49:17 that the anti-Christ would come from the tribe of Dan. *“Let Dan be a serpent by the roadside, a horned viper by the path, that bites the horse’s heel, so that the rider tumbles backward.”*

The author continues his description of the elect:

After this I saw before me a huge crowd which no one could count from every nation and race, people and tongue. They stood before the throne and the Lamb, dressed in long white robes and holding

palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, "Salvation is from our God, who is seated on the throne, and from the Lamb!" All the angels who were standing around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures fell down before the throne to worship God. They said: "Amen! Praise and glory, wisdom and thanksgiving and honor, power and might, to our God forever and ever. Amen!"

Then one of the elders asked me, "Who are these people all dressed in white? And where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you should know better than I." He then told me, "These are the ones who have survived the great period of trial: they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. It was this that brought them before God's throne: day and night they minister to him in his temple; he who sits on the throne will give them shelter. Never again shall they know hunger or thirst, nor shall the sun or its heat beat down on them, for the Lamb on the throne will shepherd them. He will lead them to springs of life-giving water, and God will wipe every tear from their eyes" (Rv. 7:9-17).

This revelation has been granted to strengthen the Church in the face of the tribulations that must be endured on earth. Through the operation of the Holy Spirit within the redeemed, faithful witness is always possible. The fruit of this redemption will be the fullness of redemption: the faithful will share forever in the joys and glories of heaven.

The saved are identified as those who have come out of the great tribulation. Those "sealed" and the "huge crowd which no one could count" are most likely the same group. Their being sealed gives a theological reason for their being saved. These have been tested and tried like gold. They gained the white robes of victory because they identified with Jesus Christ and His death. *"They washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb."* The death of Christ on the Cross is the universal cause of salvation. He is the Savior of the World. Being *"washed in the blood of the Lamb"* implies martyrdom of blood; it also applies to those who died with Christ in Baptism, and remained faithful to Christ unto death--those *"who have not soiled their garments."*

The heavenly scene evokes an image of the great feast of Tabernacles when the laborers have ended the work of the fields and a full harvest has been gathered, and now with joy they enter the House of the Lord chanting and

singing: *“We will draw water joyfully from the streams of salvation!”* And again, the carrying of the palms recalls the Feast of Dedication. This feast celebrated the cleansing of the temple from the abominations wrought by Antiochus Epiphanes. At this feast, the temple was sanctified and rededicated to God. The heavenly scene celebrates the defeat on earth of the Kingdom of Darkness and the re-establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven. All the redeemed proclaimed: *“Salvation is from our God, who is seated on the throne, and from the Lamb!”* (Rv.7:10). And the angels and all heaven respond:

Amen! Praise and glory, wisdom and thanksgiving and honor, power and might, to our God forever and ever. Amen! (Rv.7:12).

CHAPTER 8

GREAT PERIODS OF TRIAL

INTRODUCTION

The Scriptures warn that in the last days the love of many will grow cold because of the increase of evil in the world. Christians will live amidst an evil environment, and their tendency will be to react against evil in a natural way. Not only will they withdraw from those who hate and persecute them, but they will permit hatred to seep into their own souls; they will react towards others with hatred--hot or cold. When this occurs, the environment will have corrupted the Christian. To lose love--regardless of the reason--is to lose one's Christian Life. An enemy of a Christian could have no greater triumph than to destroy the spirit of love in a Christian's heart. As noted in the message to the Church at Ephesus, the faith of the Christians survived the onslaught of false prophets and teachers and their doctrines, but these onslaughts took their toll in Christian Love. The Lord rebuked the Community for the diminishing of the spirit of love in their lives, and He warned that it could lead to their being rejected by God. The Lord had congratulated them on their hatred for evil doctrines, which He Himself hated, but their hatred extended to persons. For this there could not be any congratulations, only a warning. Hatred of other persons is a two-edged sword that hurts both the enemy and the Christian. In warning, Jesus commanded His disciples:

My command to you is: love your enemies, pray for your persecutors. This will prove that you are sons of your heavenly Father ... In a word you must be made perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect (Mt.5:44-45,48).

Apparently loving one's enemies is a practical way of perfecting the human heart. Having caught this spirit of Jesus, Paul wrote:

Bless your persecutors; bless and do not curse them... Never repay injury with injury... If possible, live peaceably with everyone. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves; leave that to God's wrath, for it is written: "Vengeance is mine; I will repay," says the Lord." ...Do

not be conquered by evil but conquer evil with good (Rom.12:14-21).

When our charity dries up in the face of evil, we have been conquered by evil. One spiritual writer observed that when human beings seek to deal justice out to others, they usually end up by being unjust themselves. Rather than rendering justice, they increase injustice in the world. He observed that only those who stood on a plane higher than justice--the plane of merciful love--could minister true justice. Those who understand this leave vengeance to God. The author of Sirach observed and encouraged:

The vengeful will suffer the Lord's vengeance, for he remembers their sins in detail. Forgive your neighbor's injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven. Should a man nourish anger against his fellows and expect healing from the Lord? Should a man refuse mercy to his fellows, yet seek pardon for his own sins? If he who is but flesh cherishes wrath, who will forgive his sins? Remember your last days, set enmity aside; remember death and decay, and cease from sin! Think of the commandments, hate not your neighbor; of the Most High's covenant, and overlook faults (Sir.28:1-7).

Apparently Paul did not intend his teachings to be applied to those in authority within society. They had the office to administer justice according to the just laws of the land, which guided them in the administration of their office. Paul wrote:

For the ruler is God's servant to work for your good. Only if you do wrong ought you to be afraid. It is not without purpose that the ruler carries the sword; he is God's servant, to inflict his avenging wrath upon the wrongdoer (Rom.13:4).

The Old Testament verifies that God uses one nation at certain times "to inflict his avenging wrath upon the wrongdoer."

The author of Hebrews wrote:

We know who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay," and "The Lord will judge his people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb.10:30-31).

The prophets of the Old Testament assured people that God would personally deal with those who afflicted the People of God. Deuteronomy says: *“For he avenges the blood of his servants” (Dt.32:43b)*. Jeremiah wrote: *“But now, thus says the Lord: Surely I will defend your cause, I will avenge you” (Jer.51:36)*. In Joel: *“I will avenge their blood, and not leave it unpunished” (Jl.4:21)*. Isaiah said:

For the Lord has a day of vengeance (34:8). He put on justice as his breastplate, salvation, as the helmet on his head; He clothed himself with garments of vengeance, wrapped himself in a mantle of zeal. He repays his enemies their deserts, and requites his foes with wrath (Is.59:17-18).

The prophet Nahum confirmed:

The Lord brings vengeance on his adversaries, and lays up wrath for his enemies; The Lord is slow to anger, yet great in power, and the Lord never leaves the guilty unpunished (Na.1:2-3).

When the Scriptures encourage us to leave vengeance to the Lord and for us to love our enemies, it does not simultaneously encourage moral indifference to evil or Christian stoicism in the face of it. In Ezekiel, the angel was told to mark those *“who moan and groan over all the abominations that are practiced” (Ez.9:4)*. It was written of Jesus, *“You have loved justice and hated wickedness” (Heb.1:9)*. The disciples of Jesus hunger and thirst for justice. Paul says one should have an *“ardent desire to restore the balance of Justice!” (2Cor.7:11)*. Jesus encouraged His disciples to pray for justice and not to lose heart in the face of injustice: *“Will not God then do justice to them who call out to him day and night? Will he delay long over his chosen, do you suppose? I tell you, he will give them swift justice (Lk.18:7-8).*

From the words of Jesus to Saul on the road to Damascus, we know Jesus identifies completely with His Church. Since the Church exists because of Christ, it exists in Christ and for Christ. It flows from this that Jesus considers anything that anyone suffered as a Christian in His Name, as suffered by Him--as inflicted against Him. To the persecutor of the Church, He said: *“Saul, Saul, Why do you persecute me?” ‘Who are you, sir?’ he asked. The voice answered, ‘I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting’” (Acts 9:4-5).*

While on earth, Jesus taught: *“I solemnly assure you, he who accepts anyone I send accepts me, and in accepting me, accepts him who sent me” (Jn.13:20). “He who hears you, hears me” (Lk.10:16a).* It likewise follows: *“He who rejects you rejects me. And he who rejects me, rejects him who sent me” (Lk.10:16b).*

From the view of heaven, the rejection of the Church is a rejection of God and His salvation. The persecution of the Church symbolizes and gives concrete expression to the world’s rejection of God. It is for this reason that God allies Himself with the People of God and avenges Himself against those who seek to destroy them.

DIVINE VENGEANCE

In the narrative of the Flood, the Old Testament records the account of God’s vengeance upon the entire earth for its universal condition of rebellion. In retribution, all life on earth was destroyed, but a seed of life remained. God’s vengeance against a segment of mankind is depicted in the account of ten plagues permitted to fall upon Egypt for its refusal to permit the Hebrew People to go forth from slavery and from Egypt. John sees a parallel between what the Roman Empire inflicts upon the Christians and what the Egyptians inflicted upon the Jewish People. He sees in God’s afflictions upon the Egyptians, symbols of the afflictions now to fall upon the enemies of the Church. What follows in the Apocalypse dramatically illustrates that the prayers of the saints on earth for God to *“judge our cause and avenge our blood among the inhabitants of the earth” (Rv.6:10)* are being heard.

Already God’s vengeance against the ungodly has been inaugurated in the form of wars, famine, pestilence and other natural disasters--none of which occurs without the consent of God. However, the saints must *“be patient a little while longer”* before God’s vengeance is consummated on earth, completely vindicating His Church. This time is being used to complete the number of the elect.

The earth itself has become an altar upon which the lives of God’s People have been sacrificed: their blood has flowed into the earth. There, *“from under the altar,”* their blood calls for vengeance to be inflicted upon the earth that slaughtered them and drank up their blood. This blood can never be silenced. Until completely avenged and vindicated, it cries out night and day. John continues to manifest the chastisement coming upon the earth because of these prayers of the martyrs. These chastisements are presented in three

series of seven: the seals, the trumpets and the bowls. As mentioned, all three series tell and retell the same story, with greater intensity and further clarification. By way of illustration, we could say that the presentations under the seals could be compared to the negative of a picture. The trumpets give us the print of this negative in black and white, and the bowls produce the same print but in living color.

The opening of the sixth seal demonstrated cosmic catastrophes and concluded with *“the great day of their vengeance has come. Who can withstand it?”* (Rv.6:17). That question was answered in Chapter Seven--the people who will survive *“the great period of trial”* are those who *“have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”* (Rv.7:14). Those persons were sealed as *“the servants of God.”* We read in the Apocalypse:

When the Lamb broke open the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. Then, as I watched, the seven angels who minister in God’s presence were given seven trumpets.

Another angel came in holding a censer of gold. He took his place at the altar of incense and was given large amounts of incense to deposit on the altar of gold in front of the throne, together with the prayers of all God’s holy ones. From the angel’s hand the smoke of the incense went up before God, and with it the prayers of God’s people. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with live coals from the altar, and hurled it down to the earth. Peals of thunder and flashes of lightning followed, and the earth trembled (Rv.8:1-5).

THE SEVENTH SEAL

The opening of the seventh seal is followed by a *“silence in heaven for about half an hour.”* This heavenly silence has been interpreted to symbolize the awe and amazement in heaven over what must come to be. The revelation is of such a nature as to be ineffable--unutterable. It leaves heaven speechless and in silent contemplation. We read in Zechariah: *“Silence, all mankind, in the presence of the Lord! for he stirs forth from his holy dwelling”* (2:17). According to Zephaniah, there would be silence in the Presence of God when the Day of the Lord would arrive. We read:

Silence in the presence of the Lord God! for near is the day of the Lord. Yes, the Lord has prepared a slaughter feast,... I will punish the princes, and the king’s sons, and all that dress in foreign

apparel... Near is the great day of the Lord, near and very swiftly coming. Hark, the day of the Lord! bitter, then, the warrior's cry. A day of wrath is that day, a day of anguish and distress, a day of destruction and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of thick black clouds, a day of trumpet blasts and battle alarm against fortified cities, against battlements on high... because they have sinned against the Lord; and their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their brains like dung. Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to save them on the day of the Lord's wrath, when in the fire of his jealousy all the earth shall be consumed. For he shall make an end, yes, a sudden end, of all who live on the earth (Zep.1:7-8,14-16,17b-18).

The silence in heaven certainly recalls Zephaniah's words, and this may well be the intention of the Seer. Another interpretation has been that this silence followed a scene of universal chaos. It recalls the time before Genesis when *"the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters"* (Gn.1:2).

The silence represents the primeval silence prior to creation. It is the interval between the "uncreating" of the old world and the "recreating" of a new world. Some see in the silence a reflection of the Jewish belief that the heavenly chorus only sang at night and remained silent in the day so heaven could hear the prayers of Israel. The silence is interpreted as a time for heaven to listen to the prayers of the saints from the earth--to hear their cries. The silence may well be interpreted as the period of patience that *"little while longer until the quota was filled of their fellow servants and brothers to be slain."* It could be interpreted as the time needed to fulfill the command of the angel: *"Do no harm to the land or the sea or the trees until we imprint this seal on the foreheads of the servants of God"* (Rv.7:3). At any rate it is a limited period followed by renewed heavenly activity.

The scene following the silence reflects the temple worship service. The altar of gold and the previous reference to the blood of the Lamb certainly evokes an image of the morning and evening service in the temple. We find this description of the altar of incense in Exodus:

For burning incense you shall make an altar of acacia wood, with a square surface, a cubit long, a cubit wide, and two cubits high, with horns that spring directly from it...its walls on all four sides, and its

horns you shall plate with pure gold. Put a gold molding around it... This altar you are to place in front of the veil that hangs before the ark of the commandments where I will meet you.

On it Aaron shall burn fragrant incense. Morning after morning, when he prepares the lamps, and again in the evening twilight, when he lights the lamps, he shall burn incense. Throughout your generations this shall be the established incense offering before the Lord... Once a year Aaron shall perform the atonement rite on its horns. Throughout your generations this atonement is to be made once a year with the blood of the atoning sin offering. This altar is most sacred to the Lord (Ex.30:1-3,6-8,10).

In the temple worship, the incense was burned after the lamb had been immolated but before being placed on the altar of holocausts at the morning sacrifice. In the evening, the offering of the incense came after the immolated lamb had been placed on the altar of holocaust. During the offering of the incense, the celebrating priest and two assistants entered into the Holy Place. One assistant priest carried burning coals in a brazier, taken from the altar of the holocausts. He placed the brazier on the altar of incense and departed; the celebrant priest took incense from a container which he handed to his assistant priest. Upon the burning coals, the priest poured the incense. Then the celebrant inclined profoundly before the Holy of Holies and slowly backed away from the altar and out of the Holy Place. As the incense burned, the priest offered prayers and the Levites chanted Psalm 150. As they chanted, trumpets sounded to call the people to join in prayer:

Praise the Lord in his sanctuary, praise him in the firmament of his strength. Praise him for his mighty deeds, praise him for his sovereign majesty. Praise him with the blast of the trumpet, praise him with lyre and harp (Ps.150:1-3).

The Seer mentions seven angels who minister in God's presence; they were given seven trumpets. Jewish tradition identifies these seven angels as *Uriel* (Fire of God), *Raphael* (God has healed), *Raguel* (Friend of God), *Michael* (Who is like God), *Sariel* (Prince of God), *Gabriel* (God is my strength), and *Remiel* (Thunder of Height of God). These seven are said to stand before the throne. They are the Angels of Presence; they stand ready to execute the Will of God. Through these ministers, God exerts His Will in the universe. They are the Angels of Theophany--they manifest God. Several references to angels are made in the Scriptures, and three are named:

--An angel appeared to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, while he offered incense in the Holy Place. The angel said, *“I am Gabriel, who stand in attendance before God, I was sent to speak to you” (Lk.1:19).*

--We read in Tobit that the angel identified himself as *“...Raphael, one of the seven angels who enter and serve before the Glory of the Lord...when I came to you it was not out of any favor on my part, but because it was God’s will” (Tb.12:15,18).*

--In Daniel, Michael is spoken of as a defender of God’s people: *“Michael, one of the chief princes...Michael, your prince, standing as a reinforcement and a bulwark” (Dn.10:13b,21b).*

--We are told that in a time unsurpassed in distress: *“There shall arise Michael, the great prince, guardian of your people” (Dn.12:1a).*

--The belief existed among the People of God that they would overcome their enemies because God and His angels would fight with them. Yahweh promised: *“I will send an angel before you to the land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex.33:2-3).*

--We read in 2 Chronicles, *“Then the Lord sent an angel, who destroyed every valiant warrior, leader and commander in the camp of the Assyrian king, so that he had to return shamefaced to his own country” (2Chr.32:21).*

--We are told in the Apocalypse that an angel--other than the seven--took his place before the golden altar of incense that stood before the throne, and there he offered incense to God. The incense symbolized prayer. We are told that a large amount of incense was offered *“together with the prayers of all God’s holy ones” (Rv.8:3).*

--It is stated very clearly that *“from the angel’s hand the smoke of incense went up before God, and with it the prayers of God’s people” (Rv.8:4).* The angel acts as a mediator before the throne upon which is also seated the Lamb. The angel purifies the prayers of the saints and makes them worthy of acceptance before God. If the Scriptures verify that an angel acts in this capacity, is it so foreign for the Church to believe that the Virgin Mary, whom the angels acknowledged to be *“O highly favored daughter! The Lord is with you” (Lk.1:28),* could also act in this capacity? She who is the Mother of the Church and the perfect example of a Christian?

--Incense rising up before the throne symbolizes God's acceptance of these prayers--the prayers of the People. We are told, "*Then the angel took the censer, filled it with live coals from the altar, and hurled it down to the earth*" (Rv.8:5).

Ezekiel records seeing in a vision a man-like being who is commanded, "*Go within the wheel work under the cherubim: fill both your hands with burning coals from among the cherubim, then scatter them over the city*" (Ez.10:2).

In Ezekiel's vision, this action represents the glory of God departing the city of Jerusalem, which will not be destroyed. Likewise, the vision in the Apocalypse now symbolizes that the Glory of God departs from the earth, which will ultimately be destroyed. Those live coals represent the Wrath of God falling upon the earth in response to the prayers of the saints. It recalls the fire and brimstone that once rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah. In that incident Lot was saved because of his relationship with Abraham, and Abraham's prayers. Even today, on the plains where it is believed Sodom and Gomorrah stood, one finds a lava-like rock all over the area. Apparently, the only explanation for this kind of stone to be found in that region would be that a meteorite had struck the area.

That God will be present in the catastrophes falling upon the earth is intimated in the words: "*Peals of thunder and flashes of lightning followed, and the earth trembled*" (Rv.8:5b). It recalls the theophany upon Mt. Sinai:

On the morning of the third day there were peals of thunder and lightning, and a heavy cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled... Mount Sinai was all wrapped in smoke, for the Lord came down upon it in fire. The smoke rose from it as though from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. The trumpet blast grew louder and louder, while Moses was speaking and God answering him with thunder (Ex.19:16,18-19).

One is left with the impression of a volcanic eruption. However, in the Apocalyptic scene God comes not to establish a covenant, but to seek vengeance "*among the inhabitants of the earth*" for the blood of the martyrs spilt on the earth.

THE FOUR TRUMPETS

The seven angels will now signal this coming wrath with their seven trumpets. We read:

The seven angels with the seven trumpets made ready to blow them. When the first angel blew his trumpet, there came hail and then fire mixed with blood, which was hurled down to the earth. A third of the land was scorched, along with a third of the trees and every green plant.

When the second angel blew his trumpet, something like a huge mountain all in flames was cast into the sea. A third of the sea turned to blood, a third of the creatures living in the sea died, and a third of the ships were wrecked.

When the third angel blew his trumpet, a huge star burning like a torch crashed down from the sky. It fell on a third of the rivers and the springs. The star's name was "Wormwood" because a third part of the water turned to wormwood. Many people died from this polluted water. When the fourth angel blew his trumpet a third of the sun, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars were hit hard enough to be plunged into darkness. The day lost a third of its light, as did the night (Rv.8:6-12).

The angels sound the trumpets that herald the coming of God's Wrath upon the face of the earth. It is assumed that God is the agent of the disasters to occur. Although trumpets were used in liturgical services, they were earlier used to signal alarm and to call people together. Zephaniah spoke of the day of Wrath as "*a day of trumpet blasts and battle alarm*" (Zep.1:16). In Zechariah, the trumpet announces the appearance of the Lord: "*The Lord God shall sound the trumpet, and come in a storm from the south*" (Zec.9:14).

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: "*The Lord himself will come down from heaven at the word of command, at the sound of the archangel's voice and God's trumpet*" (1Thes.4:16). The sounding of the trumpets signifies the coming of God, His judgment, His Wrath upon the inhabitants of the earth. The psalmist writes, "*The earth swayed and quaked; the foundations of the mountains trembled and shook when his wrath flared up*" (Ps.18:8). The first four trumpets herald the coming disasters in nature that will affect the land, seas, fresh water and sky. When it speaks of a third being destroyed, the number is symbolic, and should be interpreted to mean that God has limited the

destruction that is to occur. These disasters in nature, that men consider natural occurrences, are presented as signs from God to serve mankind a warning and an invitation to repent, for they are but the Prelude to the End. In a word, mankind walks above a seething volcano. However, even when God withdraws His mercy and executes chastisement, the punishment can still be medicinal and curative.

The plagues to fall directly strike nature--the source of man's life. Mankind, by its idolatrous life, has contaminated these sources. Human sin corrupts nature. The plagues that fell upon Egypt serve as a pattern for this section of the Apocalypse. The first trumpet unleashes hail and fire mixed with blood. This reflects the seventh plague suffered by the Egyptians when God sent hail mixed with peals of thunder and lightning. We read in Exodus:

The Lord sent forth hail and peals of thunder. Lightning flashed toward the earth, and the Lord rained down hail upon the land of Egypt; and lightning constantly flashed through the hail, such fierce hail as had never been seen in the land since Egypt became a nation (Ex.9:23-24).

To his description, John added "*blood.*" This may signify that this and the plagues to follow represent the blood of the martyrs coming down upon the heads of their persecutors. This image may have been stimulated by a rare phenomenon that can occur in the Mediterranean area. At times, the sandstorms in the Sahara are so intense that a fine red sand is carried high up into the air where it mixes with rain; the rain, then, has an appearance of blood when it falls upon the earth.

We read in Joshua that in the battle of Gibeon and Joshua against the Amorites, God "*hurled great stones from the sky above them all the way to Azekah, killing many. More died from these hailstones than the Israelites slew with the sword*" (Jos.10:11). Job speaks of snow and hail reserved for battle: "*Have you entered the storehouse of the snow, and seen the treasury of the hail which I have reserved for times of stress, for the days of war and of battle?*" (Job 38:22). Natural afflictions will come that will destroy vegetation on the earth.

The second trumpet releases a force causing the contamination of the sea: something like a huge mountain is cast into the sea. This reflects the first plague suffered by the Egyptians when the Nile was turned to blood and "*the fish in the river died, and the river itself became so polluted that the Egyptians*

could not drink its water” (Ex.7:21).

Many today could see this plague occurring as the greed of man pollutes the lakes, streams, rivers and oceans to such a degree that much fresh water and marine life have been destroyed. Factories, like volcanoes, pour forth their polluting streams. The description of the disaster occurring at the second trumpet may have been stimulated by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 9 A.D., which desolated the Bay of Naples. It grimly calls the modern scene of Mt. St. Helens, in the State of Washington, exploding on May 18, 1980, with a blast equal to 500 times the force of the Hiroshima bomb. Hot ash and debris sped at 200 miles an hour to demolish everything within a 15 mile arc to the North. It convulsed away 1,300 feet of its stature and half a cubic mile of its volume. It left sixty people dead and cut a destructive path across 212 square miles of forests, lakes, and rivers, killing millions of fish and animals.

In Jeremiah, Yahweh promised to destroy Babylon for *“all the evil they did to Zion.”* The Lord said, *“Beware! I am against you, destroying mountain, destroyer of the entire earth... I will stretch forth my hand against you, roll you down over the cliffs, and make you a burnt mountain”* (See Jer.51:24-25). The huge mountain all aflame, falling into the sea, may symbolize the fall of the Roman Empire--the new Babylon.

The third trumpet brought down to earth a huge star called “Wormwood” that fell to earth like a burning torch. It fell upon one third of the rivers and streams, polluting them and causing many to die from pollution. Wormwood (*apsinthos*) is a plant of the genus of Artemisia. The taste of it is bitter, but its name symbolizes more than bitterness of taste in the Scriptures; it denotes the bitter spirit of idolatry. We read in Deuteronomy:

Let there be, then, no man or woman... who would now turn away their hearts from the Lord, our God, to go and serve these pagan gods! Let there be no root that would bear such poison and wormwood among you! (Dt.29:17).

The prophet Amos wrote: *“Woe to those who turn judgment to wormwood and cast justice to the ground! (Am.5:7).”* Wormwood is a spirit that perverts righteousness and leaves the bitterness of injustice. The Lord said to Jeremiah that He would give the idolatrous Jews *“wormwood to eat and poison to drink”* (Jer.9:14). He promised the same to false prophets.

Wormwood is a spirit of idolatry that corrupts the souls of people and leads them to divine chastisement and death. It represents an aspect of Satan--an evil spiritual leaven that permeates the spirits of men, contaminating the living springs of truth, and poisoning the life-giving waters of pure doctrine and religious truth with deadly heresies, symbolized by the Nicolaitans and the Jezebels in the Christian Communities. Speaking of Wormwood's arrival as a shooting star probably intends to indicate its evil force. In ancient times, falling stars were considered ill omens. In the Epistle of Jude, false teachers are referred to as *"wild ocean waves, splashing their shameless deeds abroad like foam, or shooting stars for whom the thick gloom of darkness has been reserved forever"* (Jude 1:13).

