

Introduction to the Book of Revelation

THE LAST BOOK OF THE BIBLE

The Apocalypse or Book of Revelation is the last book of Sacred Scripture and is the only prophetic book in the New Testament. The Church makes frequent use of it, particularly in the Liturgy, to sing the praises of the risen Christ and the splendour of the heavenly Jerusalem which symbolizes the Church in the glory of heaven.

A certain parallel can be seen between the Book of Revelation and Genesis, the first of the sacred books. Genesis describes the beginning of the world through the creative action of God. Using similar symbolism, the Apocalypse speaks at length of the new creation (cf. Rev 21:1, 5) initiated by the Redemption brought about by Christ which will reach its climax when he comes again at the end of the world. The last chapters of Revelation specifically mention the river which watered paradise (cf. Gen 2:6; Rev 22:1) and the tree of life (cf. Gen 2:8; Rev 22:14).

The Apocalypse is a book at once difficult and profound, and yet it focuses intense light on the figure of Christ in glory and builds up our hope of attaining eternal life.

AUTHORSHIP AND CANONICITY

The Apocalypse is one of the “deuterocanonical” books, that is, one of those which at one time were not accepted as sacred by all Christian communities. Its authenticity was suspect in parts of the Church, particularly in the East, probably because it was widely used by some early heretical sects in support of their teachings.

However, the earliest testimonies we have, which go back to the second century, are unanimous in recognizing the Apostle John as the author of the book. St Justin refers to “a man named John, one of the apostles of Christ”, as having received the revelations contained in the Apocalypse.¹ This is a particularly valuable testimony in view of the fact that Justin was converted to Christianity in Ephesus in the year 135, only a few decades after John wrote the book to the seven churches of Asia, the foremost of which was Ephesus. Contemporary with Justin’s text is the commentary on the Apocalypse written by St Melito, bishop of Sardis, another of the churches mentioned at the start

1. *Dialogue with Trypho*, 81, 3.

of the book. The bishop's commentary is not extant but it is referred to by Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Ecclesiastical History*.² Other second-century writers who support Johannine authorship of the Book of Revelation are Papias, bishop of Hierapolis,³ and St Irenaeus, who frequently quotes from it.⁴ The Muratorian Fragment, which dates from the end of the century, includes the Apocalypse in its list of sacred books.

An outstanding third-century testimony is that of Origen of Alexandria: he says that the author of it was the man who wrote the Fourth Gospel and had the good fortune to rest his head on Jesus' breast.⁵ In the West, Tertullian also attributes the Book of Revelation to St John.⁶ However, other views were being expressed around the same time as Tertullian: a Roman priest named Caius thought the Apocalypse was written by Cerinthus, a prominent Gnostic contemporary of John.⁷ Other writers of the same period, called *alogoi* because they rejected the *Logos* of St John, refused to accept the authenticity of the Apocalypse.⁸ Dionysius of Alexandria denied its canonicity because millenarianists were using it to support their arguments. To show that St John was not the author despite clear Church Tradition, Dionysius put forward arguments (not compelling ones) based on differences between the Apocalypse and the Fourth Gospel.⁹

In the fourth century, St Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, recognized the Apocalypse as canonical and used it in his controversy with the Arians.¹⁰ St Basil and St Gregory of Nyssa, for their part, accepted the tradition in favour of authenticity. However, the school of Antioch generally denied both the authenticity and the canonicity of the book; St Cyril of Jerusalem, St John Chrysostom, Theoderet and others do not use it.¹¹ This lack of conviction among some writers of the Eastern Church must be set against the unanimity of the Latin Church, which always accepted the Apocalypse as part of the canon of inspired books and as written by St John.

From the sixth to the sixteenth century the authenticity of the book was undisputed. Doubts which arose in Spain in the early seventh century were dispelled by the first Council of Toledo.¹² Once the danger from millenarianism was over, the Eastern Church came round again to accepting the Apocalypse as inspired.

In the sixteenth century Erasmus¹³ expressed some doubts about its authenticity and canonicity, but his views were rejected and censored by the

University of Paris. Luther¹⁴ initially argued against authenticity but later changed his view. In the eighteenth century rationalists (who rejected prophecy out of hand) naturally had no place for the Book of Revelation: rationalist arguments were based on internal evidence (the same kind of arguments as put forward earlier by Dionysius of Alexandria). On the basis of a passage in Eusebius' *History*, rationalists attribute the Apocalypse to a personage called John the Presbyter; but these arguments are weak: what Eusebius says is far from clear, and his thinking was coloured by the danger posed by millenarianism.

At the present time there is a certain amount of disagreement among scholars. Some, Protestants for the most part, are of the opinion that the Apocalypse could not have been written by the author of the Fourth Gospel, given the differences in style and language. Others, mainly Catholics, accept that it is a Johannine text, given the antiquity of Tradition to this effect and the fact that the difference in subject matter between the two books can account for the differences in style.

The Magisterium has on different occasions pronounced on the authenticity and canonicity of the Apocalypse—for example, at the Council of Hippo (in 393), Carthage (397), and Toledo (633).¹⁵ This teaching was confirmed later by the ecumenical Councils of Florence and Trent.¹⁶ However, whereas the Church has dogmatically defined the book as canonical, it has not pronounced as strongly on who wrote it or how it was redacted.

PLACE AND DATE OF COMPOSITION

At the beginning of the book, we are told of how the hagiographer received this divine revelation: "I John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a voice like a trumpet . . ." (1:9-10). Patmos is a small island in the Aegean Sea, one of a group of islands known as the Dodecanese. It was a Sunday, the Lord's day, the day that ever since the beginning of the Church Christians had dedicated to divine worship in place of the Jewish sabbath; the *Didache* and St Ignatius of Antioch testify to this Christian practice. An ancient tradition, witnessed to by Tertullian, mentions that St John, the beloved disciple, was exiled on Patmos because of his preaching and apostolic ministry. The author of the Apocalypse seems to confirm this by saying at the outset that he shares the affliction, pain and patience experienced by those he is addressing.

St Irenaeus thinks that the book was written towards the end of the reign of Domitian, around the year 96.¹⁷ Writing in the third century or towards the end of the second, Victorinus says that Domitian sent St John into exile, interning

2. Cf. *Ecclesiastical History*, IV, 26, 2.

3. Cf. Andrew of Caesarea, *Comment in Apoc.*, prologue.
4. Cf. *Against heresies*, 4, 20.
5. Cf. *In Iohann. comm.*, 1, 14.
6. Cf. *Against Marcion*, 3, 14; *De resurrectione carnis*, 25.
7. Cf. *Ecclesiastical History*, III, 28, 2.
8. Cf. St Epiphanius, *Haer.*, 51, 1-35.
9. Cf. Dionysius of Alexandria, *Ex libro de promission.*, 3-7.
10. Cf. *Oratio II contra Arianos*, 23.
11. Cf. *Ecclesiastical History*, III, 25, 2.
12. Cf. Mansi, 10, 624.
13. Cf. Erasmus, *In Apoc.*, 22, 21.