Stars, like angelic beings, were likewise believed to be objects of God's judgment, and could be removed to the nether world. In the Book of Enoch, the Seer saw *"seven stars like great burning mountains"* that were placed in prison because they transgressed God's commandment of not coming forth at their appointed time. Enoch saw *"seven stars bound together like great mountains and burning with fire."* The falling stars represented angelic beings or powerful rulers on earth who fell in disgrace because of their pride and arrogance. Isaiah wrote:

How have you fallen from the heavens, O morning star, son of the dawn! How are you cut down to the ground, you who mowed down the nations! You said in your heart: "I will scale the heavens: Above the stars of God I will set up my throne: I will take my seat on the Mount of Assembly in the recesses of the North. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds: I will be like the Most High!" Yet down to the nether world you go to the recesses of the pit! (Is.14:12-15)

For John, "Wormwood" may symbolize the Emperor Domitian--the New Star of the empire--who poisoned the Empire with his spirit of idolatry. When the fourth trumpet is blown, we are told that the world loses a third of its light. The world grows dark. This symbolizes the encroachment of the power of darkness upon the earth. It recalls the darkness that settled over Egypt. The darkness itself causes no physical harm, but it troubles the soul with fear and expectation of what is to come. The darkness signifies the impenitence of Pharaoh in the face of all the signs and warnings given by God. The darkening of the heavens is a prelude of the cosmic disturbance to come. Amos writes:

Woe to those who yearn for the day of the Lord! What will this day of the Lord mean for you? Darkness and not light! ...gloom without any brightness?... On that day, says the Lord God, I will make the sun set at midday and cover the earth with darkness in broad daylight (Am.5:18,20;8:9).

EAGLE OF WOES

The Apocalypse makes clear the universal effect of sin; it corrupts the entire natural order. There is a close interrelationship between all of creation. The evil deeds of mankind contaminate the entire natural order and bring it under divine chastisement. Sin causes cosmic disturbances in the universe; it interrupts the delicate balance of nature.

The plagues to come will not directly and personally affect mankind. The Seer beholds in vision a solitary bird flying at high noon, at its very zenith. It is an eagle or a vulture. The bird replaces the angelic messenger for symbolic purposes. It is an unclean bird--a bird of prey. It feasts upon the bodies of those who fall in battle. The bird is an ill omen and it flies high for all to see and it calls shrilly for all to hear. In the Old Testament the bird could symbolize an invading army--the symbol of the eagle went before the Roman Army. We read in Deuteronomy:

The Lord will raise up against you a nation from afar, from the end of the earth, that swoops down like an eagle, a nation whose tongue you do not understand, a nation of stern visage, that shows neither respect for the aged nor pity for the young (Dt.28:49-50).

Jeremiah writes: *“For thus says the Lord: ‘Behold, like an eagle he soars, spreads his wings over Moab... Moab shall be destroyed, no more a people, because he boasted against the Lord’” (Jer.48:40,42).*

We read in the Apocalypse: *“As my vision continued, I heard an eagle flying in midheaven cry out in a loud voice, ‘Woe, woe, and again woe to the inhabitants of earth from the rest of the trumpet blasts that the three angels are about to blow!’” (Rv.8:13).*

To understand the scene that follows the blowing of the fifth trumpet--the first woe--we need to know a bit more about the “spiritual geography” of the time and the teachings on angels.

There was an ancient Jewish legend, reflected in Genesis and Jude, saying that a whole order of angels left heaven, came down to earth and corrupted human beings. The loyal angels of God subdued these rebellious spirits and imprisoned them in a pit within the abyss, and evil was temporarily controlled on earth. The ancients believed there was only one avenue out of the abyss: through a long shaft that passed through the earth. The opening into this shaft remained closed. While closed, these spiritual forces of evil could not affect life on earth. In the vision now described, the door to the Abyss is opened by an angel. We read:

Then the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fall from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the abyss; he opened it and smoke poured out of the shaft like smoke from an enormous furnace. The sun and the air were darkened by the smoke from the shaft. Out of the smoke, onto the land, came locusts as powerful as scorpions in their sting. The locusts were commanded to do no harm to the grass in the land or to any plant or tree but only to those men who had not the seal of God on their foreheads. The locusts were not allowed to kill them but only to torture them for five months; the pain they inflicted was like that of a scorpion's sting. During that time these men will seek death but will not find it; they will yearn to die but death will escape them.

In appearance the locusts were like horses equipped for battle. On their heads they wore something like gold crowns; their faces were like men's faces but they had hair like women's hair. Their teeth were the teeth of lions, their chests like iron breastplates. Their wings made a sound like the roar of many chariots and horses charging into battle. They had tails with stingers like scorpions; in their tails was enough venom to harm men for five months. Acting as their king was the angel in charge of the abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon and in Greek Apollyon (Rv.9:1-11).

At the sounding of the fifth trumpet, an angel opens the door from the Abyss. Since a star falling from heaven could also imply an angel coming down to the earth, the angel may not necessarily be an evil force but one of the seven (*Uriel*) releasing the evil spirits on the earth as a divine punishment. The opening of the door releases the evil spirits. They are symbolized as an invading army of locusts. They will inflict only spiritual pain upon people, and only upon those not marked with the sign of the Lord. The torment they bring destroys joy of life, and makes men long for death. These venomous spirits

torment their victims, but there is no death they can escape to--Death is their kingdom!

The locusts recall the eighth plague inflicted upon the Egyptians. This again emphasizes divine chastisement. An invading army of locusts and their destructive force upon nature serve as a perfect illustration of the spiritual devastation caused by evil spirits upon this earth. The locust has a life span of about five months from larva to death. They incubate in the desert and, when hatched, swarm and travel in a column as much as a hundred feet deep and as wide as four miles. A cloud of locusts can blot out the sun; their destructive ability defies imagination. They swoop down on all living vegetation like hungry, empty vacuum cleaners, and when they depart they leave a scorched earth; not a blade of grass nor a leaf remains--even the bark of the trees is devoured. When such a plague of locusts struck Algiers in 1866, over 200,000 people died from the resulting famine.

The prophet Joel described a plague of locusts as an invading army and recognized them to be a divine chastisement upon Israel. They ravaged Judah in 400 B.C. Joel wrote:

Let all who dwell in the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming; Yes, it is near, a day of darkness and of gloom, a day of clouds and somberness!... Before them a fire devours, and after them a flame enkindles... Their appearance is that of horses; like steeds they run. As with the rumble of chariots they leap on the mountaintops; as with the crackling of a fiery flame devouring stubble; like a mighty people arrayed for battle. Before them peoples are in torment, every face glances... Before them the earth trembles, the heavens shake; the sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withhold their brightness (Jl.2:1-6,10).

The intellectual and spiritual quality of these creatures in the Apocalypse is symbolized by "*their faces were like men's faces.*" Their long hair recalls the Parthians who appear again in the next vision. Meremiah spoke of the army of locusts as being without a leader. They are led only by the hunger of their appetites. However, this band of locusts is not leaderless. It is led by their King Abaddon or Apollyon. In Hebrew *Abaddon* means "destruction or ruin," and in Greek *Apollyon* means "destroyer." Both Nero and Domitian considered themselves to be descendants of Apollos. A pun may be intended to imply the destructive characters of these two emperors. Abaddon, king of the

Abyss, is Satan. Jesus Himself identified Satan as an intrinsic liar and murderer. He said:

He brought death to man from the beginning, and has never based himself on truth; the truth is not in him. Lying speech is his native tongue; he is a liar and the father of lies (Jn.8:44).

When John speaks of these spirits being active for five months, he indicates that their time on earth is limited. Their powers will be curtailed. This could have been the result of the spread of the Gospel that finally led to conversion of the Roman world. Historically, the fall of Rome came through its internal moral decay, and from the external attacks of barbarian forces.

THE SECOND WOE

The second woe symbolizes the coming of the barbarian invasions. We read in the Apocalypse:

The first woe is past, but beware! There are two more to come. Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice coming from between the horns of the altar of gold in God's presence. It said to the sixth angel, who was still holding his trumpet, "Release the four angels who are tied up on the banks of the great river Euphrates!" So the four angels were released; this was precisely the hour, the day, the month, and the year for which they had been prepared, to kill a third of mankind. Their cavalry troops, whose count I heard, were two hundred million in number--a number I heard myself. Now, in my vision, this is how I saw the horses and their riders. The breastplates they wore were fiery red, deep blue, and pale yellow. The horses' heads were like heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire and sulphur and smoke. By these three plagues--the smoke and sulphur and fire which shot out of their mouths--a third of mankind was slain. The deadly power of the horses was not only in their mouths but in their tails; for their tails were like snakes with heads poised to strike (Rv.9:12-19).

In the Near East, composite pictures of men and horses, men and scorpions, men and ants, etc., were very popular. Such imaginative presentations of people and events were common in John's world. Every nation was believed to have its protective angel, who represented the spirit of the nation. The four

angels could represent four nations who are not being permitted by God to inflict war on mankind.

In John's time, the hordes beyond the Euphrates would be the Parthians. The reference to a voice coming from between the horns of the altar of gold in God's presence re-emphasizes that what occurs flows from the Will of God, and as a result of the prayers of the saints. An innumerable army--200,000,000--comes forth, not only with human powers, but with superhuman powers that indicate the evil spiritual forces motivating them. The Book of Enoch speaks of the Parthians being sent against the Holy Land, and Esdras writes: *"Let these four kings be loosed, that are bound by the great River Euphrates, who shall destroy one third of mankind."*

As mentioned previously, the Parthians were cavalrymen who rode white chargers into battle. They were mighty warriors with the bow. They had long flowing hair and rode their horses at great speed while being able to shoot with great power and accuracy over their heads. The Seer symbolizes this ability by the scorpion-like ability of horses' tails—*"like snakes with heads poised to strike."* As one looks at these last two visions, the details have been shooting back and forth. The evil spirits have a Parthian-like appearance, that assume diabolical characteristics: *"The breastplates they wore were fiery red, deep blue, and pale yellow. The horses' heads were like heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire and sulphur and smoke by which a third of mankind was slain."*

We have here a repetition of the three scourges that came with the horsemen: sword, famine, and pestilence. The description painted is one of hellish forces that descend upon mankind as divine chastisement. The last chapters of Ezekiel allude to an inexhaustible reservoir of evil beyond the confines of the civilized world, which was represented for the then known world by the land that lay beyond the Euphrates River.

The picture of the Parthians lingers but a moment on John's canvas. They symbolize the world forces of evil, always at the disposal of Satan to become instruments of hell on earth. The forces of evil are contained by God, but there will come a day when the bridle will be dropped and evil will be given free rein.

John summarizes the effects these divine chastisements had upon mankind. He writes:

That part of mankind which escaped the plagues did not repent of the idols they had made. They did not give up the worship of demons, or of gods made from gold and silver, from bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk. Neither did they repent of their murders or their sorcery, their fornication or their thefts (Rv.9:20-21).

Temporary changes can be produced through emotional stimulation, through fear and anger, but permanent change lies at the heart of a person, deep beneath the surface of being where willed decisions are made. Freedom of will is the essence of a human being: it is a power of the spirit. Even though the will can be moved and affected by biological and psychological forces, it remains essentially distinct from them--it can rise above them, and persist on a chosen course despite emotional disturbances that may rage within the surface of one's being. We are not only *free* to choose good or evil, we *do* choose them. For this reason, Moses said to Israel:

I call heaven and earth today to witness against you: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the Lord, your God, heeding his voice, and holding fast to him (Dt.30:19-20).

The Lord said, in Jeremiah:

Urgently and constantly I warned your fathers to obey my voice, from the day I brought them up out of the land of Egypt even to this day. But they did not listen or give ear. Each one followed the hardness of his evil heart, till I brought upon them all the threats of this covenant which they had failed to observe as I commanded them (Jer.11:7-8).

The Lord speaks of the Jew as “*walking in the hardness of his evil heart instead of listening to me*” (Jer.16-12). We read in Psalm 81:

But my people heard not my voice, and Israel obeyed me not; So I gave them up to the hardness of their hearts; they walked according to their own counsels (Ps.81:12-13).

Job tells us: “*Behold God rejects the obstinate in heart (Jb.36:5)*. Mark tells us that, at the silence of the Pharisees, Jesus “*looked around at them with anger,*

for he was deeply grieved that they had closed their minds against him” (Mk.3:5).

In spite of all the chastisements that fell upon Egypt, we are told on ten occasions that Pharaoh remained obstinate. His stubbornness endured until the end, resulting in the destruction of his entire army. As with the Egyptians, the divine chastisements within this world resulted only in the hardness of hearts against God.

Mankind remained adamant in evil, despite the warnings and chastisements for sins. Hardness of heart results in permanent impenitence. There is only one answer for this condition, and we read it in the Gospel of John: “...men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were wicked” (Jn.3:19). Unrepentant, mankind leaves the justice of God only one course of action: abandonment to such a degree that the forces of Abaddon produce full destruction. The Apocalypse says that mankind will not “give up the worship of demons” (Rv.9:20). That which is not God, if worshipped, becomes a demonic power. As the last chapters of the Apocalypse indicate, all who fall under such powers and will not repent of their murders, sorcery, fornication or thefts, are destined for the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is Second Death!

In closing, it is interesting to note that the Euphrates--the river named in the Apocalypse--runs 1700 miles long from its source in Northern Turkey down to the Persian Sea. Beyond the Euphrates lies modern Parthia--Iran and Afghanistan; beyond them lies Russia and China. These facts, coupled with the revelations in the Apocalypse, fire the imaginations of many today. Here they see the source of the 200,000,000 who will one day cross the Euphrates--whose breastplates will be fiery red, deep blue and pale yellow--and proceed to Armageddon for the final war of the Kingdoms!

CHAPTER 9

THE TWO WITNESSES

INTRODUCTION

The Apocalypse confirms that sin destroys the beauty and harmony of the universe. Mankind fails to acknowledge its personal responsibility for the world's chaos. Like a brute beast it proceeds blindly along a path of cosmic destruction. The Apocalypse presents the bitter fruits of sinful human behavior as divinely willed chastisements of sinful people on earth. The chastisement does not produce repentance; instead it further hardens hearts against the divine universal purpose. The writer of the Apocalypse sadly laments, "*They did not give up the worship of demons*" (Rv.9:20). The human heart is therefore given over to the worship of the created rather than the Non-Created. This results in moral chaos concretized by unrepentant murderers, sorcerers, fornicators, thieves, etc. The Apocalypse clearly echoes the teaching of Paul concerning a world completely alienated from its Creator. Paul wrote in Romans:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against the irreligious and perverse spirit of men who, in this perversity of theirs, hinder the truth... In consequence, God delivered them up in their lusts to unclean practices...these men who exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator... They did not see fit to acknowledge God, so God delivered them up to their own depraved sense to do what is unseemly. They are filled with every kind of wickedness... They know God's just decree that all who do such things deserve death~ yet they not only do them but approve them in others (Rom.1:18,24-25,28-29,32).

This is the behavior that brings the world not only to moral but to physical chaos. The Apocalypse intimates that the harmony of the universe depends upon the harmony of created beings with the Non-Created Creator. The author indicates that human immorality opens the world to inhuman forces of evil--being purely spiritual and fully evil. Their active presence on earth

accounts for the magnitude of verbal and physical evil that occurs. The Apocalypse likewise agrees with Paul that only outside heavenly intervention can save the world. It has reached a state of affairs that demands divine deliverance. As one author observed, "The youth of the world has passed--the strength of creation already exhausted." Like the two dirty old men in Daniel, who connived against the virtuous Susanna, it could be said of the world, "*How you have grown evil with age!*" (See Dn.13:52b).

THE SMALL SCROLL

The Apocalypse proceeds to unfold the mystery of salvation. We saw that between the breaking of the sixth and seventh seal there was an interlude in which the Seer presented two consoling visions for the Church. The same now follows between the blowing of the sixth and seventh trumpet. These visions are also for the comfort and consolation of the Church. The author now relates:

Then I saw another mighty angel come down from heaven wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow about his head; his face shone like the sun and his legs like pillars of fire. In his hand he held a little scroll which had been opened. He placed his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, and then gave a loud cry like the roar of a lion. When he cried out, the seven thunders raised their voices too. I was about to start writing when the seven thunders spoke, but I heard a voice from heaven say, "Seal up what the seven thunders have spoken and do not write it down!" Then the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven and took an oath by the One who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and earth and sea along with everything in them: "There shall be no more delay. When the time comes for the seventh angel to blow his trumpet, the mysterious plan of God, which he announced to his servants and prophets, shall be accomplished in full" (Rv.10:1-7).

The Seer is back on the island of Patmos with his feet upon the ground. In this vision, heaven is descending to the earth. Salvation does not come by mankind ascending to God, but by God descending to mankind. Salvation comes through the Word being made Flesh! The Apocalypse rarely (only three times) mentions a "mighty angel." The identity of this angel is much discussed. The heavenly scene described is in contrast with the chaos

previously pictured upon the earth. Many identify the mighty angel as Gabriel because of the description found in Daniel:

The man clothed in linen (10:5), who was upstream, lifted his right and left hands to heaven; and I heard him swear by him who lives forever that it should be for a year, two years, a half-year; and that, when the power of the destroyer of the holy people was brought to an end, all these things should end (Dn.10:7).

As we can see from his own words in the Gospel, Gabriel is the angel who brings the good news. *“I am Gabriel, who stands in attendance before God. I was sent to speak to you and bring you this good news” (Lk.1:19)*. Because of the surrounding circumstances of this vision—*“wrapped in a cloud, a rainbow about the head, a face shone like the sun, a voice like thunder and feet of fire”*--others see this as a manifestation of the “Angel of Yahweh,” a divine theophany, or as the “Prince of Light.” Nevertheless, the vision manifests directly or through an angelic intermediary that God the Creator still directs the course of the universe despite the chaos previously revealed.

The angel holds a little scroll in his hand. This is in contrast with the large sealed scroll that only Christ would open; which only He could execute upon this earth. This small opened scroll signifies something that is open in order to be fulfilled upon this earth by someone other than Christ. It contains a fragment of God’s great purpose--in truth it is the part the Church must play in the salvation of the world.

The angel’s position with one foot upon the sea and the other upon the earth signifies God’s dominion over creation. A “foot” represents the power of a person, and that which is under a foot symbolizes submission to the power of the person. The position of the angel also symbolizes the universal scope of the revelation. It is ultimately destined for the entire world. The vision speaking forth as a roaring lion suggests the power, depth, and volume of the revelation to come.

The Old Testament applies this simile to Yahweh: *“The Lord will roar from Zion,”* wrote Amos (Am.1:2). Hosea relates, *“They shall follow the Lord, who roars like a lion” (Hos.11:10)*. Such a roar would be like the trumpet blast calling the attention of the world to what will be revealed. A divine revelation immediately follows, symbolized by *“the seven thunders”* speaking forth. God speaking is described as thunder, as we read in Exodus: *“The trumpet blast*

grew louder and louder, while Moses was speaking and God answering him with thunder” (Ex.19:19). We find recorded in the Gospel: “Then a voice came from the sky... When the crowd of bystanders heard the voice, they said it was thunder. Others maintained, ‘An angel was speaking to him’” (Jn.12:28-29).

Immediately following this incident, Jesus reveals, *“Now has judgment come upon this world, now will this world’s prince be driven out, and I--once I am lifted up from earth--will draw all men to myself” (Jn.12:31-32).*

Thunder indicates God’s judgment upon the earth. Within the thundering, the Seer hears a divine revelation which he was forbidden to record. This indicates the limitation of the revelation given in the Apocalypse. Some things are too ineffable to be revealed. The vision is of that nature of which Paul writes, *“words which cannot be uttered, words which no man may speak” (2Cor.12:4).* The Scriptures say that God reveals all to His holy prophets. Apparently, however, the holy prophets do not reveal all because divine prudence orders them to be silent. The angel takes a solemn oath in which he acknowledges the supremacy of God in creation and intimates that He alone brings creation to consummation. He announces, *“There shall be no more delay” (Rv.10:6).* The angel answers the question asked by the martyrs, *“How long will it be, O Master, holy and true” (Rv.6:10).* In Daniel, an angel asks, *“How long shall it be to the end of these appalling things?” (Dn.12:6).* The Lord says to Habakkuk:

Write down the vision clearly upon the tablets so that one can read it readily. For the vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint: If it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late (Hb.2:2-3).

The angel truly says there will be no more delay after the seventh trumpet sounds. Endlessly, mankind continues to produce the causes of its own destruction and torment. As we read in Mark. *“Indeed, had the Lord not shortened the period, not a person would be saved. But for the sake of those he has chosen, he has shortened the days” (Mk.13:20).*

The vision confirms that the process of salvation now begins. God mounts a counter-offensive on earth that ushers in the complete fulfillment of His promises. By the time the seventh and final trumpet sounds, *“the mysterious plan of God, which he announced to his servants the prophets, shall be accomplished in full” (Rv.10:7).* “Mysterious” means hidden. God’s hidden

plan of salvation for all mankind, which God announced (meaning, literally, which He “evangelized”) is about to be inaugurated. The Kingdom of God comes, which heralds the deliverance of God’s Servants. This mysterious plan of God will come to its fulfillment, as described in Daniel:

I heard him swear by him who lives forever that it should be for a year, two years, a half-year: and that, when the power of the destroyer of the holy people was brought to an end, all these things should end (Dn.12:7b).

When Daniel responded to this with, “My Lord, what follows this”, the answer he received is reflected in this section and in the following sections of the Apocalypse:

...the words are to be kept secret and sealed until the end of time. Many shall be refined, purified, and tested, but the wicked shall prove wicked: none of them shall have understanding, but the wise shall have it (Dn.12:9-10).

Paul speaks of the same time period in these words:

This lawless one will appear as part of the workings of Satan, accompanied by all the power and signs and wonders at the disposal of falsehood--by every seduction the wicked can devise for those destined to ruin because they have not opened their hearts to the truth in order to be saved. Therefore God is sending upon them a perverse spirit which leads them to give credence to falsehood, so that all who have not believed the truth but have delighted in evil-doing will be condemned (2Thes.2:9-12).

The measure of the time of evil given in Daniel was “one thousand three hundred and thirty-five days.” The measure of the time of evil is indefinite, but definitely now limited. The Seer writes, “Blessed is the man who has patience and perseveres until the one thousand three hundred and thirty-five days” (Dn.12:12). We now read in the Apocalypse:

Then the voice which I heard from heaven spoke to me again and said, “Go, take the open scroll from the hand of the angel standing on the sea and on the land.” I went up to the angel and said to him, “Give me the little scroll.” He said to me, “Here, take it and eat it! It

will be sour in your stomach, but in your mouth it will taste as sweet as honey.” I took the little scroll from the angel’s hand and ate it. In my mouth it tasted as sweet as honey, but when I swallowed it my stomach turned sour. Then someone said to me, “You must prophesy again for many peoples and nations, languages and kings” (Rv.10:8-11).

The open scroll remains in the hand of the angel. The angel does not give it to the Seer. However, the voice of Christ commands the Seer to go and take the scroll. The scroll represents the role the Church--the Christians--must play in the salvation of the world. It is a part made possible because of the role already fulfilled by Christ. However, this role will not be forced upon people. They are told by Christ to assume this role. He speaks only to His disciples from whom He has a right to expect obedience. Their obedient response will demonstrate the genuineness of their discipleship. Men, not angels, have been chosen to carry God’s plan to completion. Jesus assumed the role of pioneer in the work of salvation (see Heb.2:10).

We are told the little Seer goes up to the mighty angel and says, *“Give me the little scroll.”* He would accept his “bit part” in the drama of salvation and play it with all his heart. When the angel told him to eat it, he implies that God’s servants are not merely to listen to God’s revelation, but they are to digest it and proclaim it. They are truly, in the full biblical significance of its meaning, *“hearing the word of God.”*

That the scroll would be sweet to the taste recalls the words of the psalmist concerning the revealed Will of God: *“They are more precious than gold...sweeter also than syrup or honey from the comb” (Ps.19:11) “From your ordinances I turn not away... How sweet to my palate are your promises, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Ps.119:102-103).* When the angel prophesies that the scroll would be sour to the stomach, he intimates the world’s rejection of God’s word. It is so sweet for the spirit to know and perceive the Will of God, but so difficult for sinful human beings to truly digest the Will of God and to make it part of themselves. There will always be the natural tendency to reject the Holy Will of God in the living of it out in the world. When the Will of God is seen in its clarity--in relationship to the Church’s role in the world--it involves the martyrdom of the Church. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak!

The proclamation of the Gospel in the world is destructive for this present social order. Evangelists will be persecuted and they will suffer for being disciples. This is the meaning of the scroll being sour in the stomach. The imagery and the interpretation come from Ezekiel when the Lord told him:

Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, rebels who have rebelled against me... Hard of face and obstinate of heart are they to whom I am sending you. Be not rebellious like this house of rebellion, but open your mouth and eat what I shall give you. It was then I saw a hand stretched out to me, in which was a written scroll which he unrolled before me...written on it was: Lamentation and wailing and woe!...I ate it, and it was as sweet as honey in my mouth. He said: Son of man, go now to the house of Israel, and speak my words to them (Ez.2:3-4:8b-10:3:3b-4).

Christ commissioned the Church to proclaim the good news to all nations and peoples: it is reiterated in the command to the Seer, “*You must prophesy again for many peoples and nations, languages and kings*” (Rv.10:11). As the Lord said to Ezekiel, “*And whether they heed or resist...they shall know that a prophet has been among them*” (Ez.2:5).

THE OUTER COURT

As already noted, the Apocalypse is replete with Old Testament imagery. Our next section is no exception. Some of the imagery will call familiar images to mind. We must resist the temptation to interpret the next section in what may appear to be the most obvious interpretation. We need to bear in mind that John is speaking about the Christian Church and its position in time and eternity. He is not directly interested in Jewish history. By the time of the writing of the Apocalypse, Jerusalem and its temple had been destroyed.

This section represents the Christian Community, viewed as receiving a divine chastisement for its rejection and condemnation of Jesus Christ. As far as John and his readers were concerned, the Christian Church was the New Israel, and the prophetic promises of the Old Testament found fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth and in the Church established by Him. The simplest and best interpretation of the following section will be in its universal application to the Christian Church. We read in the Apocalypse:

Someone gave me a measuring rod and said: "Come and take the measurements of God's temple and altar, and count those who worship there. Exclude the outer court of the temple, however: do not measure it, for it has been handed over to the Gentiles, who will crush the holy city for forty-two months. I will commission my two witnesses to prophesy for those twelve hundred and sixty days, dressed in sackcloth."

These are the two olive trees and the two lamp stands which stand in the presence of the Lord of the earth. If anyone tries to harm them, fire will come out of their mouths to devour their enemies. Anyone attempting to harm them will surely be slain in this way. These witnesses have power to close up the sky so that no rain will fall during the time of their mission. They also have power to turn water into blood and to afflict the earth at will with any kind of plague.