14. Cf. Luther, *Praef. in Apoc.*

15. Cf. EB 17 and 34.

16. Cf. EB 47 and 59.

17. Cf. *Against heresies*, 5, 30.

him on the island of Patmos.¹⁸ St Jerome¹⁹ and Eusebius²⁰ say the same.

Information contained in the book itself confirm this date. We know in fact from the Acts of the Apostle (20:7) that the Christians met together on the “first day of the week”, which Revelation 1:10 describes as “Dies Domini”, “the Lord’s Day” (our Sunday). Also, the life of the Christian communities of Asia Minor as reflected in the Book of Revelation clearly indicates they were at a more mature stage than the churches referred to in other New Testament texts. All this means that the year 95, given by tradition, is realistic and acceptable.

ADDRESSEES AND PURPOSE

The book is addressed to “the seven churches that are in Asia” (1:4)—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea (cf. 1:11). Commentators are agreed that this number is symbolic and that the book is in fact addressed to the entire Church. The second-century Muratorian Canon puts it this way: “John in the Apoclypse, although writing to seven churches, is however addressing all churches.”²¹ An early commentator called Primasius states that what the Lord says to his servant is addressed to the whole Church, “uni Ecclesiae septiforme”, a single Church of which these seven are a symbol.²²

Various things in the text confirm this world-wide reference—for example, when it says (without being specific), “Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein (1:3)”; or its repeated warning, “he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6; etc.).

The book seeks to alert Christians to the grave dangers which threaten faith, while consoling and encouraging those who are suffering tribulation, particularly due to the fierce and long-drawn-out persecution mounted by Domitian. The very earliest heresies were already wreaking havoc among the Christian communities: the Nicolaitans were arguing in favour of some degree of compromise with idolatry and pagan lifestyles (cf. 2:7, 14) and there was evidence of a loss of early fervour (2:4) and a slackening of charity (3:2).

Persecution was coming from both Jews and pagans. Jewish persecutors are described as false Jews, “a synagogue of Satan” (2:9-10); pagan persecution had begun with the first great persecution (instigated by Nero), the memory of which was still fresh thirty years on (cf. 6:9-11; 17:6). The Empire would repeatedly persecute Christians up to the fourth century, when the advent of Constantine brought peace. Some emperors, Domitian for example, required idolatrous worship of their person, giving themselves the title of “our Lord and God”. Christians refused, thereby incurring their wrath. However, as Tertullian put it, the blood of martyrs would prove to be the seed of Christians. St John

18. Cf. *In Apoc.*, 10, 11 and 17, 10.

19. Cf. *Offamous men*, 9.

20. Cf. *Ecclesiastical History*, III, 18, 4.

21. Cf. *EB* 4.

22. Cf. *Commentarium super Apoc.* 1, 1.

seeks to console Christians experiencing such cruel injustice and harassment, and strives to keep alive their hope in the ultimate victory of Christ and of all who stay true to him even to death if necessary (cf. 2:10).

LITERARY FORM

In line with the teaching of Pius XII,²³ the Second Vatican Council reminds us that to understand what sacred writers had in mind one needs to take into account, among other things, the literary forms they use, that is, the genre in which they are writing—historical narrative, prophecy, poetry, etc.—and the patterns of language prevailing in their time and culture.²⁴

This principle needs to be particularly borne in mind in the case of the Book of Revelation, given its special characteristics and language, so remote from our own experience. In fact, during the two centuries before and after Christ there was quite a crop of Jewish and Christian writings entitled Apocalypse (Revelation), with a content and style of a type now called “apocalyptic writing”—for example, the Book of Enoch, the Apocalypse of Moses (which heretics attributed to St Paul) and others, including the Apocrypha of the Old and the New Testaments.

These books all had two basic features: (a) they dealt with the subject of the last age of the world, when good would triumph and evil be annihilated; (b) they made much use of symbolism taken from the animal kingdom, astrology, numbers and so forth, to depict past and present history and to prophesy the future. From the point of view of content and style these writings are a kind of late extension of prophetic literature, for the Prophets already spoke of the “day of Yahweh”²⁵ and used symbolism to convey their message.²⁶ Some Old Testament passages in fact have a markedly apocalyptic ring about them—for example, Isaiah 24-27, Zechariah 9-14 and, particularly, the Book of Daniel, which is clearly a precursor of apocalyptic literature. That literature, in turn, is influenced by wisdom literature: its visions are interwoven with moral exhortations, invitations to reflection and promises of future beatitude or retribution.

Compared with the Prophets, authors of apocalypses have distinct features of their own: a) they write under pseudonyms, using the names of celebrated figures who might have received divine revelations—men like Enoch who Genesis 5:24 tells us was taken to heaven at the end of his life; b) in general, they conceive this world as being in the power of Satan and incapable of regeneration, and therefore they place their hopes in a new world to be created by God: the most that man can contribute is prayer; c) they exhibit a marked tendency towards determinism: everything that has to be said is contained in these books, and very little room is left for freedom and personal conversion.

23. Cf. Pius XII, *Divino afflante Spiritu*, EB 558.

24. Cf. Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 12.

25. Cf. Amos 5:18-20; Is 2:6-21; Jer 30:5-7; Joel 2:1-17; etc.

26. Cf. Amos 7:1 - 8:3; Hos 13:7-8; Joel 2:10-11; Ezek 1-2; etc.

Although St John's work is entitled *Apocalypse* (*Revelation*), its key features are more akin to the books of the Prophets than to those of "apocalyptic writers". He in fact describes his book as "prophecy" (1:3; cf. 22:7, 10, 18, 19; 22:9), and although for the most part he uses language and symbolism akin to Jewish apocalyptic writing, his historical perspective is quite different, namely, that which human history acquires under the lordship of Christ, which is acknowledged and extolled in the Church, the new people of God, who like their Lord suffer in this present world at the hands of the forces of evil. However, the final outcome has already been revealed by the resurrection and ascension of Christ, and the ground is being laid for it all through the course of history by the holiness, good works and suffering of the just. Christ's definitive victory will come at the end and the Church will be raised on high in a new world where there will be no more mourning or pain (cf. 21:4) and where there will be room for all those who choose to repent (cf. 16:11).

The *Revelation* of John constitutes a strong call to conversion; it urges people to commit themselves to good and put their trust in God; in this it is like the oracles spoken by the prophets. Like other "apocalypses" it is a book of consolation written at a time of exceptional stress; but it also provides encouragement to holiness and fidelity in all ages. Those parts of the book which have epistolary features (at the beginning and end: 1:1 - 3:22; 22:21) and indeed to a lesser degree the whole text are in the tradition of didactical wisdom writing.

STYLE AND LANGUAGE

Symbolism is of the essence of apocalyptic literature: its lofty, supernatural message calls for the use of analogies and similes which will bring the reader not so much to understand its exact meaning as to grasp it intuitively.

The symbols used are in some cases physical objects, such as the seven-branched golden lampstand (cf. 1:12; Zech 4:2, 10), the book with the seven seals (cf. 5:1; Ezek 2:9), the two olive trees (cf. 11:4; Zech 4:2, 14). At other times the symbols are actions—the sealing of the foreheads of the elect (cf. 7:3; Ezek 9:4), the eating of the prophetic scroll (cf. 10:8-11; Ezek 2:8), the measurement of the temple (cf. 11:1; Ezek 40-41). Certain cities are also used as symbols—Zion, Jerusalem, Babylon and Armageddon.²⁷ Numbers also have a symbolic purpose: the number three refers to things supernatural and divine, four to created things; seven and twelve imply completion, fulness. Colours are used in a similar way: white stands for victory and purity, red for violence, black for death.

Another feature of apocalyptic writing is what we might call the "law of anticipation", that is, its tendency to refer briefly to some event which will be dealt with fully later on. And sometimes the narrative is interrupted to include a passage designed to provide consolation to the just.

27. Cf. Rev 14:1; 3:12; 21:2; 14:8; 18:2; 16:14, 16; etc.

INTERPRETING THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Due to the wealth of symbolism in the book it has been interpreted in many different ways over the centuries. The four main interpretations are as follows:

a) The book is a history of the Church, proclaiming the main events and epochs of the Church, past and future. Seven periods are identified, the last being the reign of a thousand years which Christ and his followers will establish before the end of the world, if *Revelation* 20:1-7 is taken literally. This interpretation was widespread in the early centuries of the Church and in the middle ages; it is also popular in our own days among certain sects which have made a number of (mistaken) predictions of the date of the end of the world.

b) The *Apocalypse* has to do solely with events in St John's own time—persecutions and trials of the Church, for the most part the result of the actions of outsiders. This interpretation, first proposed in the sixteenth century, is still held by many scholars in the rationalist tradition. It sees the book as merely a symbolic description of first-century events.

c) The content of the *Apocalypse* is exclusively a proclamation and premonition of the last days: it refers to the eschatological era. This interpretation was very much in vogue in the eighteenth century and still has its followers today.

d) The *Apocalypse* is a theological vision of the entire panorama of history, a vision which underlines its transcendental and religious dimension. According to this interpretation (favoured by most Fathers of the Church) St John is describing the situation of the Church in his own time and he is also surveying the panorama of the last times; but for him these last times have already begun: they began with the entry into the world of Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man. This idea is very much in line with the Fourth Gospel, which also conceives the last era of the world, and eternal life, as having already in some way begun and as developing towards ultimate and total fulness. It provides a special perspective on events in history and is involved with expectation of final victory. The book does depict the cosmic struggle between good and evil, but it takes for granted Christ's ultimate triumph. This is, in our view, the most valid interpretation of the book and therefore it is the one we follow in the commentary provided.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It is helpful to bear in mind the background against which the *Apocalypse* was written. The evangelization of Asia Minor began very early on and may well have been initiated by those Jews from Asia Minor who witnessed the events of Pentecost in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 2:9). When St Paul arrived in Ephesus he found followers of Christ there already (cf. Acts 19:1). However, until the period 53-56 and St Paul's missionary work, there were no Christian

communities in these regions which could properly be called local churches. These now began to develop, and very soon there were signs of cockle growing up among the young wheat; persecution, too, was becoming part of the picture.

This period also saw the final break with the synagogue, and some Jews began to sow confusion (cf. 2:9; 3:9). There was, moreover, the threat of syncretism, as a result of the influence of oriental religions in the Roman empire. Phrygia, the centre of the cults of Cybele and Attis, was quite close to the churches mentioned in the Apocalypse; the sins denounced in the book reflect to some extent the mystery-rites of those pagan religions (cf. 13:11-13; 2:14; 2:20ff).

Another feature of the historical background is the persecution of Christianity by Rome. The more emperor-worship increased, the more difficult it was for Christians to stay loyal to their faith. With Domitian (81-96) the situation worsened, because those who refused him divine honours became liable to the death penalty.

From five of the seven cities to whose churches St John writes we have positive evidence of emperor-worship: Thyatira and Laodicea are the exceptions. Additionally, Ephesus had its famous temple dedicated to the goddess Artemis (cf. Acts 19:28). In Smyrna St Polycarp would later suffer martyrdom (c. 156) for refusing to acknowledge Caesar as *Kyrios*, Lord. Pergamum saw the martyrdom of Antipas, "my witness, my faithful one" (cf. 2:13). As time went on Christianity continued to spread, but opposition and violence towards Christians also increased. This grieves St John and, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, he tries to make the faithful see that Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, will ultimately triumph over his enemies. In the meantime, however, the great struggle must go on, a struggle which involves Christians in every epoch of history. The enemy often gains the upper hand, but his victory is merely temporary and apparent. In fact things are quite the reverse of what they seem: martyrdom and suffering may appear to overwhelm Christians but really that experience guarantees their victory.

DIVISION AND CONTENTS

It is difficult to divide the book into parts which clarify its meaning; this is particularly so from chapter 4 onwards, when the author begins to describe his vision of the last times. For example, certain themes seem to be dealt with more than once—the scourges prior to the End (cf. 6:1-15; 8:6 - 9:21; 16:1-21), the victory of the elect (cf. 7:9-17; 14:1-5; 19:1-10), the fall of Babylon (cf. 14:6-11; 18:1-3), etc. Sometimes the rhythm of the narrative seems to break abruptly (cf. 8:2; 10:1; 12:1); it is broken, for example, by the episode of the two witnesses (cf. 11:1-13) and by that of the woman in heaven (cf. 12:1-17). This has led some scholars to suggest that the text of the Apocalypse in the form that has come down to us may be a fusion of two earlier works of St John on the same subject.

This is only a theory, however; besides, there is enough thematic develop-

ment in the book to give it a strong basic unity. From chapter 4 onwards, everything is tending towards the final outcome of a dramatic battle between Christ and the powers of evil, a battle which reaches its climax in the last chapters (cf. 19:11 - 22:5). But it is true that we are already given the result of the last battle long before the detailed narrative of that event. As he describes each vision, the author seems to repeat his entire message: he feels under no restraint to deal with events or subjects in a tidy, systematic or chronological way: apocalyptic writing is different from other genres in this respect.

By using a series of literary devices he manages to keep the reader's interest alive right to the end. For example, he uses the number seven as a device of this kind: after the seven letters to the seven churches (cf. 1:4 - 3:22) the writer sees a scroll sealed with seven seals (cf. 5:1 - 8:1), hears the seven trumpets (cf. 8:2 - 11:15) and sees the seven plagues being poured out of the seven bowls (15:1 - 16:17). The seven letters seem to form a section of their own but all the other symbolic sevens appear to be connected with one another: the seventh seal introduces the vision of the seven angels with the seven trumpets (cf. 8:1-2), and once the seventh trumpet has been blown the author sees God's temple from which the seven angels with the seven plagues emerge (cf. 11:19; 15:5). After the seventh bowl has been poured, the author is shown, in detail, the various adversaries, the last battles, and the glorification of the Church (cf. chaps 17-22). To maintain the reader's interest and attention, the gap between the sixth and seventh events is sometimes extended by the introduction of a new vision (cf. 7:1-17; 10:1 - 11:14) or the appearance of the next set of seven (cf. 12:1 - 15:5) is delayed, so that when he thinks he is nearing the end the reader finds that preliminary episodes are still being introduced.