When they have finished giving their testimony, the wild beast that comes up from the abyss will wage war against them and conquer and kill them. Their corpses will lie in the streets of the great city, which has the symbolic name "Sodom" or "Egypt," where also their Lord was crucified. Men from every people and race, language and nation, stare at their corpses for three and a half days but refuse to bury them. The earth's inhabitants gloat over them and in their merriment exchange gifts, because these two prophets harassed everyone on earth. But after the three and a half days, the breath of life which comes from God returned to them. When they stood on their feet sheer terror gripped those who saw them. The two prophets heard a loud voice from heaven say to them, "Come up here!" So they went up to heaven in a cloud as their enemies looked on. At that moment there was a violent earthquake and a tenth of the city fell in ruins. Seven thousand persons were killed during the earthquake; the rest were so terrified that they worshiped the God of heaven (Rev.11:1-13).

The temple of God, its altar, and those who worship there are the Christian Church and the Christian People. Paul says of the Christian Community:

Are you not aware that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will

destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, and you are that temple (1Cor.3:16-17).

We read in First Peter 2:5, *“You too are living stones, built as an edifice of spirit, into a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”* We see in the Old Testament that both Ezekiel (40:1ff) and Zechariah (2:1-5) had similar visions. The measuring of God’s temple or “holy city” signifies its protection by God. We read in Zechariah 2:9, *“But I will be for her an encircling wall of fire, says the Lord, and I will be the glory in her midst.”* It indicates the place of God’s presence on earth, *“The voice said to me: Son of man, this is where my throne shall be, this is where I will set the soles of my feet; here I will dwell among the Israelites forever” (Ez.43:7).*

John assures the Church, in the face of its rejection by the world, of God’s protection--the Gates of Hell will not prevail against her. He assures the Church that, even if its bark is storm-tossed and Jesus appears asleep in the boat, the Lord is with her until the consummation of the world: *“Lo, I am with you always. Do not be afraid!”*

The Seer was told not to measure *“the outer court.”* We know that in the Old Testament the area was no less a part of the temple. the Gentiles had free access into this section of the temple. However, it was not the heart and essence of the temple: into that area only a true Israelite entered and, into its holiest section, only the priests entered. The outer court is no less a part of the Christian Church. It represents the physical presence of the Church in the world. Our Lord does not offer her physical security. The physical dimension of the Church remains open to the full hostility of its enemies. This makes martyrdom possible. But the soul of the Church remains under divine protection. Jesus encouraged Christians not to be afraid of those who could destroy the outer court--the body--but had no power to touch the soul.

The body of the Church will not be protected from persecution. However her mission will be protected. The persecution to be suffered by the Church will last “forty-two months”—*“for it has been handed over to the Gentiles, who will crush the holy city for forty-two months.”* This forty-two months, or twelve hundred and sixty days, or three and a half years are all temporal references to the duration of the activities of the Antichrist. As we have already noted, 3 1/2 is symbolic, and the image of 3 1/2 comes from Daniel’s reference to Antiochus IV Epiphanes’ persecution of Israel. It signifies an evil time

suffered by the People of God--evil that will endure for an undetermined, but limited time.

THE TWO WITNESSES

The Seer mentions the commissioning of two witnesses who will prophesy *“for those twelve hundred and sixty days, dressed in sackcloth.”* The two witnesses will not be impeded from prophesying during that period. The sackcloth signifies that they will call mankind to repentance. The identity of these two witnesses has caused interpreters much concern. John directs our interpretation by his reference to the *“two olive trees”* and the *“two lampstands which stand in the presence of the Lord of the earth.”* This recalls Zechariah’s vision of a golden lamp stand fed by the oil of two olive trees, identified as *“... the two anointed who stand by the Lord of the whole earth” (Zec.4:14)*. In this text, the two olive trees are Zerubbabel, the anointed king, and Joshua, the anointed high priest. In its opening greeting to the Christian Communities, John spoke of the Church as *“a royal nation of priests” (Rv.1:6)*. We heard in the hymn sung by the heavenly choir: *“You made of them a kingdom and priests to serve our God and they shall reign on the earth” (Rv.5:10)*. The *“two witnesses”* symbolize the Christian People commissioned by Jesus to be His witnesses in this world. Calling them *“two olive trees”* refers to their faith in Christ as oil giving them eternal life.

The reference to the two lampstands verifies their role as the light of the world that cannot be hidden--the number “2” itself being the required biblical number for witnesses. “Two” symbolizes witnesses. This would be a reference to the decree in Deuteronomy: *“One witness alone shall not take the stand against a man in regard to any crime or any offense of which he may be guilty; a judicial fact shall be established only on the testimony of two or three witnesses” (Dt.19:15)*. The reference to *“two witnesses”* ought to be seen as applying, not to two individuals, but to the general Church.

The Lord said to Jeremiah, *“Behold, I make my words in your mouth, a fire, and this people is the wood that it shall devour!” (5:14)*. The fire is the spirit-filled words that come forth from the Church that places before the consciences of sinners their choice of good or evil. As the author of Hebrews wrote, *“God’s word is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates and divides the soul and spirit, joints and marrow” (4:12)*. It is a light that bares and exposes the dark deeds of men’s hearts. Jesus promised His disciples that when they are brought to trial, *“I will give you words and a*

wisdom which none of your adversaries can take exception to or contradict” (Lk.21:15).

When the Seer speaks of the witnesses possessing the power to close up the sky, to turn water to blood and to afflict the earth with any kind of plague, these powers symbolize that these witnesses came with “the rod” of Moses and the “mantle” of Elijah. The Scriptures foretold that another prophet like Moses would come and that Elijah would return. On Mt. Tabor they both represented the double witness of the Law and the Prophets to Jesus Christ. Both Moses and Elijah returned in spirit in Jesus Christ. What the Apocalypse confirms is that the ruling power of Moses and the prophetic power of Elijah reside in the Church. The Seer implies that the Church possesses the power--if she chooses to use it--to bring greater affliction upon the world than Moses did upon the Egyptians. However, she is directed by Jesus in her use of power. The Church has come to bless, not curse, her persecutors. She leaves vengeance to the Lord.

THE BEAST FROM THE ABYSS

Jesus taught that the world would hate the Church just as it had hated Him. Precisely because of her commission and role of witness in the world, she would be persecuted. Jesus summarized His own rejection and the cause of the condemnation of the world in this statement: *“Men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were wicked. Everyone who practices evil hates the light; he does not come near it for fear his deeds will be exposed” (Jn.3:19-20).*

If a person reveals the hidden sinfulness and evilness of the life of another, he will normally be hated and persecuted. This will be particularly true where the person refuses consciously to acknowledge this evil within him/herself. Because of their sin, Adam and Eve hid from the gaze of God. They did not want to see themselves in the reflection of His eyes. Their ruse failed to work; God sought them out and confronted them with their evil. God did the same thing to the world when He sent His Son as the Light of the World. Those who loved darkness because their deeds were wicked hated the Light. Since they could no longer hide from the Light, they extinguished it. For this reason, at the death of Jesus, we read that *“there was darkness over the whole land” (Mt.27:45).* Nevertheless, the Sun of Justice rose bringing healing in his wings. Through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the light of the world was widely diffused throughout the world by the disciples of Jesus Christ. They had

become the light of the world--a city seated upon a mountaintop that cannot be hidden.

The Seer proceeds to demonstrate that the hatred experienced by the Church may come through human agents—such as Imperial Rome--but that the primary source and power of this hatred is a spiritual, satanic force: it arises out of the Abyss. The “wild beast” now rising out of the sea symbolizes the Antichrist who comes upon the earth in the spirit and power of Satan to engage in a war with the Church. The life of the Christian Community will follow the pattern set by Christ. The “*wild beast will wage war against them and kill them*”--these witnesses of Christ.

In the ancient world, nothing symbolized the hatred and detestation of a person more powerfully than to leave the person’s dead body unburied. The hatred of the world for the Church, its ridicule of the Church, the pain it suffers because of the Church’s presence, were symbolized by John when he said that the bodies of the witnesses were lying unburied, and were a cause of relief, gift-giving and merriment for the entire world. Christian presence was seen as harassment and its removal a cause of congratulations and celebration. Apparently, so was the death of Jesus for His enemies in the city of Jerusalem.

Just as “*the city of God*” is not a geographical place, but one built of “*living stones*” and present wherever the People of God are present, so also is the “*great city*” which is symbolically called Sodom or Egypt. It is not so much a geographical place as a mythical image embodying the spirit and power of evil on earth--the same forces of evil that inspired the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

The actual city of Jerusalem is represented here only as a symbol. In the eyes of the Seer, Jerusalem has assumed its place in symbolic history alongside Sodom, symbol of the perversion of natural powers and appetites, and Egypt, symbol of earthly power in rebellion against divine authority. Jerusalem is now added to this list as a symbol of the evil spirit that rejects divine light. Jerusalem earned this reputation as it stoned and killed the prophet sent by God.

Rome, the great city of the Antichrist, possessed the spirits of Sodom, Egypt, and Jerusalem. In John’s mind, the city of Rome became a corporate symbol on earth of the “*great city*” in which lay the “*unburied bodies*” of the saints. We need to keep in mind that at the time of the writing of the Apocalypse, the

city of Rome could be considered to extend from the city upon the seven hills east to the Euphrates River, west to the Pillars of Hercules, north to Brittany and south to the Sahara Desert. The *“great city”* encompassed the Roman Empire in which Satan had erected his throne. Rome was the embodiment of spiritual evil that has existed in past history and will be a recurring presence in human history.

Just as the body of Jesus was raised from the dead by the power of God, so the bodies of the saints will be raised, *“the breath of life which comes from God returned to them”* (Rv.11:11). The Seer confirms the resurrection of the saints from the dead and their assumption into heaven at the command of God: *“Come up here!”* (Rv.11:12). The Scriptures confirm that the body of Elijah had been carried into heaven. Jewish tradition maintains that the angels carried the body of Moses into Paradise, and the Apocalypse reveals that those who embody their spirits here on earth as Jesus did will also be assumed into heaven.

Our Seer describes the profound effect the resurrection and the assumption of the Just have upon the people of the earth. Those who witness the resurrection from the dead are filled with sheer terror. We are told that a violent earthquake follows the assumption of the saints. As a result of the earthquake an innumerable number die--symbolized by both a *“tenth of the city fell into ruins,”* and *“seven thousand persons were killed.”* However, at this time, an even greater number turned to the Lord as signified by the words, *“the rest were so terrified that they worshiped the God of heaven”* (Rv.11:13). In the vocabulary of John, such words as fear, do homage, worshiping God, are all synonymous for repentance. Repentance indicates the necessary condition for salvation.

From our study of images and symbols in the Old Testament, we know that a violent earthquake figuratively expresses the destruction of a society or a government that is ungodly and idolatrous. Our Seer, through his description of the *“two witnesses,”* presented a cameo picture of Christian life in its role as witness, its effect--good and evil--upon mankind, and its ultimate glorification. This vision intimates that the lives and the deaths of the saints will ultimately cause the salvation of innumerable people. From the picture of salvation painted by John, the winnings of Christ and His Church are greater than their losses. If only a remnant is saved through the Redemption, then Satan will be the winner.

THE SEVENTH TRUMPET

Before the sounding of the seventh trumpet, the Seer writes: *“The second woe is past, but beware! The third is coming very soon” (Rv.11:14.)* We need to bear in mind that the Seer presents religious truths in the recorded visions. His is a kaleidoscopic presentation of truths. They do not come to us in the logical presentation of truths or in the logical presentation of a theological treatise; they come to us in apocalyptic fashion. At one moment we receive a complete view in cameo fashion, followed by a general presentation of a particular revelation, and then a repetition of the same truth but with particulars. The Seer will appear to complete a picture and then begin again creating the same picture. John flashes scenes before our eyes and then rearranges, so to speak, the backdrop and stage props and repeats the same thought. With this material, he forms an impression of religious truth in the conscious awareness--often a complex and confusing picture. However, this technique forms an even more powerful and lasting impression upon the subconscious. There, these impressions will shape attitudes and may motivate change in future behavior.

After the presentation of the Church's life on earth, the seventh trumpet is sounded. We read in the Apocalypse:

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet. Loud voices in heaven cried out, “The kingdom of the world now belongs to our Lord and to his Anointed One, and he shall reign forever and ever.” The twenty-four elders who were enthroned in God's presence fell down to worship God and said: “We praise you, the Lord God Almighty, who is and who was. You have assumed your great power, you have begun your reign. The nations have raged in anger, but then came your day of wrath and the moment to judge the dead: The time to reward your servants the prophets and the holy ones who revere you, the great and the small alike; The time to destroy those who lay the earth waste.” Then God's temple in heaven opened and in the temple could be seen the ark of his covenant. There were flashes of lightning and peals of thunder, an earthquake, and a violent hailstorm (Rv.11:15-19).

The first six trumpets sound the alarm and call mankind to repentance. The seventh and final trumpet proclaims the victory of God and the Lamb, "*The kingdom of the world now belongs to our Lord and to his Anointed One*" (11:15). God always reigns upon earth, but He reigns amidst a rebellious and stiff-necked people who impede the fulfillment of God's perfect will. The psalmist asks:

Why do the nations rage and the peoples utter folly? The kings of the earth rise up, and the princes conspire together against the Lord and against his anointed: "Let us break their fetters and cast their bonds from us?" He who is throned in heaven laughs; the Lord derides them. Then in anger he speaks to them; he terrifies them in his wrath: "I myself have set up my king on Zion, my holy mountain." I will proclaim the decree of the Lord: The Lord said to me, "You are my son; this day I have begotten you. Ask of me and I will give you the nations for an inheritance and the ends of the earth for your possession. You shall rule them with an iron rod; you shall shatter them like an earthen dish" (Ps.2:1-9).

The Seer has transported us from the present moment in time to the eternal present in which the victory of the Lamb upon earth is declared and celebrated. The words of the Psalm have been fulfilled. When this has occurred, and the earth has become submissive to the Lamb, it inaugurates "*the moment to judge the dead.*" The third Woe has come--the Day of Final Judgment, the Day upon which the Lord will render to each what has been merited by life upon earth. Since Jesus is Judge, the judgment will be His and be in perfect accord with His Spirit. As far as we are concerned, we can know no more than what the Seer has revealed. The Day of Judgment will be "*the time to reward your servants the prophets and the holy ones who revere you, the great and small alike; the time to destroy those who lay the earth waste*" (Rv.11:18).

The Seer closes this scene with the heavenly temple opening to reveal the presence of the Ark of His Covenant. In the Old Testament, the Ark was a chest that contained the two tablets upon which were written the Ten Commandments. Since these commandments represented the Will of God, they became the symbols of Israel's covenant with Yahweh. To guard the commandments was to guard the covenant--to guard the relationship with God.

The appearance of the Ark, the symbol of God's Presence in Israel, in the Temple of Heaven could symbolically represent the Presence of God. All humanity stands in the Presence of God to be judged. The judgment now falling upon the earth is symbolized by, "... *flashes of lightning and peals of thunder, an earthquake, and a violent hailstorm*" (Rv.11:19). The judgment of the world has indeed come!

It is interesting that Luke, in his gospel account, goes to some pains in the infancy narrative to present the Virgin Mary as the New Ark of the Covenant. Since her Son, Jesus Christ, is God among us, it can be said, in a sense, that every true Christian is an Ark of the New Covenant in this world. The Scriptures have confirmed that when God comes in glory to judge the world, He will come with the angels and the saints. The saints will share in this judgment. John would not have been interested in a symbolic representation of the Old Covenant, but rather of the New. The Ark of the Covenant appearing in the Temple of God may well represent the appearance of Mary in glory. Certainly Mother Mary's presence--as did her life--will precede and herald the coming of God's children in glory.

A PROFILE OF THE ANTICHRIST

The word Antichrist comes from the Greek *antixpistos*. The word appears in the Bible only in the epistles of John. As we know, *Christos* was the Greek word for Messiah, which in Hebrew means the "Anointed One of God." The Messiah is the Holy One sent by God to save His People. The use of the prefix "anti" signifies opposition to the Anointed One of God. The word antichrist signifies one who fights against Christ more than one who seeks to usurp his role.

The idea of antichrist is not so much the description of a false messiah as it is the description of one who opposes Christ and what He represents. The title antichrist symbolizes so much more than false messiah. The Antichrist seeks to replace Christ, to substitute himself in His place, but not in His role. The Antichrist may seek to accomplish this through fraudulent claims to be the Messiah. However, his purpose in doing so is to do away with Christ and that for which He stands. His intention is to make himself the power on earth and an object of worship. Through him evil will replace goodness, and worship of Satan will replace worship of God. It is well to keep in mind the distinction between concepts of "false Messiah" and "Antichrist." In a word, a false Messiah desires to usurp the role of Christ--to be the Christ. The Antichrist

seeks to destroy the Christ and to present to the world, in the place of Jesus Christ, a new role model to follow and adore.

In the person of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a prototype of the Antichrist appears in the Old Testament. Antiochus is a foreign king who seeks to destroy the true religion of Israel and to replace it with pagan culture and worship. Antiochus appears in the Book of Daniel. Since this is an apocalyptic literary work, it presents Antiochus clothed in apocalyptic symbols and colorful images.

In a vision, Daniel saw:

...the four winds of heaven stirred up the great sea, from which emerged four immense beasts, each different from the others... I saw the fourth beast, different from all the others, terrifying, horrible, and of extraordinary strength; it had great iron teeth with which it devoured and crushed, and what was left it trampled with its feet. [This beast was Alexander the Great or the kingdom established by him.] I was considering the ten horns it had, when suddenly another, a little horn, sprang out of their midst, and three of the previous horns were torn away to make room for it. This horn had eyes like a man, and a mouth that spoke arrogantly (Dn. 7:2-3, 7-8).

Daniel received this interpretation of his vision:

“These four great beasts stand for four kingdoms which shall arise on the earth. But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingship, to possess it forever and ever.” ...As I watched, that horn made war against the holy ones and was victorious until the Ancient One arrived... “The fourth beast shall be a fourth kingdom on earth, different from all the others; It shall devour the whole earth, beat it down, and crush it. The ten horns shall be ten kings...another shall rise up after them, Different from those before him” [This is Antiochus Epiphanes] (Dn. 7:17-18, 21-24).

The court was convened [the heavenly court], and the books were opened. I watched, then, from the first of the arrogant words which the horn spoke, until the beast was slain and its body thrown into the fire to be burnt up... "His power is taken away by final and absolute destruction" (Dn. 7:10-11;26).

Again the character of Antiochus appears in the Old Testament in the historical narrations of the First Book of Maccabees. In this book, his image and works are described quite concretely. There we are told that he came to power as a result of the dissolution of the empire of Alexander the Great, of whom the Scriptures say *"his heart became proud and arrogant."* We read:

There sprang from these [successors of Alexander] a sinful offshoot, Antiochus Epiphanes, son of King Antiochus... He became king in the year one hundred and thirty-seven of the kingdom of the Greeks (1Mc.1:10).

For his own political purposes, Antiochus desired to Hellenize Palestine. He had *"introduced the way of living of the Gentiles"* (1Mc.1:13). He desired to universalize the people under his reign. He decreed *"all should be one people, each abandoning his particular customs"* (1Mc.1:41-42). As a result, the Jewish religion was legally forbidden and pagan worship was enforced. *"Whoever refused to act according to the command of the king should be put to death"* (1Mc.1:50). This decree was carried out in a brutal, systematic fashion. The Scriptures were destroyed along with those found possessing them. *"Women who had had their children circumcised were put to death...with the babies hung from their necks"* (1Mc.1:60-61).

Antiochus entitled himself *Epiphanes* which means "god-manifested." He erected a pagan altar in the temple of Jerusalem on the 25th of December, 167 B.C. History relates that Antiochus died during a campaign in Media in 164 B.C. (Media would be part of modern Iran). In the character of Antiochus, we have a clear distinction between the concept of the Antichrist and that of a false Messiah. Antiochus is presented as the destroyer of the holy people (Dn.12:7). It is the intention of the Antichrist to destroy the true faith by whatever means possible--to eradicate the true religion from the face of the earth. Five times the name *"antichrist"* appears in the epistles of John. Let us review this concept in John:

Children, it is the final hour; just as you heard that the antichrist was coming, so now many such antichrists have appeared. This makes us certain that it is the final hour (1Jn.2:18).

John speaks of these “many antichrists” as “false prophets” (4:4), “theirs is the language of the world” (4:5), and they possess “the spirit of deception” (4:6). John goes on to say, “Many deceitful men have gone out into the world, men who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. Such is the deceitful one! This is the antichrist!” (2Jn.1:7). “Who is the liar? He who denies that Jesus is the Christ. He is the antichrist, denying the Father and the Son” (1Jn.2:22). Even though John speaks of “many antichrists,” he still makes a distinction, by the language he uses, between the antichrist and the many antichrists.

There are many deceitful men but there is also “the deceitful one!” There are many liars, but there is also “the liar.” John’s words imply that the antichrist will be a particular historical personage. The many antichrists will be all those false prophets who come in the spirit of the antichrist. John defines well this spirit; it is a deceptive spirit that speaks with a worldly philosophy and an earthly accent; it undermines faith in Jesus Christ by seeking to destroy the true knowledge of Jesus Christ. It primarily attacks the doctrine of the Incarnation: the Divine Son of God became human flesh in Jesus Christ in order to save mankind. John writes:

This is how you can recognize God’s Spirit: every spirit that acknowledges Jesus Christ come in the flesh belongs to God, while every spirit that fails to acknowledge him does not belong to God. Such is the spirit of the antichrist which, as you have heard, is to come; in fact, it is in the world already (1Jn.4:2-3).

It is very probable, according to John, that the spirit of the antichrist is distinct from the Antichrist. The spirit of the antichrist may be present in the world without the Antichrist personally being present. With this distinction in mind, we can safely say that anyone who possesses the spirit of the antichrist--anyone who seeks to destroy the true faith in Jesus Christ--is an antichrist. “...many such antichrists have appeared” (1Jn.2:18).

In his Second Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul clarifies the concept of the Antichrist. Paul does not use the term “antichrist,” but he describes clearly the nature and work of the Antichrist. He writes:

Let no one seduce you [that the day of the Lord is here!]...Since the mass apostasy has not yet occurred nor the man of lawlessness been revealed--that son of perdition and adversary who exalts himself above every so-called god proposed for worship, he who seats himself in God's temple and even declares himself to be God (2Thes.2:3-4).

Paul speaks here of a particular person called "*the man of lawlessness.*" He is a person in complete rebellion against God and all that God means. He is "*that son of perdition.*" He is a person doomed to Hell for he is a veritable son of Satan. He is the son of the adversary--son of Satan. Jesus had implied as much of the unbelieving Jews who sought to kill Him. This man of lawlessness will produce mass apostasy in the world. Through the influence of the Antichrist, the world will one day cry out as did the Jews of old, "*We will not have this man rule over us!*"

Once this occurs, the Antichrist will declare himself God and make himself an object of worship. He will seat himself in God's temple. This probably would signify the Christian Church. We saw in Daniel that Antiochus erected the pagan altar within the temple of God at Jerusalem--or perhaps "*in God's temple*" could mean the "*earth.*" It would be more likely however, that Paul intended to mean the Church or the Christian Community. Paul goes on to say that the spirit of the antichrist is at work in the world, but that he has not yet appeared himself:

You know what restrains him until he shall be revealed in his own time. The secret force of lawlessness [the spirit of the antichrist] is already at work [paving the way for its lord], mind you, but there is one who holds him back until that restrainer shall be taken from the scene. Thereupon the lawless one will be revealed... This lawless one will appear as part of the workings of Satan, accompanied by all the power and signs and wonders at the disposal of falsehood--by every seduction the wicked can devise... (2Thes.2:6,8-10).

Paul makes a distinction between the "*secret force of lawlessness*" at work presently in the world and the appearance of "*the man of lawlessness*" who will appear "*in his own time,*" "*as part of the workings of Satan.*" This also shows that there will be a distinction between Satan and the Antichrist. He will be an "*incarnation*" of Satan in the flesh. The Antichrist will be an evil parody of Christ. However, an incarnation cannot be accomplished by the power of Satan. Satan is not a creator. He cannot recreate himself as a man.

He cannot beget a child. The spirit of Satan can possess the natural powers of a person. He can appear under the image of man or animal. He can infest a place and obsess a mind and possess a person.

But when all is said and done, Satan remains Satan--a being distinct from the possessed as the possessed is from Satan. The Antichrist remains totally a human being--a human being wedded in mind, heart, and spirit to Satan. The Antichrist will be one considered by Satan as worthy of this unholy union because of his spiritual potential for evil.

The Christian Church had its prototype of the Antichrist in Judas Iscariot. Of this man Jesus said, *"I kept careful watch and not one of them was lost--none but him who was destined to be lost."* The phrase *"destined to be lost"* can be translated as *"son of Perdition."* Jesus said to the Twelve, *"Have I not chosen you and yet one of you is a devil!"* John wrote that Satan put it into the heart of Judas to betray Jesus Christ and that, at the Last Supper *"Satan entered his heart!"* (Jn.13:27), giving Judas all the power needed to carry through his evil design against Christ. Jesus applied the words of Psalm 41:10 to Judas' action: *"Even my friend who had my trust and partook of my bread, has raised his heel against me."* The raising of the "heel" against one was a sign of contempt. Judas had contempt for Christ! He possessed the spirit of the Antichrist! Because of certain biblical references, it is believed by many that the Antichrist will be a Jew from the tribe of Dan. We read in Genesis: *"Let Dan be a serpent by the roadside, a horned viper by the path, that bites the horse's heel, so that the rider tumbles backward"* (Gn.49:17).

Jeremiah wrote:

From Dan is heard the snorting of his steeds: the neighing of his stallions shakes the whole land. They come devouring the land and all it contains, the city and those who dwell in it. Yes, I will send against you poisonous snakes, against which no charm will work when they bite you (Jer.8:16-17).

The tribe of Dan is omitted from the list of the saved given in chapter seven of the Apocalypse. When will the Antichrist appear? We read in the Apocalypse: *"When they have finished giving their testimony, the wild beast that comes up from the abyss will wage war against them and conquer and kill them"* (Rv.11:7).

Anyone who lessens or destroys the power of the Gospel in the world hastens the coming of the Antichrist. Those false prophets who destroy true religious doctrine and seek to replace it with false teachings are heralds of the Antichrist. Those who destroy Christian morality and foster immoral behavior make ready the way before him.

Against this background, we ought to be able to better interpret the teachings on the Antichrist to be presented in the Apocalypse.

CHAPTER 10

THE WOMAN AND THE DRAGON

INTRODUCTION

Insightful students of mankind recognize that certain experiences are universal to the human race. Some recognize a natural law in the world which expresses, at its very bone, an awareness of good and evil and the moral obligation to avoid evil and do good. Some psychic researchers have discovered a universal consciousness. They have discovered universal symbols and images within the sub-consciousness of mankind that also express universal experiences of both good and evil. This natural law appears within the customs, taboos, and laws of all societies. This universal consciousness appears in the dreams of its members--even the small children. It finds conscious expression in works of art and especially in the formation of religious myths and acts of worship. A serious student would never superficially dismiss the myths of any society. Myths are much more than fanciful stories; a myth relates a past incident that explains to people a present situation; it is an interpretation of life experienced. One researcher noted, *“All genuine convictions find embodiment in powerful imaginative symbols.”*

Paul teaches in Romans--and the Book of Wisdom confirms--that there is a natural revelation of universal and divine truths:

Since the creation of the world, invisible realities, God’s eternal power and divinity, have become visible, recognized through the things he has made (Rom.1:20).

For all men were by nature foolish who were in ignorance of God, and who from the good things seen did not succeed in knowing him who is, and from studying the works did not discern the artisan. (Wis.13:1).

Often supernatural revelation is but an external and heavenly confirmation of humanity’s internal and spiritual experiences. The world itself--along with the human soul--is a seedbed of religious truths. For those insightful students, it is an expected phenomenon to discover in the religious histories of men religious truths that have reappeared later within the supernatural, inspiring religions of both Judaism and Christianity. The fact of some similarity to Judeo-Christian beliefs existing in pagan religions ought to be expected, and is certainly not

something to cause amazement and scandal. Mankind is essentially religious, and God has always been a communicating God, revealing Himself through one dimension or another. Mankind, without the aid of supernatural revelation, has always faced the problem of distinguishing the heat of truth from the weed of error. Jesus of Nazareth told the story of how the "Lord of the Harvest" sowed good seed in the fields, but an enemy came at night and sowed weeds. Therefore, there are both wheat and weed in the fields.

The fact that a source of good and a source of evil exist in the world is a universal experience for mankind, and human life upon this earth has been caught in a struggle between those two opposing forces. Stories are told over and over again in the annals of the human race, in which the source of goodness often appears as Light and the source of evil appears as Darkness. This universal experience has fired the imagination of mankind. People have composed innumerable myths and legends to express the truths that mankind has always known and experienced since it possessed conscious life upon this earth. A most ancient and basic myth has been the solar myth, in which the dragon of darkness tries to kill the sun god, only to be killed by him when the new day dawns.

In the ancient world, the belief widely existed that there would come into the world a savior-king of godlike power. Forces of evil would seek to destroy this savior, who would be magically protected from evil. In the end, the savior would destroy the forces of evil upon the earth, and there would be harmony and happiness upon earth. Myths teaching these beliefs can be found in India, Asia, and the West.

Imperial Rome sought to capitalize upon the Greek version of this myth, which relates how the dragon Python seeks to destroy Apollo, the new born son of Zeus (Father-god), but fails to do so as his mother Leto escapes to the island of Delos, while Poseidon, the god of the sea, hides the island under the waves. Python, failing to find them, abandons the search. Later, Apollo returns to Parnassus and slays the dragon in its Delphic cave. The same myth appears in Egypt. There, Set, the red dragon, seeks to kill Isis, the Queen of Heaven, but later is slain by her son Horus. The Romans rewrote the myth in their favor. The goddess Roma, which symbolized the spirit of Rome, surfaces as the mother goddess and her son reappears in the form of the Roman emperors who slay the dragon of evil and bring peace and harmony to all mankind.

The Pax Romana was recognized as a divine marvel. Coins, a universal method of imperial propaganda, were issued by Rome for distribution throughout the empire. On the coins Rome appears as the Queen of the gods and the mother of

the world's savior. Augustus' head appears alongside that of Rome. On other coins, Augustus appears as the sun and Livia as the moon.

THE TWO CONSTELLATIONS

In the section that follows in the Apocalypse, John re-presents the myth in the light of Christian revelation. He repudiates Rome's present political application of the myth. In the Apocalypse's version, Rome does not appear as the Queen of the Heavens, but as the new Jezebel, the harlot that seduces the entire world. Instead of fighting the dragon of evil, the Roman Empire is the son of the harlot, and the dragons are the chief agents of darkness and destruction.

John records in the Apocalypse what may be seen as several tableaux against a heavenly background in which he presents the very heart of the message of his revelation: Satan opposes Christ and His Church. The fullness of satanic hatred is directed against the Church. In John's day, Imperial Rome is recognized as Satan's evil agent, which demands divine worship through its worship of the emperor. As Imperial Rome has come to represent the power of Satan on earth, worship of the State implies worship of Satan. Behind the Roman State stands Satan, Prince of the World. John knows that through the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ, Satan has been dethroned. *"Now will this world's prince be driven out"* (Jn.12:31). John demonstrates to his readers these mysteries and how they affect the Christian Community. We read:

A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. Because she was with child, she wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth. Then another sign appeared in the sky: it was a huge dragon, flaming red, with seven heads and ten horns; on his heads were seven diadems. His tail swept a third of the stars from the sky and hurled them down to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth, ready to devour her child when it should be born. She gave birth to a son--a boy destined to shepherd all the nations with an iron rod. Her child was caught up to God and to his throne. The woman herself fled into the desert, where a special place had been prepared for her by God; there she was taken care of for twelve hundred and sixty days (Rev.12:1-6).

John beholds two signs or constellations in the sky: a woman and a dragon. The woman and the dragon are not isolated tableaux that can be interpreted separately from the entire presentation. In the first sign, the woman clothed in

the sun, crowned with twelve stars with the moon for her pedestal, appears as Queen of Heaven. Those familiar with the Catholic liturgy and devotion will immediately see the Blessed Virgin Mary in this presentation. However, the woman in the sign symbolizes the People of God--both of the Old and New Testaments--who bring forth the Messiah into this world. Jesus teaches: "*After all, salvation is from the Jews*" (Mt.4:22). It is a picture of the faithful Israel through which salvation comes to the world. Israel, not Rome, gives the world its Savior.

Nevertheless, the liturgy is not incorrect in seeing Mary in this role. Let us briefly digress and demonstrate the correctness in such a presentation. When the life of one solitary person is of such a nature as to represent the general life of society, that individual person can be used as a symbol to represent the entire society. Such a person becomes a corporate symbol. What is said of the person may be said of the society. The society finds in the life of that person a reflection of its own life. In supernatural religion, the Mother of Jesus becomes such a symbol.

Israel of old achieved its destiny by bringing forth the savior of the world. Mary of Nazareth was the means through which Israel achieved its destiny. Scriptures speak of Israel as "Lady Zion" who is the bride and spouse of Yahweh. Mary of Nazareth personally fulfills the role of Israel. She is therefore a symbol of Zion--of Israel. Since Mary gave birth to Jesus, the New Moses, she gave birth to the New Israel. The New Israel would come to be through the followers of the Messiah entering into the New Covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ. This covenant relationship consisted of faith in Jesus Christ and of humble submission to God through obedience to Jesus Christ. The New Israel was the New Covenant in the Holy Spirit. It came to be at the death of Jesus on the Cross. His blood sealed and ratified this covenant that gave birth to the New Israel--the Church.

Because of her faith and submission to God's Will, Mary gave birth to Christ and, therefore, truly became the Mother of the New Israel. This, Jesus acknowledged and confirmed upon the Cross when the Lord told the beloved disciple to behold in Mary his mother, and He breathed out upon them His holy spirit of Life. Mary was the first to believe and accept Christ; she was the first to follow Him--even to Calvary. Mary is the first citizen in the kingdom of Heaven, and rightly and fittingly symbolizes the New Jerusalem. There is no doubt that Mary served as a model for the sign in the vision presented by John and, in a secondary sense, he may have desired his readers to see her in this sign. However, in this work, it is John's primary intention to explain the

mystery of the Church's existence in this world. Therefore the woman who appears in the sky is primarily a symbol of the People of God.

The crown of twelve stars symbolizes Israel--the remnant that remained faithful--and the twelve apostles, the foundation stones of the New Israel. Victorious (303 A.D.), the first Latin commentator on the Apocalypse, wrote: "She is the ancient Church of Patriarchs and Prophets and the Saints and the Apostles." Augustine wrote: "This woman is the ancient city of God." The sun enveloping the woman indicates the divine presence within the People of God. The moon as a pedestal signifies the divine exaltation of the Church. The pains of childbirth symbolize the sufferings endured by the People of God in order to bring forth the Messiah into the world. Around 235 A.D., St. Hyppolytus wrote: "Never shall the Church cease from producing from her heart the Word that in the world is persecuted by the unbelieving."

The Church beholds Jesus entering into the power of His role only after His death upon the Cross, as Paul says, "*but was made Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness, by his resurrection from the dead*" (Rom.1:4). As the New Israel only came to be after the death of Jesus, the woman in pain most probably symbolizes the sufferings of the People of God at the crucifixion and death of Jesus. Our Lord himself tells his disciples:

I tell you truly: you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices; you will grieve for a time... When a woman is in labor she is sad that her time has come. When she has borne her child, she no longer remembers her pain for joy that a man has been born into the world" (Jn.16:20-21).

Perhaps we would not be too far amiss to picture the Dragon as standing before the dying Christ, ready to devour him in death. As the Scriptures have taught, Satan brought Jesus to this hour. Instead of the Savior escaping death, He found permanent escape from the Dragon through death. The words used in reference to the birth of the child deliberately evoke the words of Psalm 2:

The Lord said to me, "You are my son; this day I have begotten you. Ask of me and I will give you the nations for an inheritance and the ends of the earth for your possession. You shall rule them with an iron rod."

In the mind of John, the Church has already triumphed over Satan from the moment he "*who was descended from David according to the flesh...was made Son of God in power...by his resurrection from the dead*" (Rom.1:3-4). Paul could

write, *“Death is swallowed up in victory.”* He could ask, *“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”* (1Cor.14:54-55).

John’s presentation of Satan displays him in ancient symbols of evil: dragon means serpent. The seven-headed serpent recalls the Canaanite myth of the Leviathan--the source of chaos. Isaiah speaks of the day of God’s wrath:

On that day, The Lord will punish with his sword that is cruel, great, and strong, Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the coiled serpent; and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea (Is.27:1).

John’s vision recalls Daniel’s description of the ten-horned beast. It is a presentation of great power, and the seven diadems indicate the fullness of his reign. When John mentions that *“his tail swept a third of the stars from the sky and hurled them down to the earth,”* he recalls the scene in chapter eight when one third of the earth was destroyed. Here John indicates the primary cause of the evil that befalls the earth. We are told that the woman herself escaped the Dragon by fleeing to the desert. Israel’s escape into the desert, from the red Dragon of death in Egypt, is recalled here. For the People of God the desert became a symbol of that place in which God protected the Church from evil.

The scene to follow ought to be seen as occurring simultaneously with the first scene. What has happened on earth with the crucifixion of Jesus has, at the same time, an effect in heaven. We read in the Apocalypse:

Then war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels battled against the dragon. Although the dragon and his angels fought back, they were overpowered and lost their place in heaven. The huge dragon, the ancient serpent known as the devil or Satan, the seducer of the whole world, was driven out; he was hurled down to earth and his minions with him (Rev.12:7-9).

This passage calls to mind the revolt of the wicked angels and their expulsion from heaven before human history began. It reminds us of the words of Jesus: *“I watched Satan fall from the sky like lightning”* (Lk.10:18). However, it is unlikely that John has this moment in mind. In the Old Testament, Satan is pictured as an angelic Accuser of God’s People before the throne of God (see Zec.3:1-2). Here is implied that the Accuser is likewise the Seducer of God’s People. Michael is the Defender of God’s People against the accusation of the Adversary, and against his seductions upon earth. The death of Christ upon the Cross atoned for the sins of God’s people. His death robbed Satan of his just

claim to power over the human race. He no longer has a claim before the throne of God. This truth is symbolized by Satan and his angels being driven from heaven. That the struggle takes place in heaven probably indicates that the defeat of the dragon has come through the glorified Christ.

Here the dragon is clearly identified as *“the ancient serpent, known as the devil or Satan, the seducer of the whole world”* (Rev.12:9b). This recalls the fall of Adam and Eve and identifies the beginning of sin on earth with the seduction by Satan. We read in the Book of Wisdom, *“By the envy of the devil, death entered into the world”* (Wis.2:24). We can see from an incident in Luke that Satan continues to make his claim against the disciples of Jesus, but the power of Jesus nullifies it: *“Simon, Simon! Remember that Satan has asked for you, to sift you all like wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith may never fail”* (Lk.22:31-32). Christ is the Church’s Advocate before God—Christ, who remits its sins and silences its accuser. A hymn to Christ’s triumph may already be sung, for the war, although not over, is won. John writes:

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: “Now have salvation and power come, the reign of our God and the authority of his Anointed One, for the accuser of our brothers is cast out, who night and day accused them before our God. They defeated him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; love for life did not deter them from death. So rejoice, you heavens, and you that dwell therein! But woe to you, earth and sea, for the devil has come down upon you! His fury knows no limits, for he knows his time is short” (Rev.12:10-12).

This hymn celebrates not only the victory of Christ but that of the Saints. Here it is made clear how the victory of the Saints is made possible--all the power and grace flow from the death of Christ, *“They defeated him by the blood of the Lamb.”* However, the death of Christ alone will not bring people to victory and salvation. As Augustine insists--God does not save us against our wills. The graces of the Redemption are effective unto victory and salvation in those whose lives bear witness to Christ, and who have come to love Jesus Christ more than their own lives--or at least they have come to love eternal life more than physical existence upon this earth: *“They defeated him...by the word of their testimony; love for life did not deter them from death.”* John goes on to record:

When the dragon saw that he had been cast down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the boy. But the woman was given the wings of a gigantic eagle so that she could fly off to

her place in the desert, where, far from the serpent, she could be taken care of for a year and for two and a half years more. The serpent, however, spewed a torrent of water out of his mouth to search out the woman and sweep her away. The earth then came to the woman's rescue by opening its mouth and swallowing the flood which the dragon spewed out of his mouth. Enraged at her escape, the dragon went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep God's commandments and give witness to Jesus. He took up his position by the shore of the sea (Rv.12:13-17).

THE OFFSPRING OF THE WOMAN

As has been noted previously, Satan's dominion upon earth results from sin. As long as sin is upon this earth, Satan has power and presence upon the earth. Having experienced defeat in Christ, he foresees his ultimate defeat. He seeks to delay the victory of Christ on earth. Since his victory must occur through His Church--a Church composed of people with free wills and the weakness of flesh--Satan directs his full power against Christ's weakest link: the Church on earth. This he seeks to destroy. John makes a distinction between the Church and its individual members. The Church itself will be divinely preserved from destruction. This is signified by her being carried on the wings of an eagle to a place of safety, which recalls Yahweh's words to Israel:

I bore you up on eagle wings and brought you here to myself. ...you shall be my special possession, dearer to me than all other people... (Ex.19:4-5).

So he spread his wings to receive them and bore them up on his pinions... He had them ride triumphant over the summits of the land... (Dt. 32:11b,13a).

The desert is wherever the power of the "great city" cannot touch her. There the Church will be nourished, as was Elijah, with manna from heaven--the Holy Eucharist.

Satan's first efforts are directed against the Church newly born at Pentecost. Against her, he releases floods of evil and rivers of lies. John speaks of the earth consuming these waters. This image could have been stimulated by the sight of earthly streams and rivers disappearing into the desert sands. This may represent the faith of the Church on earth that enables the Church to reject the lies of the synagogue of Satan, to reject the self-styled apostles with their

Nicolaitan teachings, and to recognize the seduction of Jezebel with her deep secrets of Satan. We may have a reference here to the Church's escape from the city of Jerusalem before its destruction in 70 A.D. It is related to the warning that the Church received through prophecy, to leave Jerusalem and flee across the Jordan to a place called Pella. The Church fled to the mountains, as the Lord had warned it to do. The Church had survived the persecution of the Jews, and it had overcome the internal assaults of false prophets and teachers.

“Enraged at her escape, the dragon went off to make war” on the individual members of the Christian Community—“those who keep God’s commandments and give witness to Jesus.” These are the two characteristics that must be present in a person in order to be a true disciple of Jesus Christ and to be of concern to Satan. The Church will be sustained by the power of God from the time Satan is allowed to wage war against the rest of her offspring. This time is given as a period of three and a half years. The word translated “offspring” is *sperma*, meaning “seed.” John’s use of this word intimates this is the war foretold in ancient times. It recalls Satan’s first encounter and victory over mankind. It calls to mind the words from Genesis: *“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers. He will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel” (Gn.3:15).* We read in Micah:

O daughter Zion, like a woman in travail; For now shall you go forth from the city and dwell in the fields; To Babylon shall you go, there shall you be rescued. There shall the Lord redeem you from the hand of your enemies (Mi.4:10).

Satan turns to powerful external means to destroy the Christian Community. We are told, *“He took up his position by the shore of the sea” (Rev.12:17b).* He erects his throne in the city by the sea: Rome! From the abyss Satan summons the beast. It is the same beast mentioned in Chapter Eleven that would wage war against the two witnesses—*“conquer and kill them” (11:7).* We further read in the Apocalypse:

Then I saw a wild beast come out of the sea with ten horns and seven heads; on its horns were ten diadems and on its heads blasphemous names. The beast I saw was like a leopard, but it had paws like a bear and the mouth of a lion. The dragon gave it his own power and throne, together with great authority. I noticed that one of the beast’s heads seemed to have been mortally wounded, but this mortal wound was healed. In wonderment, the whole world followed after the beast. Men worshiped the dragon for giving his

authority to the beast; and said, "Who can compare with the beast, or come forward to fight against it?"

The beast was given a mouth for uttering proud boasts and blasphemies, but the authority it received was to last only forty-two months. It began to hurl blasphemies against God, reviling him and the members of his heavenly household as well. The beast was allowed to wage war against God's people and conquer them. It was likewise granted authority over every race and people, language and nation. The beast will be worshiped by all those inhabitants of earth who did not have their names written at the world's beginning in the book of the living, which belongs to the Lamb who was slain.

Let him who has ears heed these words! If one is destined for captivity, into captivity he goes! If one is destined to be slain by the sword, by the sword he will be slain! Such is the faithful endurance that distinguishes God's holy people (Rev.13:1-10).

BEAST FROM THE ABYSS

The beast bears a striking resemblance to the dragon; it too possessed the seven heads of the Leviathan monster and ten horns with ten diadems--the dragon wore seven. Its similarity to the dragon signifies that the beast comes with the power of Satan and acts on earth as his personal representative. To this end, *"the dragon gave it his own power and throne, together with great authority"* (Rv.13:2).

The picture of the beast calls to mind Daniel's vision of four beasts, in which the lion symbolized Babylon; the bear, Media; the leopard, Persia; and the beast with the ten horns, the Seleucid Kingdom that sprang from Alexander the Great. The Apocalypse presents the beast as possessing the characteristics of the four kingdoms of Daniel's vision. It represents earthly power in full rebellion against divine power. It is God-given power perverted and become beastly. In the eyes of the Churches of Asia, it was indeed from the sea that the beast came; Rome had landed on the shores at Ephesus. The beast from the abyss symbolizes Imperial Rome.

Upon the heads of the beast were blasphemous names. The Roman Senate had declared Julius Caesar, Augustus, Claudius, Vespasian and Titus as divine beings worthy of divine worship. The last three had minted their coins with the inscription, *Theos*--God. Caligula sought to have his own statue erected in the

holy of holies in Jerusalem. At the time of the writing of the Apocalypse, Domitian insisted on being addressed as “*Dominus et Deus.*” Satan had once said to Jesus while showing him all the kingdoms of the world:

I will give you all this power and the glory of these kingdoms; the power has been given to me and I give it to whomever I wish. Prostrate yourself in homage before me, and it shall all be yours (Lk.4:6-7).

What Jesus refused, Rome willingly accepted.

John observed that one of the heads of the beast had received a mortal blow, but the beast recovered and returned to life. This could be seen as a parody on the death and resurrection of Christ. None of the Roman emperors were considered more satanic than Nero, both by Jews and Christians. His suicide in 68 A.D., brought about a civil war that threatened to destroy the Empire. The death of Nero ended the “royal” line of Caesars. Only the accession of Vespasian to the throne stabilized the government. We mentioned previously that a rumor existed that Nero would return. Christians saw Nero’s return in Domitian; Nero indeed returned in spirit. At any rate, the beast returned to life in Vespasian and his successors.

Until the time of Domitian, emperor worship was left to the spontaneous and grateful response of a people who idealized the peace and security provided by the Roman Empire. Domitian demanded worship and insisted it be enforced. That the Christian Faith came directly under the attack of the Roman Government may well be indicated in the statement, “*It began to hurl blasphemies against God, reviling him and the members of his heavenly household as well*” (Rv.13:6). An attack upon Christ and the beliefs of the Christian Church would have been viewed, in the light of Jesus’ teachings, as an attack upon God. An attack upon the martyrs and the saints would have been an attack upon the heavenly household. As Rome’s power grew, so would awe of it increase among the peoples.

People who experience themselves as intrinsically weak of character have the tendency to worship external forces of power and strength. The weak seek identification with the strong; they find their own strength in this identification. The powerful literally become their gods--the extensions of their lives. They worship and blindly obey them. A classic example of this in modern times was Germany’s submission to Hitler and to the Nazi Party.

Domitian's insistence upon divine worship would have thinly drawn the battle-lines. Those people, previously indifferent to the entire issue, would be forced to make a decision. There is no doubt that some, to their surprise, found themselves lined up with those who had been written in the book of life "*at the world's beginning.*" John's words here strongly intimate the doctrine of predestination. However, this must be evaluated from the point of view of the author. John's theological background was Jewish; there was a strong belief in human freedom and responsibility. Nevertheless, the Jewish people believed nothing happened in this world not decreed by God. No distinction was made between the Permissive Will of God and God's Perfect and Direct Will. In the mind of John, nothing came to be in the life of a Christian that was not willed by God. Every soul, filled with God's grace, would discover the Will of God in all that occurred within that life. A Christian willingly embraced the end destined for him by God, as Jesus had embraced the Cross and His Crucifixion. So John could write to the Communities:

If one is destined for captivity, into captivity he goes! If one is destined to be slain by the sword, by the sword he will be slain. Such is the faithful endurance that distinguishes God's holy people (Rv.13:10).

In other words, they recognize the Will of God in the evil that befalls them. They are not overcome, but persevere in the faith until the end.

BEAST FROM THE LAND

The beast from the abyss is a symbol of a political antichrist. The Seer notes that he does not lack assistance from false prophets and false messiahs. He will find support in pagan religion. We read next:

Then I saw another wild beast come up out of the earth; it had two horns like a ram and it spoke like a dragon. It used the authority of the first beast to promote its interests by making the world and all its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound had been healed. It performed great prodigies; it could even make fire come down from heaven to earth as men looked on. Because of the prodigies it was allowed to perform by authority of the first beast, it led astray the earth's inhabitants, telling them to make an idol in honor of the beast that had been wounded by the sword and yet lived. The second wild beast was then permitted to give life to the

beast's image, so that the image had the power of speech and of putting to death anyone who refused to worship it. It forced all men, small and great, rich and poor, slave and free, to accept a stamped image on their right hand or their forehead. Moreover, it did not allow a man to buy or sell anything unless he was first marked with the name of the beast or with the number that stood for its name (Rv.13:11-17).

John beholds another beast coming upon the earth. He speaks of it more as some force rather than as a person. The beast may represent those false prophets and false messiahs who will go forth over the world, working signs and wonders to mislead even the faithful if possible. It appears as a ram which is a Christ-like figure. Its dragon voice betrays its true origin. The beast will be discernible, not by its appearance, for it comes in sheep's clothing, but by its teachings. It will deny and oppose the teachings of Jesus Christ and of His Church.

When John sees the beast rising out of the earth rather than the sea, he probably sees the evil coming from within Asia itself, and not as an import from Rome. This beast may well represent, for John, the pagan priesthood of Asiatic civil leaders who sponsored Emperor Worship. It is the work of the second beast to promote the cult of the first beast. We know from the accounts of the Egyptian magician in Exodus, and from other accounts of this time, that signs and wonders were performed frequently by priestly magicians, such as Simon Magnus and Apollonius. Calling fire down from heaven recalls the prophet Elijah, and signifies that the second beast will be a false prophet. John states the fact that these signs and wonders existed--they did occur. He does not speculate by what methods they were achieved. He merely identifies their source--the dragon--and that is sufficient.

The Seer presents a picture of a society under the power and control of the beast from the abyss, who is greatly aided and assisted by the land-beast. We have a scene of tyrannical power, backed by perverted civil and religious leaders, resulting in a "police state" that easily controls travel, communication and distribution of food supplies. We have had classic examples of such states in our own time, in Germany, Russia, China--all too many to mention. The Seer implies that many Christians may starve because of their refusal to worship the beast.

He speaks of worshippers of the beast as being "*marked.*" The word used could mean a work of art, such as an image of the emperor, or an impression made by a stamp. The branding of soldiers, slaves, and temple devotees was not

uncommon at this time. Ptolemy Philopater of Egypt ordered all Jews who submitted to registration to be branded with the badge of the Dionysiac worship. There is no evidence that ordinary citizens were branded at this time.

We do know that at a later date--during the persecution of Decian--a certificate was issued to those who worshiped the emperor. Also, accused Christians were asked to burn incense before a bust of the emperor. Official documents were stamped with the name and year of the emperor. These may have been required in order to sell or buy in the market place; they could have been withheld from those who refused to burn incense before the image of the emperor. Many scholars agree that it is more in the spirit of the Apocalypse to interpret being "marked" as a figurative or symbolic expression. Those sealed with the sign of the living God did not have a visible mark upon their foreheads. Their seal was their dedication to Christ through baptism. Being marked with the seal of the beast symbolized a person's submission to the authority of the beast.

The contents of the Apocalypse direct us in identifying the mark of the beast. It is as spiritual as the seal of the living God. The mark of the beast is permanent impenitence. Those who *"did not give up the worship of demons...neither did they repent of their murders or their sorcery, their fornications or their thefts"* (Rv.9:20-21). Those marked upon the forehead are those who knowingly reject Jesus Christ, His Church, and Christian Principles. Those marked upon their right hands are those who actively attack Christ and His Church--the persecutors, the false prophets and lying teachers, the Jezebels. The mark of the beast is found in Genesis--it is the mark of Cain. As Jesus said: *"By their fruits you will know them."*

The beast from the abyss is an antichrist figure. It is born out of chaos. It comes from the sea like a leopard, like a bear, like a lion. When this vision is reflected against the vision of Daniel--which certainly influenced the description of the beast--the creature seems to be more the Roman Empire than a solitary person. In Daniel, the ten horns symbolize ten separate kings; the ten horns and diadems of the beast of the Apocalypse could, likewise, symbolize ten Roman emperors. The only problem with this interpretation is verse 18 which reads:

A certain wisdom is needed here; anyone with a little ingenuity can calculate the number of the beast, for it is a number that stands for a certain man. The man's number is six hundred sixty-six (Rv.13:18).