The number seven is so frequently used that some scholars have opted for dividing the book into seven acts, with seven scenes in each. But the text refuses to submit to this rigid scheme: the author writes with total freedom of style, though he clearly uses the "seven" device to help shape the book. However, after the seventh trumpet is sounded (11:15), this device becomes less prominent and the symbols of the woman, the beasts, the Lamb and the city occupy centre stage.

Given the way the various themes are developed and the literary aspects of the work, the following division is probably generally acceptable:

Prologue: The book and its author are introduced (1:1-3).

PART I: LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA (1:4 - 3:22)

Formal address and greeting (1:4-8)

Introduction: Christ in glory commissions John to write the book (1:9-20)

Letters: to the churches of Ephesus (2:1-7), Smyrna (2:8-11), Pergamum (2:12-17), Thyatira (2:18-29), Sardis (3:1-6), Philadelphia (3:7-13) and Laodicea (3:14-22).

PART II: ESCHATOLOGICAL VISIONS (4:1 - 22:15)

1. Introductory vision. The author is taken up into heaven, where he sees God in majesty directing the destinies of the world and the Church. Only Christ can reveal what those destinies are, for only he can open the seven seals (chaps. 4-5).

2. First section. Events prior to the final outcome. A series of visions before the last trumpet is sounded (6:1 - 11:14):

Christ opens the first six seals. The great day of God's wrath has arrived (6:1-17).

The great multitude of the saved (7:1-17).

The opening of the seventh seal and the vision of the seven angels bearing seven trumpets (8:1-6).

The sounding of the first trumpets. They herald the coming of God and cause catastrophes which stir people to repent (8:7 - 9:21).

The author is given the little scroll to eat. What must still remain hidden and what is going to be prophetically revealed (10:1-11).

The death and resurrection of the two witnesses (11:1-14).

3. Second section. Christ's victory over the powers of evil, and the glorification of the Church (11:15 - 22:15).

The sounding of the seventh trumpet: the advent of the Kingdom of Christ (11:15-19).

The woman fleeing from the dragon: the Church (12:1-17).

The beasts given authority by the dragon (13:1-18).

The Lamb and his companions (14:1-5).

Proclamation and symbols of the Judgment; the harvest and the vintage (14:6-20).

The hymn of the saved: the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb (15:1-4).

The seven bowls of plagues: the last chance for conversion (15:5 - 16:21).

Description of the powers of evil: the harlot, Babylon and the beast (17:1-18).

The fall of Babylon proclaimed: joy and lamentation (18:1-24).

Songs of victory in heaven (19:1-10).

The first battle: the beast is destroyed (19:11-21).

The thousand-year reign of Christ and his people (20:1-6).

The second battle: Satan is overthrown (20:7-10).

The Last Judgment of the living and the dead (20:11-15).

A new world comes into being: the messianic Jerusalem is described (21:1 - 22:15).

CONCLUSION: A dialogue between Jesus and the Church. Warnings to the reader and words of farewell (22:16-2).

TEACHINGS CONTAINED IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

The core of the teaching contained in the book concerns the second coming of our Lord—the Parousia—and the definitive establishment of his Kingdom at the end of time. Various elements go to make up this teaching.

1. God the almighty God is described as “the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end” (1:8; 22:13), words which teach the sublimity and absolute authority of God. Alpha is the first letter of the Greek alphabet and Omega the last: the sacred author chooses this graphic method to explain that God is the source from which all created things derive their being: he wills that what did not exist should come to be (cf. 4:11); he is also the end or goal to which everything is directed and where it finds its fulfilment.

In another passage God is defined as he “who is and who was and who is to come” (1:4), a form of words also found in Jewish literature as an explanation of the name Yahweh, “I AM WHO I AM”, revealed to Moses (Ex 3:14). This teaches that God is he who existed in the past (he is eternal); he who is (he is active in the world since its creation); and he who is to come (that is, his dynamic and saving presence will never cease).

Echoing the Book of Daniel, the Apocalypse teaches that God “lives for ever and ever” (4:9-10; cf. Dan 4:34). He is also called the “living God”, an expression often met in the Old Testament, which underlines the essential difference between Yahweh (the living God) and idols, “the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes but do not see” (Ps 115:4-5). God is, then, eternal and immortal; he has no beginning or end. He is also the *Pantocrator*, the Almighty; his power is unique and all-embracing (cf. 1:8; 4:3). God is the Lord of history; nothing falls outside his providence; he is the just Father whose word is true, who will bestow himself on the victor as he promised: “I will be his God and he shall be my son” (21:7). Finally, God's creative power and unbounded love will lead him to restore all things and create a new world (cf. 21:5).

God is also presented as the universal Judge, against whose verdict there is no appeal; none can evade his judgment (cf. 20:12). However, at the end of time his infinite love will prevail and will cause all things to be made new (cf. 21:5), and night shall be no more, for the Lord will shine on them forever (cf. 22:5), nor shall there be any pain or tears, for the old world shall have passed away.

2. Jesus Christ At the start of the book the figure of the suffering Christ is evoked by reference to “every one who pierced him” (1:7), and later on it speaks of the great city “where their Lord was crucified” (11:8). Elsewhere there is further reference to the saving blood of Christ (cf. 7:14; 12:11), particularly in connexion with the impressive yet humble figure of the Lamb, often depicted as “slain” (cf. 5:12; 22:14), the victim of the greatest of all sacrifices. However, our Lord is usually depicted in the glory of heaven under the tender symbol of the Lamb enthroned on Mount Zion, with the river of the water of life flowing from his throne (cf. 14:1; 5:6; 22:3; 22:1). He will shepherd and guide his people (7:17). His enemies will make war on him, but he will emerge victorious (cf. 17:14). He is worthy to receive power and glory and to be worshipped by all creation (cf. 5:12; 7:1; 13:8).

Jesus Christ is also given the title of “Son of man”, destined to receive power and dominion over all nations and languages (cf. Dan 7:13-14; Rev 1:13-16). He is “Lord of lords and King of kings” (cf. 17:14; 19:12-16); he is above the angels, who are his emissaries, and unlike them he is rendered the worship due to God alone (cf. 1:1; 22:6; 19:10; 22:8-9). In other passages Christ is given divine titles and attributes (cf. 1:18; 3:7; 5:13; 22:1-3). He is also depicted as the Word of God: this is in line with the Fourth Gospel and clearly teaches that he is divine (cf. 19:13; Jn 1:1-14; 1 Jn 1:1).

3. The Holy Spirit There are a number of passages which indirectly refer to the Holy Spirit—for example, when the book speaks of the seven spirits who are before the throne, or the seven torches of fire (1:4; 4:5). It also explicitly teaches that it is the Holy Spirit who is speaking to the churches (2:7, 11, 17; etc.). And, at the end, the voice of the Spirit joins with that of the Bride to make entreaty for the coming of Christ. This passage is reminiscent of St Paul’s teaching about how the Holy Spirit prays by interceding for us with sighs too deep for words (cf. Rom 8:26). In the Book of Revelation, the Holy Spirit is presented in relation to the Church: he nourishes the Church with his word and moves it interiorly to pray earnestly for the coming of the Lord.

4. The Church In a more or less explicit way the Church is present throughout the Book of Revelation. It teaches that the Church, which is one and universal, is the Bride of Christ, insistently making supplication for the Lord’s coming (cf. 22:17, 20). But the Church is also depicted as Christian communities located in various cities of proconsular Asia (cf. chaps. 2-3). These communities do not constitute a Church distinct from the Church as such; rather, we can begin to perceive here the idea that all communities, taken together, make up the universal Church: the Church becomes present in these believing communities which are “parts” of the one Church of Christ.²⁸

The apocalyptic vision of the woman in heaven (cf. chap. 12) has been interpreted in many different ways, particularly as referring to the Church. This interpretation sees her as the Church undergoing severe affliction. Her crown

28. Cf. Vatican II, *Christus Dominus*, 68.

of twelve stars is taken as symbolizing both the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve Apostles, the pillars of the new Church. The passage is reminiscent of what the prophet Isaiah says when he compares the suffering of the people to those of a woman in labour.

The Apocalypse also uses a variety of symbols designed to convey the beauty and grandeur of the Church. Thus, it speaks of the holy city, the new Jerusalem, where God dwells; it is also the “beloved city” (cf. 3:12; 21:2, 10; 20:9). Its glory and splendour are described with a wealth of detail, ranging from the richness of its walls to the fruitfulness of its waters (cf. 21:16-27; 22:1-2). It is called the “temple of God”, whose pillars are those who have won the victory; in it stands the Ark of the Covenant and there the countless multitudes of the elect render worship to God (cf. 3:12; 7:15; 11:19).

The text implies that in both its earthly stage and its heavenly stage, the Church is the chosen people of God. Thus, the voice from heaven warns the elect who live in Babylon, “Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues” (18:4); and towards the end of the book we are reminded that God will dwell in the midst of his people (cf. 21:3): the Church is depicted as the new Israel, increasing in number, and at a future time preserved from all evil by the seal of God (cf. 7:4-8).

The image of the Kingdom also reveals the nature of the Church. John depicts it, now as sharing in tribulation and the Kingdom (cf. 1:9), now as singing the praises of Jesus Christ: he has “made us a kingdom”, a royal line, “priests to his God and Father” (1:6).

One of the most important and revealing things the Bible tells us about the Church is God’s love for his people as symbolized by the beloved Bride. The Apocalypse frequently speaks in these terms, focusing attention on the marriage of the Lamb, whose wife is decked out as a new bride (cf. 19:7; 21:9), eagerly calling for her beloved (cf. 22:17). One of the most significant moments described is the wedding of the Lamb, an occasion for great joy and exultation (cf. 19:7). The book also alludes to the Bride when it says, “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb” (19:9).

5. The angels Throughout the book angels are very much in evidence. Etymologically, the word “angel” means “messenger”; this role of theirs in bringing God’s messages to men is stressed continually. At the start of the book it is through an angel that John is given to know the things that are to come, and at the end it will also be an angel who shows him the final visions of the heavenly Jerusalem (cf. 1:1; 22:6, 16). At certain points an angel passes his message on to other angels (cf. 7:2; 8:2 - 11:15), or proclaims the Gospel to all mankind and makes known God’s dire warnings and punishments (cf. 14:6-19; 16:17; 19:17).

The angels are also depicted as man’s protectors. We see them standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the winds to prevent their harming men (cf. 7:1), and standing as sentinels at the gates of the holy city (cf. 21:12). The angels of the churches (cf. 1:20; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14) are interpreted

by some commentators as symbolizing the bishops of these churches, for the main mission of bishops is to watch over their flocks. However, these angels can also be seen as divine messengers who are given things by the Lord to communicate to the churches, whom they also have a mission to protect and govern.

On occasions the angels are deputed to carry out God's punishment (cf. 9:15; 14:18; etc.). With the archangel St Michael as their leader, they fight the great cosmic battle of Good and Evil (cf. 12:7ff) against the dragon, "that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world" (12:9). But this is a war which goes on throughout history: thus, the demons, also called angels of Satan, are often shown as coming from the abyss, temporarily released to roam the earth, causing war and confusion (cf. 20:7-8); in the end, however, they will be cast down into hell where they will suffer everlasting torment (cf. 12:9; 20:10).

In addition to their important and varied mission on earth, the angels are also in heaven, in the presence of God, interceding on mankind's behalf, offering "upon the golden altar before the throne" the prayers of the saints, which reach God via the angels (cf. 8:4). Special emphasis is also put on the unceasing worship offered by the angels to God and to the Lamb (cf. 5:11; 7:11; etc.).

6. The Virgin Mary The woman clothed with the sun, crowned with stars, and with the moon under her feet is undoubtedly a symbol of the Church. However, from very early on many Fathers also saw her as representing the Blessed Virgin. It is true that Mary suffered no birth-pangs when her Son was born, and had no children other than him to be "the rest of her offspring" (12:17). However, this vision does evoke the Genesis account, which speaks of enmity between the serpent and the woman. The Son who is caught up to God and to his throne is Jesus Christ (cf. 12:5). As in the case of the parables, not everything in the imagery necessarily happens in real life; and the same image can refer to one or more things—particularly when they are closely connected, as the Blessed Virgin and the Church are. So, the fact that this passage is interpreted as referring to the Church does not exclude its referring also to Mary. More than once, the Church's Magisterium has given it a Marian interpretation. For example, St Pius X says: "Everyone knows that this woman was the image of the Virgin Mary, who, in giving birth to our head, remained inviolate. 'And being with child,' the Apostle continues, 'she cried out in her travail and was there in the anguish of delivery' [...]. It was the birth of all of us who, while being exiles here below, are not yet brought forth into the perfect love of God and eternal happiness. The fact that the heavenly Virgin labours in childbirth shows her loving desire to watch over us and through unceasing prayer complete the number of the elect."²⁹

John Paul II adopted this interpretation in a sermon at the shrine of Allötting: "Mary [...] carries the *features of that woman* whom the Apocalypse describes

29. Cf. *Ad Diem illum*, 15.

[...]. The woman, who stands *at the end* of the history of creation and salvation, corresponds evidently to the one about whom it is said *in the first pages* of the Bible that she 'is going to crush the head of the serpent'. Between this promising beginning and the apocalyptic end Mary *has brought to light a son* 'who is to rule all nations with an iron sceptre' (Rev 12:5) [...]. She it is with whom the *apocalyptic* dragon makes war, for being the mother of the redeemed, she is the image of the Church whom we likewise call mother."³⁰

30. *Homily*, 18 November 1980.

THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN SEA IN THE FIRST CENTURY AD



The Book of Revelation

ENGLISH AND LATIN VERSIONS, WITH NOTES

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PROLOGUE

¹The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon take place; and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ²who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. ³Blessed is he who

Dan 2:28
Rev 22:6

Rev 6:9
1 Jn 1:1-3
Rev 22:7, 18

¹Apocalypsis Iesu Christi, quam dedit illi Deus palam facere servis suis, quae oportet fieri cito, et significavit mittens per angelum suum servo suo Ioanni,

1-20. After a brief prologue (vv. 1-3) and a letter-style greeting (vv. 4-8), St John describes a vision which acts as an introduction to the entire book; in it the risen Christ is depicted with features identifying his divinity and his position as Lord and Saviour of the churches.

In the course of the book Jesus Christ will also appear as God's envoy, sent to teach Christians of the time, and subsequent generations (chaps. 2-3), and to console them in the midst of persecution by proclaiming God's design for the future of the world and of the Church (chaps. 4-22).

1-3. Despite its brevity this prologue conveys the scope of the book, its authority and the effect it hopes to have on its readers.

The *content* of the letter is a revelation made by Jesus Christ about contemporary and future events (cf. 1:19; 4:1). Its author, John, gives it its *authority*: Christ's revelation has been communicated to him in a supernatural manner, and he bears faithful witness to everything revealed to him. The book's *purpose* is to have the reader prepare for his or her definitive encounter with Christ by obeying what is written in the book: blessed are those who read it and take it to heart and do what it says.

God made known his salvific purpose through everything Jesus did and said. However, after his resurrection Christ continues to speak to his Church by means of revelations such as that contained in this book and those made to St Paul (cf. Gal 1:15-16; etc.). These bring the Christian revelation to completion and apply the saving action of Jesus to concrete situations in the life of the Church. When revelations reach us through an inspired writer they have universal validity, that is, they are "public" revelation and are part and parcel of the message of salvation entrusted by Christ to his Apostles to proclaim to all nations (cf. Mt 28:18-20 and par.; Jn 17:18; 20:21). Public divine Revelation ceased with the death of the last Apostle (cf. Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 4).

1. "The revelation of Jesus Christ": The word in Greek is *apocalypse*, hence the name often given to this book of Sacred Scripture. Revelation always

reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein; for the time is near.

²qui testificatus est verbum Dei et testimonium Iesu Christi, quaecumque vidit.

³Beatus, qui legit et qui audiunt verba prophetiae et servant ea, quae in ea scripta

implies the unveiling of something previously hidden—in this case, future events. The future is known to God the Father (the Greek text uses the definite article, “the God”, which is how the New Testament usually refers to God the Father); and Jesus Christ, being the Son, shares in this knowledge which is being communicated to the author of the book. It speaks of “the revelation of Jesus Christ” not only because it has come to John from Christ but also because our Lord is the main subject, the beginning and end, of this revelation: he occupies the central position in all these great visions in which the veils concealing the future are torn to allow Light (Jesus Christ himself: cf. Rev 21:23; 22:5) to dispel the darkness.

“Soon”: as regards how imminent or not all those events are, one needs to remember that the notion of time in Sacred Scripture, particularly in the Apocalypse, is not quite the same as ours: it is more qualitative than quantitative. Here indeed “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Pet 3:8). So, when Scripture says that something is about to happen it is not necessarily referring to a date in the near future: it is simply saying that it will happen and even in some sense is happening already. Finally, one needs to bear in mind that if events are proclaimed as being imminent, this would have a desired effect of fortifying those who are experiencing persecution and would give them hope and consolation.

3. The Book of Revelation is a pressing call to commitment in fidelity to everything our Lord has chosen to reveal to us in the New Testament, in this instance from the pen of St John.

The book seems to be designed for liturgical assemblies, where someone reads it aloud and the others listen. This is the preferential place for Sacred Scripture, as Vatican II indicates: “The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures as she venerated the Body of the Lord, in so far as she never ceases, particularly in the sacred liturgy, to partake of the bread of life and to offer it to the faithful from the one table of the Word of God and the Body of Christ” (*Dei Verbum*, 21).

“Sacred Scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. For it is from it that lessons are read and explained in the homily, and psalms are sung. It is from the scriptures that the prayers, collects, and hymns draw their inspiration and their force, and that actions and signs derive their meaning” (Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 24).

The situation when St John was writing called for just the sort of exhortations and warnings this text contains. Its words call for a prompt, committed response which leaves no room for any kind of doubt or hesitation. They are also a dire

PART ONE

LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Address and greeting

⁴John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was

sunt; tempus enim prope est. ⁴Ioannes septem ecclesiis, quae sunt in Asia: warning to those who try to hinder the progress of the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom which must inexorably come about and which in some way is already with us.

4-8. Following the prologue (vv. 1-3), a short reflection (vv. 4-8) introduces the series of seven letters which form the first part of the book (1:4 - 3:22). This introduction begins with a salutation to the seven churches of Asia Minor, located in the west of the region known at the time as ‘proconsular Asia’, the capital of which was Ephesus.

The salutation is in the usual New Testament style: it sends good wishes of grace and peace on behalf of God and Jesus Christ (vv. 4-5, cf. 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:2; etc.); it depicts our Lord and his work of salvation (vv. 5-8) and projects that work onto the panorama of world history.

4. Even though there were other churches in Asia Minor, John addresses only seven, a number which stands for “totality”, as an early ecclesiastical writer, Primasius, explains. “He writes to the seven churches, that is, to the one and only Church symbolized by these seven” (*Commentariorum super Apoc.*, 1, 1).

Grace and peace are the outstanding gifts of the messianic era (cf. Rom 1:7). This form of salutation embodies the normal forms of greeting used by Greeks (*jaire*, grace) and Jews (*shalom*, peace); but here the words mean the grace, forgiveness and peace extended to men by the redemptive action of Jesus Christ. Thus, St John is wishing these gifts on behalf of God, the seven spirits and Jesus Christ.

The description of God as he “who is and who was and who is to come” is an elaboration of the name of “Yahweh” (“I AM WHO I AM”) which was revealed to Moses (cf. Ex 3:14), and underlines the fact that God is the Lord of history, of the past, the present and the future, and that he is at all times acting to effect salvation.

The “seven spirits” stand for God’s power and omniscience and intervention in the events of history. In Zechariah 4:10 divine power is symbolized by the seven “eyes of the Lord, which range the whole earth”. Further on in the Apocalypse (5:6), St John tells us that the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth are the seven eyes of the Lamb, that is, Christ. This symbolism (also found in the Old Testament: cf. Is 11:2ff) is used to show that God the Father acts through his Spirit and that this Spirit has been communicated to Christ and

Ex 3:14
Is 11:2ff; 41:4

and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood ⁶and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and

Gratia vobis et pax ab eo, qui est et qui erat et qui venturus est, et a septem spiritibus, qui in conspectu throni eius sunt, ⁵et ab Iesu Christo, qui est testis fidelis, primogenitus mortuorum et princeps regum terrae. Ei, qui diligit nos et solvit nos a peccatis nostris in sanguine suo ⁶et fecit nos regnum, sacerdotes

by him to mankind. So, when St John wishes grace and peace from the seven spirits of God it is the same as saying “from the Holy Spirit”, who is sent to the Church after the death and resurrection of Christ. Patristic tradition has in fact interpreted the seven spirits as meaning the septiform Spirit with his seven gifts as described in Isaiah 11:1-2 in St Jerome’s translation, the Vulgate.