The Seer implies that the beast is a particular person, knowable to his readers. He named the man through what is known as the “gematria” method. In both Hebrew and Greek, the letters of the alphabet were used as numerals. Because of this double function, names were converted into numbers and numbers into a name. A famous graffiti found in Pompeii reads: “I love the girl whose name is Phi Mu Epsilon”--in other words, the girl whose number is “545.” The problem, as one observed, is that every sum has a correct number, but the same number can be the answer to many sums. In the mind of John, the number 666 signified complete imperfection--evil. Throughout history, methods have been ingeniously designed to apply this number to everyone’s favorite hate candidate, beginning with Nero; and in our day the most likely honoree would be Hitler. Among other nominees for the beast award have been Caligula, Domitian, Luther, Muhammed, Napoleon, Henry Kissinger, the entire Latin Church, and the most recent nominee: Pope John Paul II.

Within a century after the writing of the Apocalypse, the precise figure was being questioned: was it 666 or 616? If the identity of the person was known in the first century, it was forgotten by the second century. Most reputable scholars agree that if it represents a particular person, this person ought to be sought among the candidates of the first century. The most obvious hypothesis has been that the number can be identified with Nero--not, however, in the Greek but in the Hebrew. *Neron Kaisar* translated into Hebrew produces 666.

There is still the possibility that the beast had more than one personification. More than one emperor could have been the antichrist; it is readily agreed that Caligula, Nero, or Domitian could have sat for his portrait. “*The Man*” identified by John may have been the present emperor Domitian who was well qualified for the number 666. Domitian’s full title, properly abbreviated in Greek, equals 666. It has been theorized that John saw Nero as the prototype of the antichrist and Domitian as the resurrected “spirit” of Nero. The beast did not die with Nero; he lived on to reappear in Domitian who resumed Nero’s policy of persecution, and surpassed him in his “*blasphemies against God...and the members of his heavenly household*” (Rv.13:6). Many modern biblical scholars insist that the antichrist is not a particular person, but rather an exceptional spirit of evil that reappears again and again in history, embodied in individuals and societies. John McKenzie expressed it this way, “Antichrist is rather a personification of the powers of evil which occasionally focus in some individual person and can be expected to do so again.”

THE 144,000

John knows that Christians under pressure from the world are going to be tempted to abandon Christ. The enticements and allurements of the pagan world could be intense, perhaps becoming like an intoxicating wine. Christian life, in comparison, may appear grey and dull, demanding so much for so little in return. John seeks to aid Christians to see life in its spiritual dimension and not merely look at its face value. He unmasks the seductions of this world for what they are: the smoke of Satan. He teaches that life cannot be lived for the moment only, for every moment in time has its eternal consequence. The quality of one's life on earth determines the quality of one's life in eternity.

The Seer seeks now to encourage Christian commitment to Christ and warns of the consequences of abandoning the Lord for the beast. We read that the dragon "*took up his position by the shore of the sea*" (Rv.12:17b). Here he establishes his throne on earth. His kingdom on earth rests upon sand and cannot stand. In a vision of contrast, the Lamb appears before the Seer standing upon Mt. Zion. Here He erects His throne. It is built upon rock and will endure. The winds and waves of persecution may beat against His kingdom, but it will stand for it is founded upon Rock. The Lord says:

Hear the words of the Lord, you arrogant... Thus says the Lord God: See, I am laying a stone in Zion, a stone that has been tested. A precious cornerstone as a sure foundation; he who puts his faith in it shall not be shaken (Is.28:14,16).

And the Lord shall be king over them on Mount Zion, from now on forever (Mi.4:7).

The Lamb appears on Mt. Zion as the Servant of Yahweh to establish God's Kingdom. We read in the Apocalypse:

Then the Lamb appeared in my vision. He was standing on Mount Zion, and with him were the hundred and forty-four thousand who had his name and the name of his Father written on their foreheads. I heard a sound from heaven which resembled the roaring of the deep, or loud peals of thunder; the sound I heard was like the melody of harpists playing on their harps. They were singing a new hymn before the throne, in the presence of the four living creatures and the elders. This hymn no one could learn except the hundred and forty-four thousand who had been ransomed from the world. These are men who have never been defiled by immorality with women. They are pure and follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They

have been ransomed as the first fruit of mankind for God and the Lamb. On their lips no deceit has been found; they are indeed without flaw (Rv.14:1-5).

We know from Chapter Three of the Apocalypse who the 144,000 are. They are those who, on this earth, *“held fast to my word and have not denied my name:”*

I will keep you safe in the time of trial which is coming on the whole world, to test all men on earth... I will make the victor a pillar in the temple of my God... I will inscribe on him the name of my God... and my own name is new (Rv.3:8c,10-12).

The refrains of this new song to be sung we have already heard in Chapter Five, verse 9, and we will hear echoes of it in Chapter Fifteen.

The 144,000 represent all those *“who had been ransomed from the world” (Rv.14:3b)* by the blood of the Lamb, they represent all those to be saved. They are *“the first fruits of mankind for God and the Lamb” (Rv.14:4b)*, (they are, perhaps, those who died in Nero’s persecution). *“The first fruits”* represent the full harvest to come. Speaking of them as virgins signifies the purity of their religious spirit. In the Scriptures, fornication and adultery often stood for idolatry. The saved were not seduced into lewdness by *“Jezebel, that self-styled prophetess.”* They are those who *“have not soiled their garments.”* *“On their lips no deceit has been found.”* They have lived the truth. (See Rv.14:4-5) Lying and deceit are characteristics of the followers of Satan, for *“lying speech is his native tongue; he is a liar and the father of lies” (Jn.8:44).* *“They are indeed without flaw.”* Speaking of the remnant of Israel, Zephaniah says, *“They shall do no wrong and speak no lies” (Zeph.3:13).* It is of these that Jesus speaks when he says, *“I know your deeds--your love and faith and service--as well as your patient endurance” (Rv.2:19).*

TIME OF JUDGMENT

The Seer now sees a series of angels sent forth from heaven heralding the hour of judgment. The first angel appears in the zenith of the sky declaring the *“eternal gospel”* to all mankind. We read:

Then I saw another angel flying in mid-heaven, the herald of everlasting good news to the whole world, to every nation and race, language and people. He said in a loud voice: “Honor God and give

him glory, for his time has come to sit in judgment. Worship the Creator of heaven and earth, the Creator of the sea and the springs” (Rv.14:6-7).

This angel signifies the spirit of God that constantly reveals itself to all mankind within the depths of its spirit and in the surrounding universe. This steadfast Presence of God is an eternal gospel, for it continually calls all mankind to repentance--to turn from evil and embrace the known good: “Honor God. Give Him glory. Worship the Creator!” Repentance is the fundamental condition for salvation--it opens the door to God’s salvific grace. Paul taught that the Wrath of God falls upon the pagan world precisely “*because they certainly had knowledge of God, yet they did not glorify him as God or give him thanks...these men who exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom.1:21,25).*

The author of Hebrews expresses the fundamental faith--available to all mankind--that is capable of producing repentance unto salvation: “*Anyone who comes to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.*” (Heb.11:6.) Paul writes:

When Gentiles who do not have the law keep it as by instinct...they show that the demands of the law are written in their hearts. Their conscience bears witness...and their thoughts will accuse or defend them on the day when, in accordance with the gospel I preach, God will pass judgment on the secrets of men through Christ Jesus (Rom.2:14-16).

To all mankind the angel cries: “*Honor God and give him glory, for his time has come to sit in judgment. Worship the creator of heaven and earth, the Creator of the sea and the springs” (Rv.14:7).*

A second angel appears and proclaims an end to the kingdom built upon sand, “*Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, which made all the nations drink the poisoned wine of her lewdness!*” (Rv.14:8). Here Babylon signifies the Roman Empire, but historically the city is a symbol of world power, corrupted and in rebellion towards its Creator--a power that seeks to exalt itself above God. It corrupts the moral order upon the earth. Its influence is spoken of as a poisoned wine of lewdness which intoxicates her subjects, leading them into embracing a life contrary to the commandments of God.

The third angel picks up the theme of the “*poisoned wine*” and declares that those who have willingly drunk of its poisonous draught have drunk unto themselves the Wrath of God: they will drink the wine of God’s wrath poured full strength into his cup of anger. It is a wrath that expresses the eternal justice of God. We read,

A third angel followed the others and said in a loud voice: “If anyone worships the beast or its image, or accepts its mark on his forehead or hand, he too will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger. He will be tormented in burning sulphur before the holy angels and before the Lamb, and the smoke of their torment shall rise forever and ever. There shall be no relief day or night for those who worship the beast or its image or accept the mark of its name.” This is what sustains the holy ones, who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus (Rv.14:9-12).

The Seer has presented a frightening and terrible picture of the eternal pains of Hell in full apocalyptic horror. It certainly is an effort to impress upon his readers the dreadful consequences of a godless life, one given over to the worship of the beast. It teaches that the rejection of the redemption offered through Jesus Christ has dreadful consequences. With milder expressions, Paul teaches the same truth:

...strict justice would require that God visit hardships on those who visit them on you...when with flaming power he will inflict punishment on those who do not acknowledge God nor heed the good news of our Lord Jesus. Such as these will suffer the penalty of eternal ruin apart from the presence of the Lord...when he comes, to be glorified in his holy ones and adored by all who have believed (2Thes.1:6,8-10).

As the joys of heaven cannot be described, neither can the pain of its loss. Whatever John writes is but a feeble expression of what will be suffered by the damned. Whatever it will be, it will never equal the sufferings of God and His Christ over their loss. There is no pain greater than to have perfect love for another and to have the other completely reject that love and all that it could mean for them. The angel goes on to say, “*This is what sustains the holy ones, who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.*” Yes! It is the thought of Hell that keeps many souls out of Hell, but it is indeed love that saves

the majority. Never to see His Face is more than most could bear. The whole world isn't worth that price!

A Voice from heaven confirms this truth and encourages a patient endurance in the faith:

I heard a voice from heaven say to me: "Write this down: Happy now are the dead who die in the Lord!" The Spirit added, "Yes, they shall find rest from their labors, for their good works accompany them" (Rv.14:13).

Here we have a confirmation that the holy ones entered into heaven immediately following their death: "Now" are the dead "happy!" Their happiness has much to do with the good works that have accompanied them.

The scene that follows is the Parousia--Jesus Christ comes in glory. It is heaven's harvest time on earth. The moment for this is an eternal divine moment decreed by God and executed by Christ. Paul writes, "No, the Lord himself will come down from heaven with the word of command, with the sound of the archangel's voice and God's trumpet" (1Thes.4:16). Paul once wrote that love endures forever. We see love still enduring in eternity in the obedience of Christ to the command of the Father. We read:

Then, as I watched, a white cloud appeared, and on the cloud sat One like a Son of Man wearing a gold crown on his head and holding a sharp sickle in his hand. Another angel came out of the temple and in a loud voice cried out to him who sat on the cloud, "Use your sickle and cut down the harvest, for now is the time to reap; the earth's harvest is fully ripe." So the one sitting on the cloud wielded his sickle over all the earth and reaped the earth's harvest (Rv.14:14-16).

Christ gathers the harvest only at the command of the Lord of the Harvest. First we see that the wheat is gathered into the barn--the elect are gathered to God. This again reflects the teachings of Paul:

Those who have died in Christ will rise first. Then we, the living, the survivors, will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Thenceforth we shall be with the Lord unceasingly. Console one another with this message (1Thes.4:16-18).

This will be the moment when the “two witnesses” hear, “‘Come up here!’ So they went up to heaven in a cloud as their enemies looked on” (Rv.11:12).

The Lord Himself gathers only the elect. It is the angel that administers the final judgment upon those who rejected God and His Christ. They are spoken of as “the vines of the earth;” they are the “grapes of the earth” that are placed into the “winepress of God’s wrath.” They too will have their Gethsemani. They refused to enter into the “holy City” and now they perish outside the city--in a sea of blood. We read:

Then out of the temple in heaven came another angel, who likewise held a sharp sickle. A second angel, who was in charge of the fire at the altar of incense, cried out in a loud voice to the one who held the sharp sickle, “Use your sharp sickle and gather the grapes from the vines of the earth, for the clusters are ripe.” So the angel wielded his sickle over the earth and gathered the grapes of the earth. He threw them into the huge winepress of God’s wrath. The winepress was trodden outside the city, and so much blood poured out of the winepress that for two hundred miles around, it reached as high as a horse’s bridle (Rv.14:17-20).

It is descriptive passages such as these that have led certain critics of the Apocalypse to say that the work is not Christian. The Apocalypse is as Christian as the Gospels. It may express itself more graphically and picturesquely, but the Apocalypse still proclaims Gospel-truth. In the Gospel account of Matthew we read:

The harvest is the end of the world, while the harvesters are the angels... The Son of Man will dispatch his angels to collect from his kingdom all who draw others to apostasy, and all evildoers. The angels will hurl them into the fiery furnace where they will wail and grind their teeth. Then the saints will shine like the sun in their Father’s kingdom. Let everyone heed what he hears!” (Mt.13:39b-43).

WE MUST HEED AND HEAR THE WHOLE GOSPEL TRUTH!!

CHAPTER 11

WORLD WITHOUT CHRIST

INTRODUCTION

A certain black lady in Alabama was famous for her ability to teach children. When asked her method, she replied, "Well, I tell them what I'm going to tell them. Then, I tell them. And then I tell them what I told them." Her method has much in common with the author of the Apocalypse. John's method of teaching is similar.

In the opening of the seven seals, the Seer tells us, in apocalyptic language, how the justice of God will be manifested upon the face of the earth: "*One quarter of the earth*" will be killed "*with sword and famine and plague and the wild beasts of the earth*" (Rv.6:8). This will be followed by cosmic catastrophes producing tremendous fear within the people of the earth. However, those who "*have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb*" will survive "*the great period of trial*" (7:14), and inherit eternal happiness with God. With the blowing of each of the seven trumpets, he unfolds before us the justice of God in which one third of the land, the trees, the green plants are destroyed, along with one third of the earth's water polluted and its inhabitants dying. Evil spirits are released upon the earth and a demonic cavalry comes from the East, destroying one third of the inhabitants of the earth. However, those who were witnesses for God upon earth and died faithful to Christ will rise from the dead and be assumed into Heaven with Christ.

As John's story unfolds, it becomes obvious that God permits all this evil to befall sinful mankind in order to produce repentance that leads to salvation. Nevertheless, many people refuse to repent. They appear to be dominated and possessed by "*the beast from the abyss.*" John declares that the time has come "*to destroy those who lay the earth waste*" (Rv.11:18), which implies destroying the "*beast that comes up from the abyss*" (Rv.11:7). John writes: "*I saw in heaven another sign, great and awe-inspiring: seven angels holding the seven final plagues which would bring God's wrath to a climax*" (Rv.15:1).

John begins his message again, for the third time. He pauses before he enumerates these final plagues that will bring to consummation the Wrath of God. He presents a scene that recalls Israel's exodus from Egypt through the Red Sea, escaping Pharaoh's army. He seeks to contrast this escape of Israel from Egypt with the escape of the Christian martyrs from "the beast." They too, have passed through the "red sea" of martyrdom that has led them safely into the Promised Land of God's eternal Presence. There, with the Song of Moses upon their lips, they attribute their escape and glory to God and the Lamb. As we read in Deuteronomy, Moses and Joshua recited a song before all Israel that declared the mercy and the justice of God:

For I will sing the Lord's renown. Oh, proclaim the greatness of our God! The Rock--how faultless are his deeds, how right all his ways! A faithful God, without deceit, how just and upright he is! (Dt.32:3-4).

John records in the Apocalypse:

I then saw something like a sea of glass mingled with fire. On the sea of glass were standing those who had won the victory over the beast and its image, and also the number that signified its name. They were holding the harps used in worshipping God, and they sang the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb:

"Mighty and wonderful are your works, Lord God Almighty! Righteous and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who would dare refuse you honor, or the glory due your name, O Lord? Since you alone are holy, all nations shall come and worship in your presence. Your mighty deeds are clearly seen" (Rv.15:2-4).

It was John's intention to recall the Song of Moses in order to prepare his listeners for what must follow. That song emphasizes the justice and righteousness of God, particularly in His relationship with unrepentant sinners: "How faultless are his deeds, how right all his ways!" How proud of man to sit in judgment of the works of God! In the Song of Moses, God's goodness to mankind is in contrast with man's behavior towards the good God:

Yet basely has he been treated by his degenerate children, a perverse and crooked race! Is the Lord to be thus repaid by you, O stupid and

foolish people? Is he not your father who created you? (Dt.32:5-6a).

As the Song of Moses ends, it places these words in the mouth of Yahweh:

Learn then that I, I alone, am God, and there is no god besides me. It is I who bring both death and life, I who inflict wounds and heal them, and from my hand there is no rescue. To the heavens I raise my hand and swear: As surely as I live forever, I will sharpen my flashing sword, and my hand shall lay hold of my quiver. With vengeance I will repay my foes and requite those who hate me.

Moses ends with the exhortation: *“Exult with him, you heavens, glorify him, all you angels of God; For he avenges the blood of his servants and purges his people’s land” (Dt.32:39-41,43).*

The fiery sea beneath the feet of the saints represents their martyrdom and also the wrath of God that is to fall upon the earth precisely because of their martyrdom. In the vision related by John, he emphasizes that the plagues to fall upon the inhabitants of the world are decreed by God, and no power--either in heaven or earth--can alter what must come to pass. Seven angels appear out of the temple dressed in priestly garb. They are ministers of the sanctuary sent to purify the earth of its pollution so that it may offer worthy praise to God. We read:

After this I had another vision. The heavenly sanctuary which is the tent of witness opened up, and out of it came the seven angels holding the seven plagues. The angels were dressed in pure white linen, each with a sash of gold about his breast. One of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of the God who lives forever and ever. Then the sanctuary became so filled with the smoke which arose from God’s glory and might that no one could enter it until the seven plagues of the seven angels had come to an end (Rv.15: 5-8).

In this vision, one of the four living creatures--as a representative of nature--presents the seven bowls of divine wrath to the seven angels. Once again we are retold the relationship between moral disorder and cosmic disturbances. God uses natural disasters to remind mankind of its sinfulness, call it to repentance, and warn it of the ultimate eternal disaster that will fall upon those who fail to repent. We read in Wisdom:

...he shall arm creation to requite the enemy (5:17). You sent upon them swarms of dumb creatures for vengeance; that they might recognize that a man is punished by the very things through which he sins (Wis.11:15-16).

Wisdom teaches that the very thing God uses to punish the enemies of God's people will benefit the saints *"for by the things through which their foes were punished they in their need were benefited"* (11:5).

The smoke-filled sanctuary recalls the day when even Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, and when the priest could no longer perform in the Sanctuary within the temple of Jerusalem. In a word, there is no longer an intercessory prayer that may alter God's execution of justice.

SEVEN BOWLS OF WRATH

Seven angels, at the command of God, go forth to afflict the earth. The purpose of these afflictions is to bring about an end of a world--a world that had never existed, before or since. All the kingdoms before were but shadows of what now has come to be--Egypt, Babylon, Tyre, Nineveh. Their final destinies--by a presentation in miniature--foretell the final end of the world created by the beast from the abyss. We read:

I heard a mighty voice from the sanctuary say to the seven angels, "Go and pour out upon the earth the seven bowls of God's wrath!" The first angel went out, and when he poured out his bowl on the earth, severe and festering boils broke out on the men who had accepted the mark of the beast or worshiped its image.

The second angel poured out his bowl on the sea. The sea turned to blood like that of a corpse, and every creature living in the sea died.

The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs. These also turned to blood. Then I heard the angel in charge of the waters cry out: "You are just, O Holy One who is and who was, in passing this sentence! To those who shed the blood of saints and prophets, you have given blood to drink; they deserve it." Then I heard the altar cry out: "Yes, Lord God Almighty, your judgments are true and just."

The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun. He was commissioned to burn men with fire. Those who were scorched by

the intense heat blasphemed the name of God who had power to send these plagues, but they did not repent or give him due honor (Rv.16:1-9).

These calamities, as well as the others in the Apocalypse, are not to be taken literally. They are symbolic. At times, we can only try to conjecture what the author is symbolizing. In this section, the theme shows an end to persecution through the destruction of the persecutors.

The first bowl of wrath afflicts the subjects of the beast. It tells of “severe and festering boils.” Such a symbol speaks of internal corruption that rises to the surface in social evils. The blood stream of the spirit has become poisonous and it cannot but erupt in corrupt deeds and behavior affecting the entire communal body. To accept the “mark of the beast” is to accept a way of life contrary to the will of the Creator. It is life out of harmony with its intrinsic nature. It is life in defiance of its own natural good. The consequences cannot be but evil. Nietzsche, the German philosopher, expressed the spirit of the Antichrist when he prayed: “Evil be thou my god!” The second and third bowls of wrath turn the sea and the waters of the earth into blood. Blood symbolizes the source of life. Spilling of blood signifies the death of a being. We have symbols here that speak of death coming by both land and sea. The death of the sea-life could signify the end of the commerce that was the life of the empire. From the verses that follow, we know that the blood symbolizes death. The death that comes avenges the shedding of the blood of the Christian Community.

The Seer signifies the justice of such deadly punishment by putting into the mouth of the angel who guards the waters a hymn of praise to Divine Justice. The crying out of the altar symbolizes the voice of the martyrs, adding their “Amen!” to the angelic hymn.

The fourth bowl of wrath speaks of scorching heat. The image of scorching heat evokes a picture of life becoming burdensome and intolerable because of the environment. It is a picture of life that now produces more pain than pleasure. Genesis implies this to be one of the bitter fruits of sin: “*Cursed by the ground because of you! In toil shall you eat its yield all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to you... By the sweat of your face shall you get bread to eat*” (Gn.3:17b-19a).

It recalls the scorpion's sting that causes men to seek death but do not find it: "...they will yearn to die but death will escape them" (Rv.9:6). Because life becomes burdensome, men blaspheme God. They blame Him for their unhappy condition and the present state of social affairs. They never reflect upon the root-cause of these afflictions permitted by God--their unrepentant sins. Mankind's reaction to all these afflictions is to bite the tongue, curse and swear. Nevertheless, "they did not turn away from their wicked deeds" (Rv.16:11); "they did not repent or give him due honor" (Rv.16:9).

The last three bowls of wrath are poured out upon the government itself. We read:

The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast. Its kingdom was plunged into darkness; men bit their tongues in pain and blasphemed the God of heaven because of their suffering and their boils. But they did not turn away from their wicked deeds.

The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates. Its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings of the East. I saw three unclean spirits like frogs come from the mouth of the dragon, from the mouth of the beast, and from the mouth of the false prophet; these spirits were devils who worked prodigies. They went out to assemble all the kings of the earth for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. ("Be on your guard! I come like a thief." Happy the man who stays wide awake and fully clothed for fear of going naked and exposed for all to see!") The devils then assembled the kings in a place called in Hebrew "Armageddon" (Rv.16:10-16).

Darkness falls over the throne. The light of the kingdom is eclipsed. The kingdom is no longer a source of awe and admiration for the world. Men no longer ask, "Who can compare with the beast, or come forward to fight against it?" (Rv.13:4). The clay feet of the iron beast have become visible. It no longer offers security, and it becomes a source of desolation. Fear and hopelessness seize the souls of its subjects.

The sixth bowl of wrath foretells the wars that will complete the destruction of the kingdom. Enemy forces coming upon the kingdom from the East symbolize the coming barbarian invasions. That the "great river Euphrates" dries up implies that the same power that dried up a path within the Red Sea calls forth these forces upon the kingdom as divine chastisement.

The Apocalypse presents a picture of an unholy trinity: The Dragon Satan who fathers his son, the Beast, and the False Prophet that gives expression to their mutual unclean spirit. They are three poisonous springs, but one source of corruption. The Apocalypse speaks of these as *“three unclean spirits like frogs.”* As John writes, *“...many false prophets have appeared in the world” (1Jn.4:1).* These false prophets and teachers are the toads of Satan. John tells us that these lying, deceiving spirits gather the forces of the earth *“for battle on the great day of God the Almighty.”* Here our Seer declares that the overthrowing of the empire comes through divine intervention, and gives Him glory.

Apparently, the Seer interjects a warning to the Christian Community that they should not be caught off guard, like a sleeping man who must flee his burning house and run unclothed into the public streets. This will certainly expose their spiritual nakedness.

We are told that the evil spirits--the devils--have inspired the kings of the empire to gather in battle at Armageddon. The site of the battle is no doubt as symbolic as the rest of the material in these recorded visions. The actual meaning of the word Armageddon is disputed. It probably refers to the mountain of Megiddo, where famous battles of religious history have been fought on its plains. The place itself has become a symbol of where good and evil encounter one another in a lethal battle. Unless one is a “fundamentalist,” the actual battle could take place anywhere, and assume any number of forms. Armageddon is wherever the forces of good and evil meet for battle. The very soul of a human being is an Armageddon! In the mind of the Seer, Armageddon may have been before the gates of *“the great city.”*

The Seer relates that the seventh angel poured out his bowl upon the empty air.

Finally, the seventh angel poured out his bowl upon the empty air. From the throne in the sanctuary came a loud voice which said, “It is finished!” There followed lightning flashes and peals of thunder, then a violent earthquake. Such was its violence that there has never been one like it in all the time men have lived on the earth. The great city was split into three parts, and the other Gentile cities also fell. God remembered Babylon the great, giving her the cup filled with the blazing wine of his wrath. Every island fled and mountains disappeared. Giant hailstones like huge weights came crashing

down on mankind from the sky, and the men blasphemed God for the plague of hailstones, because this plague was so severe (Rv.16:17-21).

The bowl of wrath poured into the empty air signifies the defeat of Satan. The air beneath the firmament was considered his dominion. Satan has been cast down. His power has been overthrown. The heavens are purified of its pollution. With the fall of Satan goes the empire he has established upon the earth. We have the domino effect: Satan falls, then the great city, and then ten kingdoms--the "Gentile cities." This is all being signified by the series of cosmic disturbances—"such was its violence" that it surpassed anything of the past. *"The great city was split into three parts, and the other Gentile cities also fell."* The house has been divided and it cannot stand. The great city of the Gentiles to which *"the Dragon gave it his own power and throne, together with great authority"* (Rv.13:2), has fallen. As the heavens observed, *"God remembered Babylon the great, giving her the cup filled with the blazing wine of his wrath."*

It may be difficult for us today to grasp John's concept of the Roman Empire embodied in its corporate symbol, the emperor. As today the reigning monarch of England symbolizes Great Britain, so the emperor of Rome symbolized the Roman Empire. John's own awe of it may have been expressed in those words: *"Who can compare with the beast, or come forward to fight against it?"* In his mind, it was the epitome of political evil on earth. In truth, the world had never seen anything like the Roman Empire, and has never seen anything like it since. It epitomized the world before Jesus Christ. Regardless of what the world has become since the coming of Christ, it has never been the same. Evil still abounds, but it has been within limits.

In the Roman Empire evil reached a global scale yet to be repeated. John attributed the magnitude of this evil to the diabolical possession of a social order symbolized by "the beast from the abyss." This beast is clearly distinct from the great Dragon--Satan. The beast appears to be a veritable incarnation of the spirit of Satan--the satanic spirit that embodies itself in this world through governments and their leaders. This evil power and authority appeared to peak in certain personalities that were able to serve as proper channels for an extraordinary manifestation of evil. However, it is the general corruption of the masses that makes such a leader possible. The leader eventually surpasses the masses, and becomes abhorrent even to them. It was said that "the desire of the incredible" characterized Nero, and that Caligula

“strove most of all to realize what most men deemed impossible.” The human soul or spirit in a Nero becomes concentrated corruption--self-consecration to undiluted evil. It must be evil without social acceptability. It flaunts and parades what still causes shame in those in whom a hint of goodness remains. Such spectacles horrify, while fascinating, the general public. In such a picture, society catches a glimpse of its own soul. When such a corporate symbol of evil falls from power its chief supporters may often be its greatest condemners--as in the case of Nero, as with Hitler, as with Mussolini, as with Stalin.

John’s presentation of the beast from the abyss certainly implies that the beast is a figure of the antichrist, which embodies itself in more than one person. As the concept of the antichrist unfolds within the Scriptures, its surface appearance presents a conflicting picture. This beast from the abyss is not an easy picture to hold in focus and study. At one moment it appears to be the Empire itself incorporated in its emperors, then this image appears to dissolve, and the beast resurfaces within the personalities of two particular emperors, commonly recognized as Nero and Domitian. If the beast is the antichrist, this makes its definition difficult. It leaves one with the impression that the antichrist can be a political movement at one moment and at another time a political leader. The Scriptures appear to reveal this.

Perhaps the best we can deduce from Revelation is the existence of the spirit of the antichrist. The Apocalypse presents this evil spirit as embodied in the beast from the abyss, which appears at one moment as the Roman Empire, and at another time as a Roman Emperor. The Scriptures confirm that this spirit has sought and achieved more than one embodiment within the history of mankind. Many believe that the Apocalypse implies that before the end of time the Antichrist will make a final appearance incorporated both in a political movement and in its political leaders. Of such conjectures, movies are made. If such would come to be, we would need the insight of a John or a Paul to discern its embodiment!

SOUL OF BABYLON

The scene in the Apocalypse changes. The seventh angel, who is a symbol of spiritual discernment, comes to the Seer in order to open his eyes to see the soul of Babylon. We read:

Then one of the seven angels who were holding the seven bowls came to me and said: "Come, I will show you the judgment in store for the great harlot who sits by the waters of the deep. The kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the earth's inhabitants have grown drunk on the wine of her lewdness." The angel then carried me away in spirit to a desolate place where I saw a woman seated on a scarlet beast which was covered with blasphemous names. This beast had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet and adorned with gold and pearls and other jewels. In her hand she held a gold cup that was filled with the abominable and sordid deeds of her lewdness. On her forehead was written a symbolic name, "Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and all the world's abominations." I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of God's holy ones and the blood of those martyred for their faith in Jesus (Rv.17:1-6).

The Seer is carried in spirit to a desolate and lonely place, which signifies the absence of God--a place abandoned by God. This implies the spiritual atmosphere in which Babylon now dwells. Babylon appears as a woman on a beast, in contrast with the Woman who appears in the heavens surrounded by the light of God. In the eyes of heaven, she appears as a spiritual harlot who seduces the world with idolatrous worship. The angel speaks of kings who commit fornication with her, and the inhabitants of the earth who are intoxicated with her spirit. This indicates that she led nations and kingdoms into idolatry and that the wine of her false doctrines permeated and perverted the religious spirit of mankind.

The woman is seated upon a scarlet beast all covered with blasphemies. She is clothed in purple, a symbol of royalty, and scarlet, a symbol of the Dragon. The woman and the beast are one and the same; one is the extension of the other. The scarlet color of the beast represents the satanic powers possessed by the woman, and the heads and horns of the beast indicate the extensiveness of her reign. The beast is completely covered with blasphemous names, indicating that the entire empire is given over to the idolatry of the woman.

The Seer beholds the dazzling appearance of the woman. She is clothed in the richest of garments, and adorned with the finest of jewels. In her hand, she holds a gold cup between her jeweled fingers--a cup she shares with her lovers. However, appearances are deceiving. Inside the cup, hidden from view, is the wine of her spirit. The woman herself is like her golden cup; the cup

holds evil. When one looks beneath the exterior beauty of the woman, one discovers the abominable and sordid deeds of her lewdness. Any number of the empresses of Rome could have sat for her portrait--Livia, Aggripina, Pompea, Messalina.

It was a Roman custom for harlots to place their names above their doors or wear them upon a headband--it has always paid to advertise! The Seer sees on the woman a name, which he clearly states to be mysterious, symbolic: "*On her forehead was written a symbolic name, 'Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and all the world's abominations.'*" Her name is a mystery--it spells out the "mystery of lawlessness." Her children are as evil as she who is a curse upon the entire earth. She is a drunken harlot, inebriated on "the blood of God's holy ones." It is because she has drunk of this wine that she now staggers and falls. She has been weighed in the balance...

THE RIDDLE

John becomes dazzled by the woman. This implies her seductive force upon Christians. We read:

When I saw her I was greatly astonished. The angel said to me: "Why are you so taken aback? I will explain to you the symbolism of the woman and of the seven-headed and ten-horned beast carrying her. The beast you saw existed once but now exists no longer. It will come up from the abyss once more before going to final ruin. All the men of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of the living from the creation of the world shall be amazed when they see the beast, for it existed once and now exists no longer, and yet it will exist again. Here is the clue for one who possesses wisdom! The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits enthroned. They are also seven kings: five have already fallen, one lives now, and the last has not yet come; but when he does come he will remain only a short while. The beast which existed once but now exists no longer, even though it is an eighth king, is really one of the seven and on its way to ruin. The ten horns you saw represent ten kings who have not yet been crowned; they will possess royal authority along with the beast, but only for an hour. Then they will come to agreement and bestow their power and authority on the beast. They will fight against the Lamb but the Lamb will conquer them, for he is the Lord of lords and the King of kings; victorious, too, will be his

followers--the ones who were called: the chosen and the faithful.”

The angel then said to me: “The waters on which you saw the harlot enthroned are large numbers of peoples and nations and tongues. The ten horns you saw on the beast will turn against the harlot with hatred; they will strip off her finery and leave her naked; they will devour her flesh and set her on fire. For God has put it into their minds to carry out his plan, by making them agree to bestow their sovereignty on the beast until his will is accomplished. The woman you saw is the great city which has sovereignty over the kings of the earth” (Rv.17:6-18).

As did the angel in Daniel, the angel in the Apocalypse discerns the vision for John. Without the spirit of discernment, many in the Christian Community would be deceived by the external beauty of Babylon. They can become identified with her without realizing what spirit has possessed them. Many members of the Church had already been seduced by the glamour of Jezebel and the teachings of the Nicolaitans. The seventh angel explains the vision to the Seer. He is told that the seven heads of the beast are both the hills upon which the city rested and the kings that rule her. The one symbol is doubly symbolic. In the apocalypse a symbol can have one meaning and, a moment later, another. Probably the ten horns symbolize both the satellite nations and those incorporated into the empire.

The Seer is told that the beast once existed but no longer exists. However, he will return once more from the abyss before going to final ruin. The angel proposes a riddle concerning the seven kings:

...five have already fallen, one lives now, and the last has not yet come; but when he does come he will remain only a short while. The beast which existed once but now exists no longer, even though it is an eighth king, is really one of the seven and is on its way to ruin” (Rv.17:10-11).

The riddle remains a riddle if one demands a solution without a doubt.

It is generally agreed that John speaks of Domitian as the present incarnation of the beast. Referring to him as the eighth although he is one of the seven implies he is an incarnation of Nero. However, this poses a problem since Domitian is, strictly speaking, the eleventh emperor. However, scholars have

solved the problem by removing the names of Galba, Otho, and Vitellius--- three men who followed in quick succession to the throne. They did not rule long enough for their names to have left an impression upon the Empire outside of Rome. Next, it is proposed that the Seer wrote from the standpoint of being in the reign of Vespasian--the first emperor to stabilize the government after the death of Nero. This would fix the first five emperors who have fallen to be Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero. The living emperor would be Vespasian. The seventh emperor--the one to come-- would be his son Titus who reigned only a little more than a year and then died. This brings Domitian to the throne--the reincarnation of Nero. It is conjectured that the ten uncrowned kings represent the barbaric hordes yet to be allied with the Empire. They are of the same evil spirit that rules the beast. They will be subservient to the beast and join with her in her attacks upon Christ and His Church.

The angel proclaims both the victory of Christ and the Church *“for he is the Lord of lords and the King of kings; victorious, too, will be his followers--the ones who were called: the chosen and faithful”* (Rv.17:14b). The angel implies a distinction among the called. “Many are called but few are chosen.” The Chosen are those who answer the call and remain faithful to their vocation. The Angel reveals that the allies of “the harlot” will turn in hatred against her and become God’s means to destroy her. Her death description calls to mind the Old Testament legislation for the death of a harlot: stripped of her clothing and burned to death (Lv.21:9). The Seer hears that the alliance with the ten kings and their rebellion has been part of God’s design to destroy the woman. Evil is destructive of itself, and becomes the instrument of its own torture and defeat.

The angel of discernment concludes by identifying the woman enthroned upon the seven hills with seven kings: *“The woman you saw is the great city which has sovereignty over the kings of the earth”* (Rv.17:18). “The great city” is the Roman Empire!

John lived in the midst of the Roman evil. He personally experienced the full horror of it in the senseless and wanton slaughter of the apostles and other Christian saints. It willfully, and delightedly, destroyed that which was most beautiful, most holy, and most redemptive within its society. In its brutal murder of the saints of God, it most clearly expressed its rebellion and rejection of goodness, and its willing embrace of evil and its companions: death and corruption. If God is personal, if God is good, then the good God

must deal with such a situation in justice or mercy. God expresses His goodness either through his infinite mercy--when this is possible--or through his infinite justice when the situation demands it. Divine justice demands that God reward His holy ones and compensate them for what they have suffered in His name. What they suffered as the People of God, they suffered for Him: in them, God suffered. The destructive hate vented upon the persons of the saints was truly directed towards God.

The Apocalypse demonstrates the patience God has with evil. He permits evil to reproduce upon the earth its own bitter fruit, but only in a limited degree. God uses the bitter fruit of sin to call sinners to repentance. Society reaps a bitter harvest of wars and natural disasters because it sowed the seeds for such in its unrepentant sins. Genesis suggests a relationship between mankind and the rest of creation when it speaks of God giving man dominion over the earth. Apparently this relationship would result in either benedictions or maledictions: "*Cursed be the ground because of you!*" (Gn.3:17).

Just as the kingdom of Babylon, in its monarch, had been weighed in the balance and found wanting, John knew it would be the same for the Roman Empire--the New Babylon: it would be destroyed. He found symbols for this destruction in the prophecies that foretold the downfall of Babylon and Tyre. Egypt, for John, especially symbolized Rome. Egypt epitomized rebellion and hardness of heart in the face of the divine revelation sent to it, as did Rome in its rejection of the Gospel. The plagues that fell upon Egypt were shadows of the evil that was to fall full force upon the Roman Empire.

LAMENTATIONS

John never directly relates the fall of Rome. Much as a writer of Greek tragedy would use a chorus to relate details of his tale, so John uses a series of lamentations to express the world shaking event of the collapse of an empire. We read:

After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. His authority was so great that all the earth was lighted up by his glory. He cried out in a strong voice: "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place for demons. She is a cage for every unclean spirit, a cage for every filthy and disgusting bird: For she has made all the nations drink the poisoned wine of her lewdness. The kings of the earth committed fornication with her, and the

world's merchants grew rich from her wealth and wantonness." Then I heard another voice from heaven say: "Depart from her my people, for fear of sinning with her and sharing the plagues inflicted on her! For her sins have piled up as high as heaven, and God keeps count of her crimes. Pay her back as she has paid others: pay her double for her deeds! Pour into her cup twice the amount she concocted! In proportion to her boasting and sensuality, repay her in torment and grief! For she said to herself, "I sit enthroned as a queen. No widow am I, and never will I go into mourning!" Therefore her plagues will come all at once, death and mourning and famine. She shall be consumed by fire, for mighty is the Lord God who condemns her" (Rv.18:1-8).

The angel who announces the fall of Babylon, whose presence lighted the whole earth, signifies the power and presence of God. God has condemned her and she shall be consumed by fire because she has become the home of demons: a cage to catch and house every unclean spirit. All foul spirits find a roost in her. She is totally corrupt spiritually. None could be her partner without being corrupted by her. She contaminates the waters of the world. A voice from heaven urges the People of God to disassociate themselves from her or else become caught up in her corruptive web and suffer her plagues. Most scholars agree that this is not an admonition to physically depart from the Roman Empire, but rather a warning not to become part of her spirit. At the time it would have implied leaving the known world. The words found in John's letter express those sentiments:

Have no love for the world, nor the things that the world affords... for nothing that the world affords comes from the Father. Carnal allurements, enticements for the eye, the life of empty show--all these are from the world. And the world within its seductions is passing away (1Jn.2:15-17).

This is not a condemnation of God's creation, but of the work of darkness that perverts the good of this world. A Christian must discern the spirit or else be caught within a spirit that corrupts. Here it is not so much a matter of spirit and flesh as it is spirit versus spirit. It is the old business of not being able to serve two masters, especially when one is Christ and the other Satan. You must indeed end up by loving one and hating the other.

Rome is condemned to receive double what she has given to others. Each sin has a two-edged sword which hurts both oneself and those sinned against. Each sin has a double consequence and receives a double punishment. The Apocalypse stresses that Rome's fall results from her pride, not her wealth: "*I sit enthroned as a queen!*" (Rv.18:7b). The chief evil consists of the failure to recognize that her authority must be submissive to the authority of God. She has declared herself an absolute authority unto herself and thereby challenges the authority of God, which is essentially the cause of her fall: "*God resists the proud!*" "*She shall be consumed by fire, for mighty is the Lord God who condemns--Babylon the great, the mother of harlots*" (see Rv.18:7b). John's reaction to Rome does not represent that of some rural Galilean seeing the neon lights of the city for the first time or the over-reaction of a pious Christian soul. We have only to read the accounts of the pagan Roman intellectuals, such as Suetonius, Seneca, Horace, Juvenal, and Tacitus to realize that John understates the case.

It was written in the Jewish Talmud that ten measures of wealth came down to the earth: Rome received nine and the rest of the world only one. As the Talmud saw it, Rome possessed 9/10ths of the world's wealth. The city of Rome was the center of this wealth. It glutted itself upon the goods of the world. It is difficult to conceive, but it is estimated that there were 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire. Its entire economy was built upon the enslavement of the bodies and souls of other human beings. It was not uncommon for one human being to possess four or five hundred slaves. One Roman writer advised, "Use your slaves like the limbs of your body--each for its own end." Millions of human beings were but physical instruments for the service and entertainment of others. Often slaves were assigned to brothels and sports arenas.

The wealth of individuals was inconceivable, and the squandering of it, incomprehensible. Vitellius--emperor for less than a year--was reported to have spent nearly \$20,000,000 mainly on food. At one banquet given by Nero, the roses alone, coming from Egypt, cost nearly \$100,000. Pearls were the most expensive jewels in Rome. It became a fad to dissolve them in vinegar or wine and serve them to guests. By this means, Valerius Maximus was said to have drunk a million sesterces in a single gulp.

Aristides wrote: "If there is anything you cannot see in Rome, then it is a thing which does not exist and which never existed." Tacitus, writing on the death of Christians under Nero, said, "Mockery of every sort was added to

their deaths.” And he observed that even the Romans realized the Christians were destroyed “to glut one man’s cruelty.” Perhaps the immorality and corruption of Rome may be caught in the example of the empress Messalina, the wife of Claudius, who secretly went in the evening to a public brothel and served there as a common prostitute “under the feigned name of Lycisca” (Juvenal). Tacitus wrote that Rome was “the place into which from all over the world all atrocious and shameful things flow and where they are most popular.” In the words of Seneca, the tutor of Nero, Rome was “a filthy sewer.” And to that John might add: “The Wrath of God will flush it down to Hell!”

The Seer records the laments of Rome’s lovers--the kings of the earth, the merchants of the world, the sailors and ship owners. We read:

The kings of the earth who committed fornication with her and wallowed in her sensuality will weep and lament over her when they see the smoke arise as she burns. They will keep their distance for fear of the punishment inflicted on her and will say: “Alas, alas, great city that you are, Babylon the mighty! In a single hour your doom has come!”

The merchants of the world will weep and mourn over her too, for there will be no more market for their imports--their cargoes of gold and silver, precious stones, and pearls; fine linen and purple garments, silk and scarlet cloth; fragrant wood of every kind, all sorts of ivory pieces and expensive wooden furniture; bronze, iron and marble; cinnamon and amomum; perfumes, myrrh and frankincense; wine and olive oil; fine flour and grain; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; slaves and human lives.

“The fruit your appetite craved has deserted you. All your luxury and splendor are gone; you shall never find them again!”

The merchants who deal in these goods, who grew rich from business with the city, will keep their distance for fear of the punishment inflicted on her. Weeping and mourning, they cry out:

“Alas, alas, the great city, dressed in fine linen and purple and scarlet, Adorned all in gold and jewels and pearls! In a single hour this great wealth has been destroyed!”

Every captain and navigator, all sailors and seafaring men, then stood at a distance and cried out when they saw the smoke go up as

the city burned to the ground: "What city could have compared with this great one!" They poured dust on their heads and cried out, weeping and mourning:

"Alas, alas, the great city, in which all shipowners grew rich from their profitable trade with her! In a single hour her destruction has come about!" (Rv.18:9-19).

All her lovers lament her death; *"her companions in sin I will plunge into intense suffering unless they repent of their sins with her"* (Rv,2:22). It is intimated that only because of her fall and destruction many would be brought to repentance and salvation. The reason Babylon must fall is precisely because she has become a stumbling block--a Satan--in the way of Christ and His Church. By surrendering herself to the spirit of the Dragon she becomes the perverter of the good. By her power and luxury, she seduces kingdoms. They will lament what her loss meant to them, but they will distance themselves from her for fear of sharing in her fate.

The businessmen of the world, the ship owners and seamen, will bitterly lament her fall, for they had catered to her extravagances and desires for luxuries. They stripped the world of its goods to glut her appetite for dainties and to increase their own personal wealth. They eagerly bartered their souls to obtain her gold. Upon the backs of their slaves they amassed their fortunes. Everything of value upon the face of the earth became grist in the mills of financial profit.

Delicacies were brought to Rome from the British Channel to the Ganges. Silver came from Carthage in Spain, mined by 40,000 slaves. Diamonds and emeralds came from Scythia, pearls came from India, silk came from China--a pound of silk sold for a pound of gold. Pliny wrote that in Rome there was "a frantic passion for purple." Purple dye and cloth came from Phoenicia. The dye was extracted from a shellfish; one "Murex" produced one drop of dye. A sweet smelling citrus wood came from the Atlas regions of North Africa. A table made of this wood sold from \$10,000-\$40,000.

In the valuable commodities to be bartered and sold, the least of all were "slaves and human lives"; they were listed after horses, cattle and carriages. Human beings fell to the bottom of the list of valuables--human beings for whom Christ died upon the Cross and one of whom is more valuable than an entire world. Such is the evaluation of human life in a world without Christ!

John writes that those *“who grew rich from business with the city will keep their distance for fear of punishment inflicted upon her.”* They will weep and mourn for their lost profits and for that way of life to which they had grown accustomed. Captains, navigators, sailors and ship owners will join in the lament of the merchants, for their own selfish profits have ended. *“They poured dust on their heads”* and wept and mourned aloud. A world had truly come to an end, and all who were a vital part of its spirit suffer their own personal loss: *“...a man is punished by the very things through which he sins”* (Wis.11:16).

Did John see the destruction of Rome as the end of the world? It certainly ended a world. The end of Rome as described by John certainly symbolizes, for us who have lived after the Fall of Rome, the End of the World. We are left with a symbol far better than that of Egypt and Babylon. John goes on to show that whoever, society or person, refuses to repent in the face of God’s patience and limited chastisements will experience the unmitigated justice of God for hardness of heart. It leaves no other door open for the goodness of God to be expressed on earth: *“Ask and you shall receive!”*

As one would throw a rock into the sea which would then sink beneath the waves never to be seen again, so shall be the passing of the Roman Empire. John observed:

A powerful angel picked up a stone like a huge millstone and hurled it into the sea and said: “Babylon the great city shall be cast down like this, with violence, and nevermore be found! No tunes of harpists and minstrels, of flutists and trumpeters, shall ever again be heard in you! No craftsmen in any trade shall ever again be found in you! No sound of the millstone shall ever again be heard in you! No light from a burning lamp shall ever again be seen in you! No voices of bride and groom shall ever again be heard in you! Because your merchants were the world’s nobility, you led all nations astray by your sorcery. In her was found the blood of prophets and saints and of all who were slain on the earth” (Rv.18:21-24).

As the world laments, heaven rejoices because God’s justice has been vindicated. The Fall of Rome results from God avenging the death of his saints: *“Rejoice over her, you heavens, you saints, apostles and prophets! For God has judged your case against her”* (Rv.18:20). Because her sorcery led the world astray, she has fallen never to rise again. She became a scandal to all

human life. She played Satan's role too well. *"For her sins have piled up as high as heaven, and God keeps count of her crimes" (Rv.18:5). "In her was found the blood of prophets and saints and of all who were slain on the earth" (Rv.18:24). Their blood has fallen upon her head. Judgment has come and God pays "her double for her deeds!" He poured "into her cup twice the amount she concocted!" (Rv.18:6).*

Moses and Joshua had sung: *"Oh, proclaim the greatness of our God! The Rock--how faultless are his deeds, how right all his ways! A faithful God, without deceit, how just and upright he is!"* They ended their song of praise on this note: *"Exult with him, you heavens, glorify him, all you angels of God; for he avenges the blood of his servants and purges his people's land" (Dt.32:3-4,43).*

It is not surprising that John records:

After this I heard what sounded like the loud song of a great assembly in heaven. They were singing: "Alleluia! Salvation, glory and might belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just! He has condemned the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her harlotry. He has avenged the blood of his servants which was shed by her hand." Once more they sang "alleluia!" And as the smoke began to rise from her forever and ever, the four and twenty elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God seated on the throne and sang, "Amen! Alleluia!"

A voice coming from the throne cried out [the voice of Christ, no doubt]: "Praise our God, all you his servants, the small and the great, who revere him!" Then I heard what sounded like the shouts of a great crowd, or a roaring of the deep, or mighty peals of thunder, as they cried: "Alleluia! The Lord is king, our God, the Almighty! Let us rejoice and be glad, and give him glory! For this is the wedding day of the Lamb; his bride has prepared herself for the wedding. She has been given a dress to wear made of finest linen, brilliant white." [The linen dress is the virtuous deeds of God's saints] (Rv.19:1-8).

As John stands there experiencing the ineffable glory of a vision in which all heaven is singing, the angel commands him:

“Write this down: Happy are they who have been invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb.” The angel continued, “These words are true; they come from God” (Rv.19:9).

John is so overcome by the sense of God’s glory in creation that he tells us:

I fell at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, “No, get up! I am merely a fellow servant with you and your brothers who give witness to Jesus. Worship God alone. The prophetic spirit proves itself by witnessing to Jesus” (Rv.19:10).

Rome had fallen because it had worshiped the creature rather than the Creator. It did not recognize the day of its visitation and denied *“that Jesus is the Christ.”* It had been overcome by the spirit of the antichrist. Those remaining in the world would always be exposed to these temptations.

The Seer has observed world history from the dimension of heaven, and he has presented this vision to us. All has come to be as God has willed it. However, from the standpoint of the earth, history has unfolded following its natural course, and in so doing has fulfilled the Will of God. The evil punishments mankind brought upon itself have fulfilled the Just Will of God.

CHAPTER 12
CITY OF GOD
INTRODUCTION

As we approach the end of our study of the Apocalypse, it would be in order to recall the final warning of its author:

If anyone adds to these words, God will visit him with all the plagues described herein! If anyone takes from the words of this prophetic book, God will take away his share in the tree of life and the holy city described here! (Rv.22:18-19).

The author warns interpreters not to tamper with his work. One does so at the risk of one's own spiritual peril. Neither do these words encourage superficial or careless interpretation of the text. In our presentation of the Apocalypse, we have studiously and prayerfully, and in keeping with the time and ability allotted to us, adhered to the principles and guidelines laid down by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, which are:

1. The interpreter of sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writer really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words.

2. Those who search out the intention of the sacred writers must, among other things, have regard for literary forms. For truth is proposed and expressed in a variety of ways, depending on whether a text is history of one kind or another, or whether its form is that of prophecy, poetry, or some other type of speech.

3. For the correct understanding of what the sacred writer wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of perceiving, speaking, and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer.

4. Since holy Scripture must be read and interpreted according to the same Spirit by whom it was written, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly brought to light. The living traditions of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith.

It is the task of exegetes to work according to these rules toward a better understanding and explanation of the meaning of Sacred Scripture, so that through preparatory study the judgment of the Church may mature.

5. ...interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgment of the Church, which carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God. (Revelations III, 12)

These principles have directed this study. Every written word of it remains humbly submissive to the teaching authority of the Church.