5:6. Three messianic titles taken from Psalm 89:28-38 are given a new meaning in the light of fulfilment of Christian faith and applied to Jesus Christ. He is “the faithful witness” of the fulfilment of God’s Old Testament promises of a Saviour, a son of David (cf. 2 Sam 7:14; Rev 5:5;), for it is Christ who has in fact brought about salvation. That is why, later on in the book, St John calls Jesus Christ “the Amen” (Rev 3:4)—which is like saying that through what Christ did God has ratified and kept his word; St John also calls him “Faithful and True” (Rev 19:11), because God’s fidelity and the truth of his promises have been manifested in Jesus. This is to be seen in the Resurrection, which made Jesus “the first-born from the dead”, in the sense that the Resurrection constituted a victory in which all who abide in him share (cf. Col 1:18). Christ is also “the ruler of kings on earth” because he is Lord of the world: this will be clearly seen when he comes a second time, but his dominion is already making itself felt because he has begun to conquer the power of sin and death.

The second part of v. 5 and all v. 6 are a kind of paean in praise of Christ recalling his great love for us as expressed in his words, “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13). Christ’s love for us knows no bounds: his generosity led him to sacrifice his life by the shedding of his blood, which redeemed us from our sins. There was nothing we could have done to redeem ourselves. “All were held captive by the devil”, St Augustine comments, “and were in the thrall of demons; but they have been rescued from that captivity. The Redeemer came and paid the ransom: he shed his blood and with it purchased the entire orb of the earth” (*Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 95, 5).

Not content with setting us free from our sins, our Lord gave us a share in his kingship and priesthood. “Christ the Lord, high priest taken from among men (cf. Heb 5:1-5), made the new people ‘a kingdom of priests to his God and

Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. ⁷Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, every one who pierced him; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

Deo et Patri suo, ipsi gloria et imperium in saecula saeculorum. Amen. ⁷Ecce venit cum nubibus, et videbit eum omnis oculus et qui eum pupugerunt, et plangent se super eum omnes tribus terrae. Etiam, amen. ⁸Ego sum Alpha et Omega, dicit Dominus Deus, qui est et qui erat et qui venturus est, Omnipotens. ⁹Ego Ioannes, frater vester et particeps in tribulatione et regno et patientia in Iesu, fui in insula, quae appellatur Patmos, propter verbum Dei et testimonium

Father’ (Rev 1:6; cf. 5:9-10). The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated to be a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, that through all the works of Christian men and women they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the perfection of him who has called them out of darkness into his marvellous light (cf. 1 Pet 2:4-10)” (Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, 10).

7. Christ’s work is not finished. He has assembled his holy people on earth to bring them enduring salvation, and he will be revealed in all his glory to the whole world at the end of time. Although the text speaks in the present tense—“he is coming with the clouds”—this should be understood as referring to the future: the prophet was seeing future events as if they were actually happening (cf. Dan 7:13). This will be the day of final victory, when those who crucified Jesus, “every one who pierced him” (cf. Zech 12:10; Jn 19:37), will be astonished by the grandeur and glory of the crucified One. “The Sacred Scriptures inform us that there are two comings of the Son of God—one when he assumed human flesh for our salvation in the womb of a virgin; the other when he shall come at the end of the world to judge all mankind [. . .]; and if, from the beginning of the world that day of the Lord, on which he was clothed with our flesh, was sighed for by all as the foundation of their hope of deliverance; so also, after the death and ascension of the Son of God, we should make that other day of the Lord the object of our most earnest desires, ‘awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God’ (Tit 2:13)” (*St Pius V Catechism*, I, 8, 2).

Commenting on this passage of the Apocalypse, St Bede says: “He who at his first coming came in a hidden way and in order to be judged (by men) will then come in a manifest way. (John) recalls these truths in order to help the Church bear its suffering: now it is being persecuted by its enemies, later it will reign at Christ’s side” (*Explanatio Apocalypsis*, 1, 1).

The joy of those who put their hope in this glorious manifestation of Christ will contrast with the pains of those who reject God’s love and mercy to the very end. “Then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Mt 24:30).

8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

Reason for writing

9 I John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹saying, "Write what you see in a book and send

Iesu. ¹⁰Fui in spiritu in dominica die et audivi post me vocem magnum tamquam tubae ¹¹dicentis: "Quod vides, scribe in libro et mitte septem ecclesiis: Ephesum

8. The coming of the Lord in glory, the climax of his dominion, is guaranteed by the power of God, the absolute master of the world and its destiny. Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet; here they are used to proclaim that God is the beginning and end of all things, of the world and of history; he is present at all times—times past, present and future.

9-20. After greeting the churches (vv. 4-8) the author explains his reason for writing: he has been commanded to do so by his glorious Lord, in a vision of the risen Christ concerning his Church.

In Sacred Scripture God's messages are frequently communicated to prophets in the form of a vision (cf. Is 6; Ezek 1:4 - 3:15; etc.; Zech 1:7 - 2:9; etc.). Accounts of divine visions are particularly found in "books of revelation" or apocalypses, such as Daniel 8-12, and also in other Jewish and Christian writings of the time immediately before and after Christ's life on earth: although not included in the canon of the Bible, these writings were designed to keep up Christians' morale in times of persecution. In a genuinely prophetic vision God elevates the prophet's mind to enable him to understand what God desires to tell him (cf. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 173, a. 3). In the Apocalypse, when St John reports his vision he is making known the message given him by the risen Christ: Christ is continuing to speak to his Church in a number of ways, including the exhortations and teachings contained in this book.

9-11. Like other prophets and apostles (cf. Ezek 3:12; Acts 10:10; 22:17; 2 Cor 12:2-3), John feels himself caught up by a divine force; in an ecstasy he hears the voice of our Lord; its power and strength he describes as a trumpet.

Some scholars think that the seven churches listed here were chosen because of their particular situation at the time. They stand for the entire Church universal, and therefore what is said in the seven letters is addressed to all Christians who, in one way or another, find themselves in situations similar to that of these churches of proconsular Asia.

it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

et Smyrnam et Pergamum et Thyatiram et Sardis et Philadelphiam et Laodiciam." ¹²Et conversus sum, ut viderem vocem, quae loquebatur tecum; et conversus vidi septem candelabra aurea ¹³et in medio candelabrorum quasi Filium hominis, vestitum podere et praecinctum ad mamillas zonam auream;

The Apostles' vigilant care of the Church is discernible in many of the letters they addressed to their communities. Like St Paul (cf. 2 Cor 11:28; 1 Thess 2:2), the other Apostles felt anxiety for all the churches. St Peter, for example, wrote to elders telling them to be good shepherds of the flock God gave into their care, tending it "not by constraint but willingly, as God would have you, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock" (1 Pet 5:2-3).