As our study draws to a close, we must agree with St. Jerome that we are left with many unsolved mysteries. However, even though many mysteries remain mysterious, our study has revealed many enlightening manifestations. We have been greatly aided in discerning what the Apocalypse does not teach. It has become obvious that many popular interpretations of this scriptural work have violated all the common sense principles laid down for its proper interpretation. These interpretations do violence to the text and to the intention of the author. Some modern interpreters reduce the Apocalypse to a biblical crystal ball in which “seers” divine their own fantasies and pass off their apocalyptic daydreams as inspired revelation; it has become a “holy” ouija board confirming the nightmares of religious fanatics and the ravings of heretics. It cannot be said too forcefully: He who drinks from every spring will sooner or later be poisoned!

To reject the guidance and authority of the Catholic Church in the interpretation of the Scriptures is to leave the protected Sanctuary in order to live in the “outer court” of the temple which “*has been handed over to the Gentiles*” (Rv.11:2). Those who through pride of mind reject the teaching authority of the Church expose their souls to false prophets and messiahs who will indeed appear before their eyes as “angels of light.” Their pride leads them to discern their own spirit. This leaves them prey to the “noonday devil.” Regardless of their external display of Christian morality, many Catholics have become spiritually perverted and corrupted. The perversion of their

religious spirit becomes evident in their present detestation of the Catholic Church and their blasphemous attacks upon Catholic doctrines. A sure test of this evil spirit is that no one can convict them of sin on this level--rarely, on any level! Pride of mind leads to hardness of heart, and herein lies spiritual ruin. Spiritual salvation lies in humility of heart. "*Learn of me for I am meek and humble of heart.*" Without that primary grace, the light of truth presented for their consideration only succeeds in increasing the hardness of heart. If one desires to cast out a demon, the demon must first be named!

Most reputable scholars agree that the Apocalypse was addressed in the first century to the Christian Churches in Asia Minor. The work was written to encourage and console a Church that had endured the persecution of Nero, and in which such apostles as Peter and Paul died. There is no doubt that this persecution devastated the Church in Rome. The Church in Asia now faced at its own front door, a similar persecution in the provinces inaugurated by Rome. The very existence of the Church appeared to be in jeopardy. "*Who can compare with the beast, or come forward to fight against it?*" (Rv.13:4c).

That question haunted the hearts of Christians, and the Apocalypse answered that question. The Apocalypse, regardless of its apocalyptic style and method, was addressed to the Church of its time. It interpreted the time of persecution and revealed the end results of the persecution, both for the Church and for Imperial Rome.

A scholarly and sincere study of the Apocalypse indicates that over nine-tenths of its contents were fulfilled within the history of the early life of the Christian Church. Apparently, the Apocalypse does deal with a distant future, which we will study in a moment. But we need to keep the nine-tenths of the material which "*must happen very soon*" (Rv.1:1), distinct from those things which will happen in the far distant future. It violates the text and the intention of the author to take material already fulfilled and project its fulfillment into the distant future--that distant future being the here and now. It certainly adds what was not intended by the author. However, this is not to imply that the nine-tenths lacks value for the present. Even though it was written for a unique moment in Church History, the lesson taught and the truths revealed will always offer encouragement and consolation for a Church that must always be *in* the world, and persecuted for not being *of* the world.

John established a Christian criteria for discernment of prophecy when he wrote, *“The prophetic spirit proves itself by witnessing to Jesus” (Rv.19:10)*. Prophecy proclaims the true nature and message of Jesus Christ. Paul expressed somewhat the same concept in the words: *“And no one can say: ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except in the Holy Spirit” (1Cor.12:3)*. This the Apocalypse does indeed do. It leaves no doubt in the mind of the listeners to the true nature of Jesus Christ: *“To the One seated on the throne, and to the Lamb, be praise and honor, glory and might, forever and ever!” (Rv.5:13)*.

In dramatic and colorful apocalyptic language, John foretold the fall of the Roman Empire, which occurred as a result of its self-idolatry, and as a divine vengeance for its murder of the saints. In one of the most dramatic moments in the Apocalypse, John once again presents Jesus Christ, this time not as an Inspector General of His troops, but as the triumphant Commander General to whom the fall of Rome and the coming triumph of the Christian Church is attributed. From another dimension, John repeats what he has told us, but with additional details. We read in the Apocalypse:

The heavens were opened, and as I looked on, a white horse appeared; its rider was called “The Faithful and True.” Justice is his standard in passing judgment and in waging war. His eyes blazed like fire, and on his head were many diadems. Inscribed on his person was a name known to no one but himself. He wore a cloak that had been dipped in blood, and his name was the Word of God. The armies of heaven were behind him riding white horses and dressed in fine linen, pure and white. Out of his mouth came a sharp sword for striking down the nations. He will shepherd them with an iron rod; it is he who will tread out in the winepress the blazing wrath of God the Almighty. A name was written on the part of the cloak that covered his thigh:

“King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rv.19:11-16).

Earlier, John wrote of seeing *“an open door to heaven” (Rv.4:1)*, but now he beholds *“the heavens were opened”*--gone are the walls and doors. One magnificent solitary figure appears in the open heavens seated upon a white horse. The Vision comes forth as a Victor from battle. It is a victory associated with the war waged with the Lamb in which we read, *“They will fight against the Lamb but the Lamb will conquer them” (Rv.17:14)*. *“Justice”* was the standard under which the Warrior fought. The judgments rendered and the

punishments meted out have been in keeping with that divine justice that gives to each its due--a justice rendered by the one whose *"eyes blazed like fire"* and seared through the surface of every deed, exposing its heart and spirit. The Rider is living proof that God keeps His Word.

The Seer's description leaves no doubt in the mind of his listeners that the vision is *"Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born from the dead and ruler of the kings of earth"* (1:5), *"the holy One, the true"* (3:7), *"the Amen, the faithful Witness and true, the Source of God's creation"* (3:14). *"Many crowns"* rest upon the head of Jesus. These are not crowns of victory (*stephanos*) but diadems of princely power and authority. They indicate his victory over the beast that possessed seven kings and ten diadems. The *"many Diadems"* symbolize the writing found upon his cloak: *"King of kings and Lord of lords!"* The Seer indicates that such an identity of Christ is only on the surface. The true nature of the Rider cannot be fathomed by any human being. He intimates the divinity of Jesus by writing, *"Inscribed on his person [not on his cloak] was a name known to no one but himself."* John does not clarify, but deepens the mystery when he adds *"his name was the Word of God."* To know the name of Jesus--or to comprehend his nature--would be equivalent to knowing the Mind of God which, as Paul taught, is humanly impossible. *"Who has known the Mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"* (Rom.11-34).

John relates that Jesus wears a *"cloak that had been dipped in blood."* This image could have more than one significance, and has been subjected to various interpretations. The blood could symbolize Christ's own death *"obediently"* accepted, and *"because of this God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every other name"* (Phil.2:8-9)—*"the Word of God."* The blood-dipped cloak could symbolize the martyrdom of Jesus that issued forth Jesus' victory over Satan. However, many feel that the Seer intended to recall Yahweh's victory over Edom as described by Isaiah:

Who is this that comes from Edom, in crimsoned garments... This one arrayed in majesty, marching in the greatness of his strength? "It is I, I who announce vindication, I who am mighty to save." Why is your apparel red, and your garments like those of the wine presser? "The wine press I have trodden alone, and of my people there was no one with me. I trod them in my anger, and trampled them down in my wrath; Their blood spurted on my garments; all my apparel I stained" (Is.63:1-3).

This interpretation certainly has validity and appears to be supported by the reference to Christ as *“he who will tread out in the winepress the blazing wrath of God the Almighty.”* As we know, one image can have more than one symbolic meaning. It is even possible that the cloak dipped in blood represents the Church--the Body of Christ--subjected to persecution and the blood of the martyrs. The blood of the martyrs added to Christ’s victory.

We are immediately informed that behind the Victor upon the white horse came *“the armies of heaven.”* Some see these as legions of angels, and others see them as the martyrs. It is highly possible that the *“armies of heaven”* are both angels and saints. The members of the army *“dressed in fine linen, pure and white”* and seated upon white horses, certainly appear to symbolize persons who have emerged victoriously from a battle. We were told that the Lamb would conquer, but we were also informed the *“victorious, too, will be his followers--the ones who were called: the chosen and the faithful” (17:14).*

Even though Jesus may appear as a Warrior spattered with the blood of battle, we are told that truth was the sword that slew the enemies: *“Out of his mouth came a sharp sword for striking down the nations” (19:15).* This may well symbolize the power of the Gospel in the world. The true revelation of Jesus Christ will destroy his enemies. Paul wrote:

Thereupon the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will destroy him with the breath of his mouth and annihilate him by manifesting his own presence (2Thes.2:8).

In a word, as the sun appears in full brilliance, all darkness is annihilated, and ceases to be!

DEFEAT OF EVIL

John does not imply that Jesus becomes the King of kings by his victory over the Roman Empire, but rather, that his victory over all nations is assured because He is King of kings and Lord of lords. To war against Jesus Christ implies certain defeat, regardless of what may appear on the surface to be temporary success. Our Seer teaches this symbolically in the following scene, which some interpreters see as a ghoulish contrast to the wedding feast of the Lamb. We read:

Next I saw an angel standing on the sun. He cried out in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midheaven: "Come! Gather together for the great feast God has prepared for you! You are to eat the flesh of kings, of commanders and warriors, of horses and their riders; the flesh of all men, the free and the slave, the small and the great." Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth, and the armies they had mustered to do battle with the One riding the horse, and with his army. The beast was captured along with the false prophet who performed in its presence the prodigies that led men astray, making them accept the mark of the beast and worship its image. Both were hurled down alive into the fiery pool of burning sulphur. The rest were slain by the sword which came out of the mouth of the One who rode the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on the flesh of the slain (Rv.19:17-21).

The angel standing on the sun seems to be looking down upon the forces of evil gathering at Armageddon, and he invites the birds of prey to prepare themselves for a feast upon the bodies of God's enemies. The scene that is pictured recalls the account of Ezekiel's vision of God's final battle with Gog and Magog, in which birds and beasts are called to feast upon the bodies of the mighty fallen in battle. We read in Ezekiel:

As for you, son of man, says the Lord God, say to birds of every kind and to the wild beasts: Come together, from all sides gather for the slaughter I am about to provide for you, a great slaughter on the mountains of Israel: you shall have flesh to eat and blood to drink... You shall be filled at my table with horses and riders, with warriors and soldiers of every kind, says the Lord God (Ez.39:17,20).

By its reference to the beast, the false prophets, the mark of the beast and the worshiping of its image, the vision seems to be but another allusion to the Fall of Rome, seen from the perspective that attributes its fall to Christ and His martyrs. However, some see it as a reference to a battle with the kingdoms that destroyed the Roman Empire, and became the new embodiment of the beast. It implies that the beast continues to alienate the great and small from Christ and His Church. But final victory is achieved by the very presence of Christ and His saints on earth. Truth refuses to be eclipsed by darkness. Goodness refuses to be overcome by evil.

The Seer makes a distinction between the final end of the beast and the false prophets, and that of the members of Satan's army. It is not yet the hour of final Judgment. The latter are slain, and wait as ghostly beings in Sheol for their final sentencing. However, the beast and the false prophets are hurled alive into the "*lake of fire.*" Some interpret this to mean that they have been completely annihilated. The sentence "*all the birds gorged themselves on the flesh of the slain*" may signify their being "*devoured*" by demons, which were previously compared to birds: "*She has become the dwelling place for demons. She is a cage for every unclean spirit, a cage for every filthy and disgusting bird*" (Rv.18:2).

The victory is not yet complete. Satan still exists upon earth. We have been told he was cast out of heaven, and "*he was hurled down to earth and his minions with him*" (Rv.12:9); "*His fury knows no limits, for he knows his time is short*" (Rv.12:12). Perhaps this "short" time is represented by "three and a half years." Jesus foretold that the Prince of this world will be cast out by his death. John now deals with Satan's immediate destiny and its effect upon the earth. We read:

Then I saw an angel come down from heaven, holding the key to the abyss and a huge chain in his hand. He seized the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the devil or Satan, and chained him up for a thousand years. The angel hurled him into the abyss, which he closed and sealed over him. He did this so that the dragon might not lead the nations astray until the thousand years are over. After this, the dragon is to be released for a short time.

Then I saw some thrones. Those who were sitting on them were empowered to pass judgment. I also saw the spirits of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and the word of God, those who had never worshiped the beast or its image nor accepted its mark on their foreheads or their hand. They came to life again and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The others who were dead did not come to life till the thousand years were over. This is the first resurrection; happy and holy are they who share in the first resurrection! The second death will have no claim on them; they shall serve God and Christ as priests, and shall reign with him for a thousand years (Rv.20:1-6).

Genesis relates that evil began on earth with Satan's influence upon mankind. The Apocalypse relates that evil ended on earth with Satan's excommunication from earth. For some authors, the mystery of Satan is deeply related to the mystery of the human will. John speaks of Satan's removal from earth in order to protect the nations from his influence. His removal eliminates a great obstacle to the acceptance of the Gospel and the establishment of the Church. Isaiah had foreseen that before "*the Lord of hosts will reign on Mt. Zion and in Jerusalem, glorious in the sight of his elders*" (Is.24:23), he must first "*punish the hosts of the heavens in the heavens, and the kings of the earth on the earth*" (Is.24:21).

Isaiah foretold: "*They will be gathered together like prisoners into a pit: they will be shut up in a dungeon, and after many days they will be punished*" (Is.22:22). John's description of Satan's imprisonment reflects the account found in 1 Enoch, in which God commands Raphael to bind Azazel, the evil spirit of the desert, and cast him into the darkness through a hole in the desert. The hole was to be sealed with a rock forever. Enoch records that on the last day Azazel will be cast into the fire. Enoch beheld an abyss of fire in which the fallen angels would suffer ten thousand years prior to the final judgment. As John describes it, an angel descends and seizes Satan forcefully and secures him in his proper place within the abyss which is shut and sealed, guaranteeing no escape.

THE MILLENIUM

John beheld a vision of an unnumbered amount of persons seated upon thrones of judgment. The place of the thrones is not specified. However, it has been pointed out that, in the Apocalypse, thrones only appear in heaven. Nevertheless, the Apocalypse has declared that the saints will reign on earth.

John immediately speaks of the resurrection of the saints who "shall reign with Christ." The text seems to imply two distinct groups of saints, primarily those who have been martyred—"who have been beheaded." Secondly, those later referred to as "confessors"—men and women whose lives gave heroic witness to Christ even though they never suffered physical martyrdom. John speaks of these souls as sharing in the first resurrection. There is no other reference in the Sacred Scriptures to a first and second resurrection. Most reputable scholars agree that the "first resurrection" is to be taken symbolically. It is intended to distinguish the quality of life enjoyed by those who died in Jesus Christ from those "inhabitants of the earth" who died. It confirms

that, while still in this purely spiritual state, they enjoy the presence of God: they have entered into their eternal reward which cannot be altered by the last Judgment: they presently reign with Christ and serve as priests, both before God and before Jesus Christ. This vision certainly negates the belief of those who deny the power of the saints, both in heaven and on earth.

Mentioning that the saints will reign with Christ for a thousand years brings before us for consideration the question of the millennium. The general doctrine of the millennium is that Jesus Christ will return in the flesh to earth in glory, and here He will reign with His saints for a thousand years.

Many teach that the "rapture," spoken of by Paul in Thessalonians, will occur first and be followed by the millennium after "tribulations" have ended. It should be noted that Paul makes no mention of any thousand years, but only that "*we shall be with the Lord unceasingly*" (1Thes.4:17). The belief in the millennium is of Jewish origin. It originated by combining the seven days of creation mentioned in Genesis 2:2 with the expression in Psalm 40:4 that one day is as a thousand years.

From this combination it was deduced that creation consisted of seven thousand years. It was believed that the Sixth Millennium was subjected to the reign of Satan. This would come to an end with the Sabbath Millennium, which would be a time of rest--the Messianic Millennium. This was to be followed by the Eighth Millennium, which would bring to being the timeless new world. It is the Seventh Millennium that has stirred the imaginations of men and been a cause of heresy in the Church. An argument was recorded in one of the Early Christian communities in Egypt, over the millennium that would last three full days. Both St. Justin and St. Irenaeus believed in it. Papias taught an exaggerated doctrine that St. Eusebius attributed to Papias' lack of intelligence.

It was St. Augustine that ended the doctrine, for the most part, in the Catholic Church when he entirely spiritualized the concept of the thousand years. Augustine saw it as the period between the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and the Second Coming. To him the first resurrection was the life of sanctifying grace received at baptism.

Augustine beheld the Church on earth as supplanting the Roman Empire. For Augustine, the throne of judgment was the Sees of the Catholic Bishops who possessed the power of Christ to bind or loose upon earth. Augustine's

teachings were the death of any belief in a physical millennium. The Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D., condemned the doctrine of millenniumism as being a fable and a deviation from true Christian Doctrine. History has seen its recurrence in the Church. In 1944, the Holy See issued a decree forbidding the teaching of this doctrine in the Catholic Church (*Acts Apostolicae Sedis* 36-July 21, 1944). Therefore, the Catholic Church does not teach, and actually forbids the teaching of any doctrine that claims that Jesus will physically return to this earth and reign with the saints for a limited time. It is a doctrine held today by the Mormons, the Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and certain Evangelical Pentecostals.

These Scriptures certainly emphasize that the saints, particularly the martyrs, exercise authority with Christ on earth, and that they "*shall serve God and Christ as priests*" (*Rv.20:6*), which implies a role of intercession before both the Father and Christ. Apparently John does not see the saints participating in the reign of Christ, or the exercise of their role as priests as threatening or detracting from the role of Christ as Intercessor before the Father. The Scriptures make it clear that God gives power to whomever He wills. Apparently, He wills to grant power on earth, and in heaven, to the saints. The teaching of Jesus, as recorded in Matthew, implies that those who have been faithful over the little matters on earth, will be put in a position of authority over much more in heaven: "*Since you were dependable in a small matter I will put you in charge of larger affairs. Come, share your master's joy*" (*Mt.25:21*). It is strange that the Catholic doctrine on the intercessory power of the saints--and particularly that of Mary, His mother, who at Calvary became the Queen of Martyrs--causes so many false prophets and teachers to grind their teeth.

THE END OF SATAN

John relates the release of Satan from the abyss and records his ultimate end.

When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison. He will go out to seduce the nations in all four corners of the earth, and muster for war the troops of Gog and Magog, numerous as the sands of the sea. They invaded the whole country and surrounded the beloved city where God's people were encamped~ but fire came down from heaven and devoured them. The devil who led them astray was hurled into the pool of burning sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had also been thrown. There they

will be tortured day and night, forever and ever (Rv.20:7-10).

Jeremiah once asked: “Can a leopard change his spots? Can an Ethiopian change the color of his skin?” We may add another obvious question: “Can Satan change his nature?” Apparently not! Once freed, he assumes his same activity for the same deep hatred still consumes him: “The dragon went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep God’s commandments and give witness to Jesus” (Rev.12:17).

Satan’s release and return to earth is part of the inscrutable plan of God. God has willed his activity to be. Once again, great forces of evil will be released and nations, once more, will be possessed by Satan. The forces of Satan will direct one final attack upon the “beloved city”--the Church of Christ on earth.

The ancient world believed that the entrances to the abyss were at the four corners of the earth. Some see in the reference to the four corners of the earth, an allusion to the release of the demons and evil spirits upon the earth. We are told that the troops of Gog and Magog will be mustered for war against the Church. In Jewish literature, Gog and Magog had become mystical symbols of diabolical evil. The Jews spoke of the land of Magog as the land to the North. It was the land of Scythia around the Black Sea. Today, the land of Magog would be part of Russia. Ezekiel had seen in a vision that, in the end times, when Jerusalem was secure and at peace, these hordes would descend suddenly upon her. We read in Jeremiah:

And from the north, said the Lord to me, evil will boil over upon all who dwell in the land. Lo, I am summoning all the kingdoms of the north, says the Lord. Each king shall come and set up his throne at the gateway of Jerusalem, opposite her walls all around and opposite all the cities of Judah (Jer.1:14-15).

Ezekiel writes:

...turn toward Gog [the land of Magog], the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal... Prepare yourself ... be at my disposal ... you will be mustered [in the last years you will come] against a nation which has survived the sword, which has been assembled from many peoples [on the mountains of Israel which were long a ruin] ... all of whom now dwell in security. You shall come up like a sudden storm, advancing like a cloud to cover the earth, you and all your

troops and the many peoples with you... But on that day, the day when Gog invades the land of Israel... my fury shall be aroused... Mountains shall be overturned, and cliffs shall tumble... In the last days I will bring you against my land, that the nations may know of me, when in their sight I prove my holiness through you, O Gog (Ez.38:1,7-9,18-20,16).

Upon the mountains of Israel you shall fall, you and all your troops and the people who are with you... I will make my holy name known... I will no longer allow my holy name to be profaned... Yes, it is coming and shall be fulfilled, says the Lord God. This is the day I have decreed... On that day I will give Gog for his tomb a well known place in Israel, the Valley of Abarim east of the sea [the Dead Sea]. Gog shall be buried there with all his horde... Thus the land shall be purified... Now I will restore...the whole house of Israel. ... No longer will I hide my face from them, for I have poured my spirit upon the house of Israel, says the Lord God (Ez.39:4,7-8,11-16,25-29).

John no doubt had these prophecies of Ezekiel in mind when he wrote that Satan would muster for war the troops of Gog and Magog. The end of these forces of evil indicates God's dramatic intervention in order to save the Church. The end of evil upon the earth has come. It is the final end of Satan, who goes to join the beast and the false prophet in the lake of fire--not in the abyss. The unholy trinity IS forever united there--in the lake of fire--which symbolizes eternal death.

The final excommunication of Satan from the earth removes the last obstacle to the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. The prelude to God's reign on earth will be the Final Judgment of all mankind. Our seer describes a vision of the Last Judgment:

Next I saw a large white throne and the One who sat on it. The earth and sky fled from his presence until they could no longer be seen. I saw the dead, the great and the lowly, standing before the throne. Lastly, among the scrolls the book of the living was opened. The dead were judged according to their conduct as recorded on the scrolls. The sea gave up its dead; then death and the nether world gave up their dead. Each person was judged according to his conduct. Then death and the nether world were hurled into the pool

of fire, which is the second death; anyone whose name was not found inscribed in the book of the living was hurled into this pool of fire (Rv.20:11-15).

THE FINAL JUDGMENT

The Seer beheld the throne of universal judgment upon which was seated the One God. This does not exclude Christ as Judge, as He is One with the Father and Holy Spirit. There is a general resurrection from the dead--the sea and Hades give up their dead. All the dead rise in their bodies. Paul said that we will all indeed rise, but we will not all be changed. There is a mention of the scrolls and the Book of the living; there is a distinction between the two. It is implied that the saints do not rise--they have already risen to life with Christ. They are not spoken of as being among the dead. Apparently those inscribed in the Book of the living are not judged. Their names in that Book testify that they are living citizens in God's kingdom. The judgment of the dead is quite mysterious. Their names, apparently, are not written in the Book of the living, but there seems to be an indication that they are not automatically condemned.

God is not like the mad Queen of Hearts: *“Sentence first! Then the evidence!”* They are to be judged on the grounds of their deeds and conduct while on earth. They are being weighed in the balance. There is certainly the possibility that they will be judged worthy to have their names inscribed in the Book of the living. When the judgment is completed, those whose names are not found in the Book of the living will be hurled--by angelic forces--into the pool of fire. When the author speaks of death and of Hades being thrown into the pool of fire, he signifies the end of mortality--the end of death. After the resurrection all men will be immortal, even the damned. Perhaps it is of these that John wrote: *“Men will seek death but not find it they will yearn to die but death will escape them” (Rv.9:6).*

NEW HEAVENS AND A NEW EARTH

John writes that when God comes in judgment *“the earth and sky fled from his presence until they could no longer be seen.”* This flight signifies that nothing impure can remain in the presence of God. It flees from His sight for it hates the light. It has been said that the pains of Hell are less painful for the damned than the Presence of God. It has generally been interpreted that the fleeing of the heavens and earth symbolize their destruction in order to make way for

“new heavens and a new earth.” John now sees in vision “new heavens and a new earth:”

Then I saw new heavens and a new earth. The former heavens and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no longer. I also saw a new Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down out of heaven from God, beautiful as a bride prepared to meet her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne cry out: “This is God’s dwelling among men. He shall dwell with them and they shall be his people and he shall be their God who is always with them. He shall wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, crying out or pain, for the former world has passed away” (Rv.21:1-4).

In his first epistle, John taught that nothing in this world was of the Father. For him the “world” was creation alienated from God--life out of harmony with its Creator. He urged Christians not to find their treasures in this world: “If anyone loves the world, the Father’s love has no place in him” (1Jn.2:15). “And the world with its seductions is passing away but the man who does God’s will endures forever” (1Jn.2:17). To let one’s heart take root in the world is to pass away with it.

John comes to the climax of his revelations when he presents to the Church the new heavens and the new earth. What God has prepared for those who love Him, eye has not seen, ear has not heard--it hasn’t even entered into the mind of men. The Seer places a vision before the eyes of men and women who must live in a society that offers them nothing more than ridicule and rejection. They must dwell in an environment of sin and violence in which they may never feel at home. As the letter to the Hebrews implies, many of them had been deprived of their material goods and forced to live lives of extreme poverty. They had been imprisoned and lost their freedom. They had experienced life as a valley of tears, pain and death. On this earth, they could be no more than pilgrims. The members of the Christian Community faced the real possibility of martyrdom. However, on the other hand they faced the real danger of apostasy.

Historical evidence indicates that both of these realities came to be. Some years later, Pliny the Younger would write to the emperor of many people being questioned about their faith who, years before in other persecutions, had abandoned the Christian Faith. The Church would not have taken such a

hard stand about re-instating apostates back into the Faith if something close to “mass apostasy” had not occurred. John writes with both of these possibilities in mind, and he plainly indicates the eternal consequences of both martyrdom and apostasy.

John sees the results of persecution and martyrdom. The Church has been purified. He speaks of the Christian Community as a bride prepared for her wedding day with the Lamb. It is the day that the Church and Christ will become eternally one. It is no longer till “death do you part,” for death is no more.

CITY OF GOD

The Church is the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city in which God dwells. For such as these, all must be made new. The old is no longer a suitable environment for the Bride of Christ--and so it must pass away. To say that the sea will be no more signifies an end to chaos and violence; nothing more can cause pain or death. There will be no reason for tears. The intimacy with God symbolized by the Garden of Eden, and the awareness of God’s presence experienced by Old Israel in its desert sojourn will be experienced forever by all God’s People. God and His People are one at heart. To perfectly love God makes it possible for God to love perfectly.

In the Apocalypse God speaks only once. John relates His words:

The one who sat on the throne said to me, “See, I make all things new!” Then he said, “Write these matters down, for the words are trustworthy and true!” He went on to say: “These words are already fulfilled! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To anyone who thirsts I will give to drink without cost from the spring of life-giving water. He who wins the victory shall inherit these gifts; I will be his God and he shall be my son. As for the cowards and traitors to the faith, the depraved and murderers, the fornicators and sorcerers, the idol-worshippers and deceivers of every sort--their lot is the fiery pool of burning sulphur, the second death!” (Rv.21:5-8).

God speaks only once and declares that He will “*make all things new.*” He declares the grace of salvation to be a free gift. He gives His Word that everything described will come to be. Already in God it has come to be: “*I am*

the Alpha and the Omega!” In this vision, God speaks to mankind amidst this present world, which must pass away. To each He holds out the gift of eternal life: *“To anyone who thirsts I will give to drink without cost from the spring of life-giving water.”* However, God confirms that evildoers will not inherit eternal life. At the end of each of the seven letters to the Churches, Christ made the promise: *“To the one who wins the victory” (Rv.2:26), “to the victor”* would the prizes go. The quality of our life in time determines the quality of our life in eternity.

Heading the list of those who find no place in the City of God will be those who have sinned against faith: the cowards who fall away in times of trials and persecutions~ the traitors--those who once possessed the faith but abandoned it. Excluded will be all those who have corrupted the moral order established by God. because they insist on clinging to their evil ways, they must be excluded from where evil has no place. Evildoers, just as the heavens and earth, will flee His Presence and be seen no more.

Israel of old survived its time of captivity and persecution because the Jewish prophets assured the People of God that a remnant would be saved, and they would become a seed from which would flower a New Jerusalem--a new Israel renewed in vigor and beauty. John the prophet reveals to the Christian Church that “the great city”--the harlot--will fall. It will be replaced by the City of God, the Bride of the Lamb. John enkindles the hope that the Christian Church will replace “the great City.” He intimates this by using almost identical form in both the vision foretelling the fall of Rome in chapter 17 and in the vision foretelling the New Jerusalem in chapter 21. It is John’s intention to contrast “the great city”--the harlot in which Christians must now physically dwell, with “the city of God”--the spiritual creation being created by God.

Within the Christian Community, the City of God has already come to be. Christians are unable to see what they presently are in this world and what they will come to be in the next. Through the eyes of prophecy they are aided to see Heaven’s concept and vision of the Church on earth; what the Church essentially is right now, and what it will be when the Temple of God has been completed.

John goes on to present the vision of the City of God, which is the Church on earth, the Church of the “thousand years.” He submits an image of breathtaking loveliness to us that symbolizes the spiritual magnificence

flourishing from the redeeming death of Jesus. For his description of the New Jerusalem, he borrows generously from previous apocalyptic writings, especially from the final chapters of Ezekiel (40-48). Previously, “the great city” had been pictured as dwelling in desert-like desolation, but the New Jerusalem rests upon the mountain top where heaven descends to encounter the earth. In a vision, Ezekiel had seen “a structure like a city” on a mountain (Rv.40:2). Isaiah had foretold that “the house of the Lord” would be a mountain established “as the highest of the mountains” and towering over all hills to which all the nations shall come (Rv.2:2).

The Church is a city seated upon a mountain, not to be hidden, but to give light to the world. The city is described as cubic in shape--an ancient symbol of perfection. It is fully protected by God and nothing impure can be part of it. The City possesses the glory of God, described as having a radiance which denotes it to be a light-giving body, similar to a diamond. The description of the city deliberately recalls the description of the throne of God. God’s sanctifying Presence will be in this City. It becomes the Sanctuary of the Triune God on earth. No other temple would be needed as the City itself is the Temple of God. It possesses no sun, for the City itself is Light: The Light of the World! As the “great city” had encompassed the world in darkness, the Seer pictures the City of God as being radiant with the presence of the sun--a sun that changes everything without itself being changed or changing a thing into itself.

The foundation, the structure, the brick and mortar of the City, are the apostles, the prophets, the Saints of God of both the Old and the New Testament. They are described as precious stones, corresponding to the stones in the breastplate of the high priest. These precious stones signify the holiness, the goodness and the godliness now intrinsic to their very nature; there is no semblance of goodness here, no cover-up of evil, “all has been made new.” The Seer presents the picture of the Church clothed in Sanctifying Grace, with all its human imperfections removed and all that is humanly good glorified. The Bride is adorned in her wedding garment, there is no wrinkle and no stain. The Church is already what it has begun to be. It beholds in Mary, His Mother, its achieved perfection and a confirmation of what it will be. Let us listen to the portrait painted by John:

One of the seven angels who held the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the woman who is the bride of the Lamb.” He carried me away in spirit

to the top of a very high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. It gleamed with the splendor of God. The city had the radiance of a precious jewel that sparkled like a diamond. Its wall, massive and high, had twelve gates at which twelve angels were stationed. Twelve names were written on the gates, the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. There were three gates facing east, three north, three south, and three west. The wall of the city had twelve courses of stones at its foundation, on which were written the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

The one who spoke to me held a rod of gold for measuring the city, its gates, and its wall. The city is perfectly square, its length and its width being the same. He measured the city with the rod and found it twelve thousand furlongs in length, in width, and in height. Its wall measured a hundred and forty-four cubits in height by the unit of measurement the angel used. The wall was constructed of jasper; the city was of pure gold, crystal-clear. The foundation of the city wall was ornate with precious stones of every sort: the first course of stones was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh hyacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each made of a single pearl; and the streets of the city were of pure gold, transparent as glass.

I saw no temple in the city. The Lord, God the Almighty, is its temple--he and the Lamb. The city had no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God gave it light, and its lamp was the Lamb. The nations shall walk by its light; to it the kings of the earth shall bring their treasures. During the day its gates shall never be shut, and there shall be no night. The treasures and wealth of the nations shall be brought there, but nothing profane shall enter it, nor anyone who is a liar or has done a detestable act. Only those shall enter whose names are inscribed in the book of the living kept by the Lamb (Rv.21:9-27).

The Seer sees the wealth of the nations flowing into the City of God. Nothing that is good is excluded, but it is sanctified by its dedication to God. However, nothing evil or unclean will enter the City--the angels guard its gates. No

deceit or abomination, such as idolatry, will be found there. It is baptism that inscribes one's name in the book of the living kept by the Lamb. No one will be inscribed who has not sincerely repented of sin.

On one occasion, Jesus stood up in the temple of Jerusalem and cried out: *"If anyone thirsts let him come to me... From within him rivers of living water shall flow"* (Jn.7:37-38). The narrator remarked that Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit not yet given, as Jesus had not yet been glorified: He had not yet died. The Principle of Life within the City of God is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is presented as life-giving water flowing crystal clear from the throne of God and the Lamb. John wrote:

The angel then showed me the river of life-giving water, clear as crystal, which issued from the throne of God and the Lamb and flowed down the middle of the streets. On either side of the river grew the trees of life which produce fruit twelve times a year, once each month; their leaves serve as medicine for the nations. Nothing deserving a curse shall be found there. The throne of God and of the Lamb shall be there, and his servants shall serve him faithfully. They shall see him face to face and bear his name on their foreheads. The night shall be no more. They will need no light from lamps or the sun, for the Lord God shall give them light, and they shall reign forever (Rv.22:1-5).

The roots of Christian life are nourished to eternal life through the life of the Holy Spirit. There is no death and no sickness for the soul in the Spirit. The virtuous lives of the saints are the fruits of the Holy Spirit. The Gift of the Holy Spirit brings each soul into intimate relationship with God--lives become rooted in God as a tree in the earth. The Garden of Eden possessed one tree of life: there are many in the City of God, offering a plenitude of life to all its inhabitants. The uniqueness and distinctiveness of each individual is nourished. Jesus taught his disciples: *"In my Father's house there are many dwelling places; otherwise, how could I have told you that I was going to prepare a place for you?"* (Jn.14:2).

The revelation of the New Jerusalem on earth--the City of God--consummates the Book of the Apocalypse. Public revelation to the Church has ended. What has been revealed is public to the world. It is the light of the world, which leaves the mind and heart free.

Then someone said to me: "Do not seal up the prophetic words of this book, for the appointed time is near! Let the wicked continue in their wicked ways, the depraved in their depravity! The virtuous must live on in their virtue and the holy ones in their holiness!"(Rv.22:10-11).

Revelation is true light to the mind, but the human will makes the fundamental choice that directs the living out of life in time, and determines the quality of eternal life. Jesus warns the Members of the Church:

Remember, I am coming soon! I bring with me the reward that will be given to each man as his conduct deserves. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End (Rv.22:12).

Jesus intimates that this is the judgment facing all who are not his true disciples. And He will be faced as Judge, not Redeemer. Of those who have repented of their sins and been baptized, Jesus says: "*Happy are they who wash their robes so as to have free access to the tree of life and enter the city through the gates!*" [Through faith in Jesus] (Rv.22:14).

This is indeed a reference to baptism which imparts the Holy Spirit and incorporates a person into the Body of Christ--the Church. Without repentance and faith it is impossible for an adult to enter the Church. Of the unrepentant, Jesus says: "*Outside are the dogs and sorcerers, the fornicators and murderers, the idol-worshippers and all who love falsehood*" (Rv.22:15).

In a true sense, we may say that we have heard the final witness of the Holy Spirit for Jesus to the Church. To this divine document, three most reputable witnesses affix their seal of witness: the Angel of Revelation, John the Prophet, and Jesus. We read:

The angel said to me: "These words are trustworthy and true; the Lord, the God of prophetic spirits, has sent his angel to show his servants what must happen very soon." ... It is I, John, who heard and saw all these things, and when I heard and saw them I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me. But he said to me: "No, get up! I am merely a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets and those who heed the message of this book. Worship God alone!" (Rv.22:6,8-9).

John not only witnesses to the truth of the revelation, but he likewise witnesses to the Church of the seductive power of revelation. Revelation is truth, but it is not God, and it is not to be worshiped. The Scriptures are a holy medium--an angel of revelation--divulging the mind and will of God to mankind. The Pharisees made the mistake of worshiping the Torah, and they ended by rejecting God when He came in Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

Many fundamentalist Christians have come to worship the angel of revelation: the Scriptures. The Scriptures have become a god to them. They reject the living God whose living voice can always be heard within the City of God. When the Voice of God is reduced solely to the Scriptures and one's own inner voice, then God becomes what men will Him to be, and He says what they desire to hear Him say. By the misuse of the Scriptures, men have made God their puppet! "If the meaning of the sacred text is to be correctly brought to light, the living tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith." The Catholic Church honors and preserves the Holy Scriptures as a holy medium of God's revelation, but it worships only the Triune God.

The final witness to affix his seal of knowledge to the Apocalypse is Jesus Himself.

"It is I, Jesus, who have sent my angel to give you this testimony about the churches. I am the Root and Offspring of David, the Morning Star shining bright" (Rv.22:16). "Remember, I am coming soon! Happy the man who heeds the prophetic message of this book!" (Rv.22:7).

Therefore, the Holy Spirit and His Spirit-filled Church issue this invitation to all mankind:

The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come!" Let him who hears answer, "Come!" Let him who is thirsty come forward: let all who desire it accept the gift of life-giving water (Rv.22:17).

As the curtain falls upon public revelation to the Church, its final prophet, John, takes his adieu with these words:

I myself give witness to all who hear the prophetic words of this book. If anyone adds to these words, God will visit him with all the

plagues described herein! If anyone takes from the words of this prophetic book, God will take away his share in the tree of life and the holy city described here!

The One who gives this testimony says, "Yes, I am coming soon!" Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all. Amen!!(Rv.22:18-21).

Can any more be said, except: SO BE IT! AMEN!

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INVITATION TO CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

A Seven Year Catholic Bible Study

Commentary by: James P. O'Bryan, S.T.

This multi-year Catholic Bible Study series is entitled, INVITATION TO CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP. It is an in-depth study of the New Testament for Catholic laity so that the Word of Christ, rich as it is, might dwell in us.

Thus you will be able to grasp fully, with all the holy ones, the breadth and length and heights and depth of Christ's love, and experience this love which surpasses all knowledge, so that you may attain to the fullness of God himself. (Eph. 3: 18-19)

The general motivating force behind this course is the preservation and growth of the Christian faith as understood and transmitted by the Catholic Church through the centuries.

This course has four immediate goals:

1. To ensure a true spirit of repentance
2. To foster a deeper commitment in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ
3. To create a greater awareness of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer
4. To encourage a more vibrant participation in the life and mission of the Church

This Bible Study is now available to all parishes and at-home study groups. It has been accredited by the Catechetical Institute of the Orange Diocese, Orange, California, for CCD re-certification. The study is designed for presentation by either a religious or layperson. Most studies have received NIHIL OBSTAT and IMPRIMATUR through the Bishop of Orange, California. All studies have been submitted for Imprimatur and no work of Father O'Bryan has ever been rejected.

The complete study consists of:

1. A spiral-bound Teacher's Manual containing the printed text for all of the lectures of the study ordered (Mark, Luke, Acts, etc.)
2. A spiral-bound Student Manual (Meditations) containing a corresponding Summary of the Lecture and Worksheet for each week's study. Each student should purchase a copy of the Student Manual to keep a personal record of their responses to the questions, as well as notes that might be taken during the lecture or group sessions.
3. A few studies are available only in 3-ring binders. One copy each of the Teacher's Manual and Student Manual are purchased, and copies of the student manual are made for each participant.

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY CLASS FORMAT

First Hour - Small Group Sharing:

- Students break into their small groups (10 or fewer participants)
- Prayer said aloud together (Example: Prayer to the Holy Spirit)
- Songs can be sung
- Sharing begins (approximately 45 minutes)
- Stretch / Break for coffee etc. (15 minutes)

Second Hour – Lecture:

- Prayer said aloud by lecturer.
- Lecture begins for the following week's study (approximately 45-60 minutes)

Total Class Time - 2 Hours Each Week

The study can be adapted for 10 to 400 people. Committed people needed may vary depending upon the number of students.

Recommended Personnel:

- Lecturer: To present the material
- Small Group Leader: One for every 10 people sharing answers.
- Secretary: Functions might include making copies of materials (not required if participants each have their own spiral bound student book), distributing copies as required; advertising; registration; collecting fees (where applicable for materials, etc.)

Purpose:

The motivating purpose for the formation of the Bible Study is to preserve and impart the Christian Faith as understood and transmitted by the Catholic Church through the centuries. This course has four immediate aims:

1. To incite a true spirit of repentance
2. To foster a deeper commitment in faith to Jesus Christ
3. To create a greater awareness of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer
4. To encourage a more vibrant participation in the life and mission of the Catholic Church

Since "ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ," is there anything more important for a sincere Christian than a study of the Scriptures?

Recommended Work Assignments for Parish Studies

Secretary

Will place announcement of day, time and location in the Sunday bulletin beginning four weeks prior to the Bible Study beginning. A flyer can also be posted on the parish bulletin board.

Accept registrations by mail, phone, through the parish office or personally.

Collect fee, if applicable, at the first session of the Bible Study. The registration fee can be used to defray the cost of the study (workbooks (Meditations), printing, coffee etc.) and is also a form of commitment by persons attending to complete the study.

Be responsible for coffee, treats at break.

Each week reproduce the Summaries/Worksheets for entire group and distribute to each small Group Leader (This may be done by rectory personnel). This is not necessary if each student purchases a personal workbook.

Group Leader

Through years of experience, it has been found that it is best to strictly follow the discipline listed below.

- After community prayer, group shares worksheet answers for the week.
- Working in a clockwise order, the student to left of the leader answers the first question. The leader then asks if anyone has an additional or different answer. Move then to the next student, who answers question number (2) and so on, through all the questions for the week. The leader should help ensure answers are in accordance with the Catholic Church. If in doubt, check it out!
- It is the group leader's responsibility to confine discussion to the subject matter being dealt with in the weekly lesson. (Sharing problems or special prayers can be done after lesson is completed) If extraneous discussion is not regulated, the questions will not be answered in the time allotted.
- If a student has a question on the subject and no agreement can be reached, put that student in charge of finding the answer through a priest or any Catholic resource. The answer is to be brought back to the group the following week. (The leader should research the question as well.)
- ONLY students who have done their written homework may participate in the discussion. Others are encouraged to attend, listen, and write down the answers. There is much to be learned from one another, so incomplete homework is no reason to stay away. On the other hand, sharing off-the-cuff (without prayerful study and written answers) has proven too often to be disruptive and misleading.

- If the student is self-centered and tries to dominate the discussion, the group leader must speak to him privately and gently explain the problem, requesting his cooperation within the study guidelines. If the student persists in unacceptable behavior, that student is asked to remain silent or leave the study. (It is better to lose one destructive student than to lose the entire group.)
- Try to bring out the best in each student.
- Occasionally there is just one correct answer; when that is given, do not allow haggling, just move on to the next question.
- At the end of the discussion period, distribute next week's Summary/Worksheet for the students' home study (not required if participants have purchased individual workbooks).
- If time runs out before ALL questions are answered, BREAK anyway. People need the coffee break in order to move around and relax. This is very important. The student needs to be refreshed and ready to concentrate on the upcoming lecture. This should seldom occur. Manage your time; a student may really need an answer to the last question. Time allowed is 45 minutes for small group sharing.
- The first night of the study is a good time to explain the expectations of the group. We share as a community in love, kindness and consideration. This is not just an intellectual study.

Lecturer

Open with a short prayer.

Prepare (rehearse / edit) and deliver the commentary on Sacred Scriptures for the week. Present the material with personal enthusiasm.

Each lesson contains a great deal of material. The lecturer should read and rehearse ahead of time for a most effective presentation. It need not all be presented. Time allowed is 45-60 minutes per lecture.

You may also elect to play Fr. O'Bryan's recorded tapes or CD's. These are available wherever the studies are sold. They are also excellent for personal review and reflection. (Note: many groups have done years of lessons listening to Father's original recordings...they are great!)

Total Class Time - 2 Hours Each Week!

ESTABLISHING A CATHOLIC BIBLE STUDY IN YOUR PARISH

The Catholic Bible Study: INVITATION TO CHRISTIAN DICIPLESHIP

By James P. O'Bryan S.T.

This Bible Study is designed to be presented by the laity but it may also be presented by religious. The number of participants will determine whether the study should be presented in the parish hall, class-rooms, or in homes. Some parishes have fifty or more people wanting to attend. (When this study was first presented by Fr. O'Bryan, it drew from the entire diocese, not from just one parish. There were 200 people at both the morning and evening session for the seven years...that's right, 400 people each week attended the study in one place.)

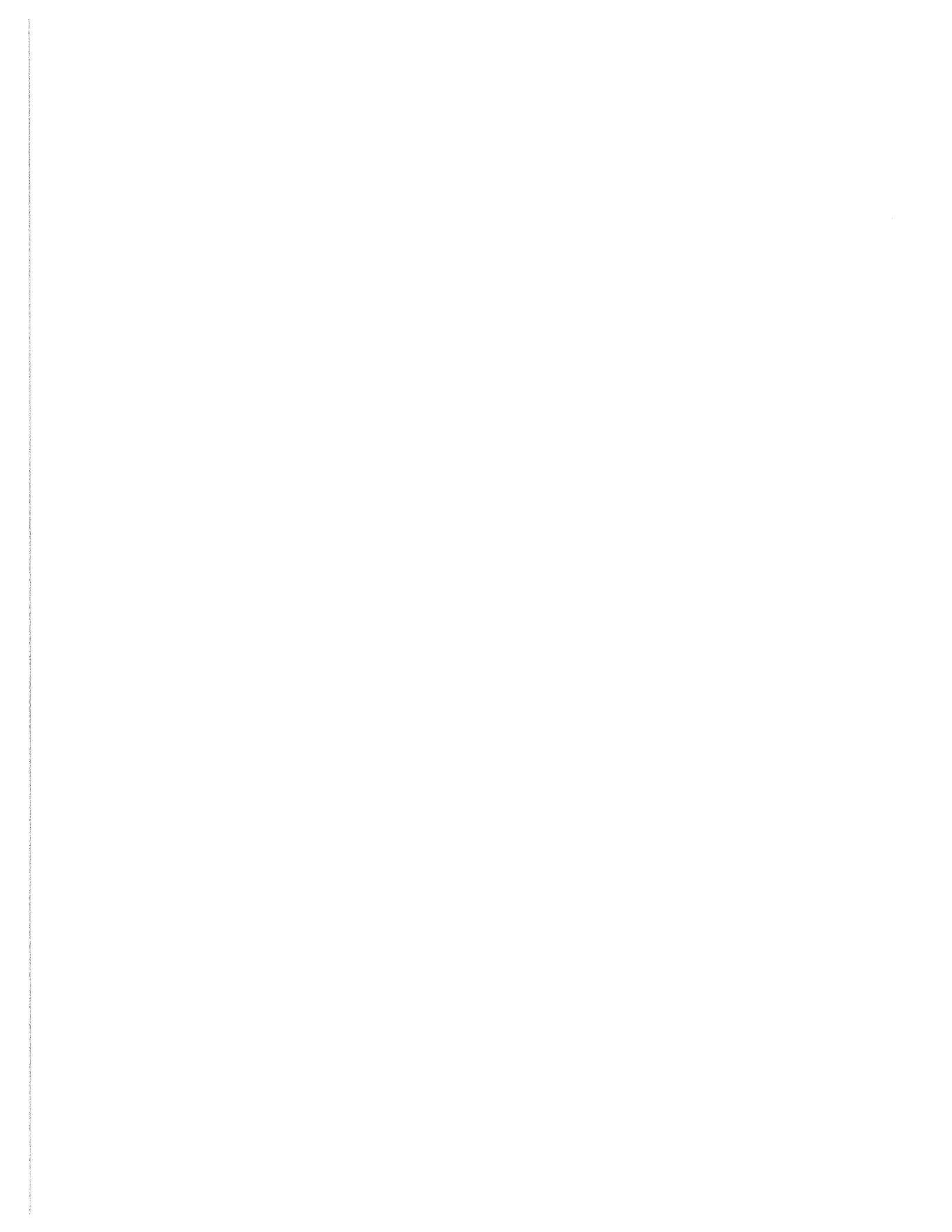
Many groups, large and small, still prefer to use the original (and recommended), method because it provides the fullness of the work produced by Fr. O'Bryan. First, the full lecture, or an edited version, is presented by a "lecturer". The lecturer should spend time in prayerful preparation each week before presenting the material, and it should be presented with enthusiasm. Tapes and CDs of Father's lectures are also available for purchase. Listening to his recorded lectures at leisure, and being able to pause and replay them provides a wealth of information each week.

The homework portion of the study calls us to obedience and daily prayer as we strive to complete our assignment. Homework is a major factor in our personal spiritual growth. How much time will you give to God? The recommended method requires 2 hours each week as a group and additional study time at home, but the rewards are tremendous. This format may be used in homes or parishes.

A variation on the above, used successfully with High School groups (as large as 50) and adults, is to present the Summaries in place of the full lecture. Homework is assigned, answers are shared in a group, and then the Summary is read for the following week. All students have their printed assignments or workbooks. Homework may be trimmed to one or two questions per day for high schoolers (they already have homework to do). This method can reduce a session to about one hour total rather than 2 hours. This method is useful for severely time-challenged people, but the summaries only include about 20% of the complete lecture. However, the purchase of the recorded lectures which can be listened to during the week may be useful in providing a fuller experience for those who are unable to attend the full sessions.

A more recent method has also been successful for small home groups. Instead of using the Lectures and a lecturer, only the Bible and the Summary/Worksheets or Meditation Workbooks are used. Group members take turns reading aloud the Summary and the Bible references in the workbook--answering the questions as they go along. This eliminates the requirement for homework. A leader is still necessary at each meeting--one leader can be chosen for the whole study, or the attendees can take turns. (Note: Again, listening to parts of the recorded lecture in free time during the week may be helpful in providing more than the 20% of information given in the Summary. Also, the homework portion, though a pain to many, has a place in our lives as we strive to be more obedient to God's call).

All of the above styles have proven to be successful for different people in different situations. Start one in your community today!





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Gospel of: Mk, Lk, Jn, Mt	Teacher's Manual, spiral bound 8 1/2 x 11	\$50.00	\$3.88	\$9.00	16-23
Gospel of: Mk, Lk, Jn, Mt	Student Manual, spiral bound 7 x 9 1/2	\$20.00	\$1.55	\$5.00	16-23
Gospel of: Mk, Lk, Jn, Mt	CD's, complete set of Fr. O'Bryan's lectures	\$25.00	\$1.94	\$9.00	16-23
Other N. T. works					
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Corinthians	Student Manual, spiral bound 7 x 9 1/2	\$14.00	\$1.09	\$5.00	11
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Thessalonians/Galatians *	Teacher's Manual, spiral bound 8 1/2 x 11	\$50.00	\$3.88	\$9.00	16
Thessalonians/Galatians *	Student Manual, spiral bound 7 x 9 1/2	\$20.00	\$1.55	\$5.00	16
Thessalonians/Galatians	CD's lectures--To be announced				
Revelation	Teacher's Manual, spiral bound 8 1/2 x 11	\$40.00	\$3.10	\$9.00	12
Revelation	Student Manual, spiral bound 7 x 9 1/2	\$14.00	\$1.09	\$5.00	12
Revelation	CD's lectures--To be announced				

* Available June 2008; (All are available now in 3-ring binder form @ \$40 + tax + S&H)

Other Catholic Teachings by Fr. O'Bryan					
Rock Foundation Revisited	8 1/2 x 11 workbook, Catholic Teachings	\$20.00	\$1.55	\$9.00	29
Christian with a Capital C	3-ring binder workbook, sequel to Rock Founda	\$15.00	\$1.16	\$9.00	30
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The Little Flower	8 1/2 x 11 The Life of St. Therese of Lisieux	\$15.00	\$1.16	\$9.00	N/A
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Where Eagles Fly	8 1/2 x 11 compilation of saints writings	\$15.00	\$1.16	\$9.00	N/A
Christian Lady in the 21st Century	8 1/2 x 11 reflections on the Easter People"	\$15.00	\$1.16	\$9.00	N/A

LIBROS EN ESPANOL

Most of the scripture studies shown above are available in Spanish. The Spanish versions are student workbooks in 3-ring binders 8 1/2" x 11". These may be ordered at the price of \$14+ \$1.09 tax + \$5 shipping & handling (\$20.09 total).



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REVELATION 12:1-5