This pastoral solicitude leads St John to show solidarity with the joy and affliction of Christians of his day. His consoling words come from someone who well knows (because he has learned it from Jesus and later from his own experience) that fidelity to the Gospel calls for self-denial and even martyrdom. Communion and solidarity are wonderful features of the mystical body of Christ: they stem from the fact that all Christians are united to each other and to Jesus Christ, the head of that body which is the Church (cf. Col 1:18; Eph 4:16; etc.). The visionary of Patmos clearly has tremendous love for Christ and for the Church. We should remember that "charity more than any other virtue, unites us closely with Christ, and it is the heavenly ardour of this love which has caused so many sons and daughters of the Church to rejoice in suffering contumely for his sake, joyfully to meet and overcome the severest trials, and even to shed their blood and die for him" (Pius XII, *Mystici corporis*, 33).

From the very start of his public ministry our Lord foretold how much his followers would have to suffer for his sake. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, he said, "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Mt 5:11-12).

"The Lord's day": the *dies Dominica*, Sunday, the day which the Church, ever since the apostolic age, keeps as its weekly holy day in place of the Jewish sabbath, because it is the day on which Jesus rose from the dead: "on this day Christ's faithful are bound to come together into one place. They should listen to the word of God and take part in the Eucharist, thus calling to mind the passion, resurrection, and glory of the Lord Jesus, and giving thanks to God by whom they have been begotten 'anew through the resurrection of Christ from the dead, unto a living hope' (1 Pet 1:3)" (Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 106). This day should be sanctified by attending Mass and also by giving time to other devotions, rest, and activities which help build up friendship with others, especially in the family circle.

Rev 1:4, 20

Dan 7:13; 10:5

Dan 7:9; 10:6

Rev 2:18;
19:12
Ezek 1:24; 43:2Mt 17:2
Judg 5:31
Rev 2:12
Dan 8:18;
10:5-19
Is 41:4; 44:6
48:12

12Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast; ¹⁴his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters; ¹⁶in his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

17When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But

¹⁴caput autem eius et capilli erant candidi tamquam lana alba, tamquam nix, et oculi eius velut flamma ignis, ¹⁵et pedes eius similes orichalco sicut in camino ardenti, et vox illius tamquam vox aquarum multarum, ¹⁶et habebat in dextera manu sua stellas septem, et de ore eius gladius acutus exibat, et facies eius sicut sol lucet in virtute sua. ¹⁷Et cum vidi eum, cecidi ad pedes eius

12-16. The lampstands in this first vision symbolize the churches at prayer; they remind us of the seven-branched candlestick (the *menorah*) which used to burn in the temple of Jerusalem and which is described in detail in Exodus 25:31-20. In the midst of the candlestick, as if guarding and governing the churches, a mysterious figure appears, in the form of a man. The expression “son of man” originates in Daniel 7:14 where, as here, it refers to someone depicted as Judge at the end of time. The various symbols used indicate his importance. His “long robe” shows his priesthood (cf. Ex 28:4; Zech 3:4); the golden girdle, his kingship (cf. 1 Mac 10:89); his white hair, his eternity (cf. Dan 7:9); his eyes “like a flame of fire” symbolize his divine wisdom (cf. Rev 2:23), and his bronze feet his strength and stability.

The seven stars stand for the angels of the seven churches (cf. v. 20), and our Lord’s holding them in his hand is a sign of his power and providence. Finally, the splendour of his face recalls the Old Testament theophanies or apparitions, and the sword coming from his mouth shows the power of his word (cf. Heb 4:12).

It is interesting to note that our Lord used the title “son of man” to refer to himself (cf., e.g., Mt 9:6; Mk 10:45; Lk 6:22); it is always used in St John’s Gospel to indicate Christ’s divinity and transcendence (cf., e.g., Jn 1:51; 3:14; 9:35; 12:23).

“Burnished bronze”: Latin versions transliterate the original as “*orichalc*”, a shining alloy of bronze and gold.

17-19. When the glory of Christ, or the glory of God, is manifested, man becomes so conscious of his insignificance and unworthiness that he is unable to remain standing in his presence. This happened to the Israelites at Sinai (cf. Ex 19:16-24) and to the Apostles on Mount Tabor (cf. Mk 9:2-8 and par.). A

Heb 7:25

Mt 16:18

Rev 1:11,
12, 16

he laid his right hand upon me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, ¹⁸and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. ¹⁹Now write what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter. ²⁰As for the mystery of the seven stars

tamquam mortuus; et posuit dexteram suam super me dicens: “Noli timere! Ego sum primus et novissimus, ¹⁸et vivens et fui mortuus et ecce sum vivens in saecula saeculorum et habeo claves mortis et inferni. ¹⁹Scribe ergo, quae vidisti

person who experiences the divine presence in a vision reacts in the same way (cf. Ezek 1:29f; Dan 8:18; etc.), and in the case of the Apocalypse it happens when Christ is seen in glory surrounded by his Church. However, the risen Christ’s first word to his followers was one of peace and assurance (cf., e.g., Mt 28:5, 10), and here he places his right hand on the seer’s head in a gesture of protection.

The risen Christ is depicted as reassuring the Christian, who sees him as having absolute dominion over all things (he is the first and the last) though he shared man’s mortal nature. By his death and resurrection Christ has overcome death; he has dominion over death and over the mysterious world beyond the grave—Hades, the place of the dead (cf. Num 16:33). “Christ is alive. This is the great truth which fills our faith with meaning. Jesus, who died on the cross, has risen. He has triumphed over death; he has overcome sorrow, anguish and the power of darkness” (J. Escrivá, *Christ is passing by*, 102).

The vision St John is given is meant for the benefit of the whole Church, as can be seen from the fact that he is told to write down what he sees; it is connected with contemporary events and with the future. The immediate context of the vision is the salvation of the churches mentioned and the glory of Christ who is caring for them (chaps. 2-3); the future has to do with the afflictions the Church must undergo and the full establishment of Christ’s kingdom: his second coming will mean definitive victory over the powers of evil (cf. chaps. 4-22).

20. To understand the meaning of the revelation made to St John, which he is transmitting in this book, one needs to know the mysterious, hidden meaning behind the images which appear in the vision. When John says that Jesus Christ himself revealed this to him, he is saying that this is the true interpretation and he is inviting us to interpret the book’s symbolism by using this key to its meaning; no parallel explanation is given of the other visions when he comes to describe them.

The angels of the seven churches may stand for the bishops in charge of them, or else the guardian angels who watch over them, or even the churches themselves insofar as they have a heavenly dimension and stand in God’s presence as angels do. Whichever is the case, the best thing is to see the angels of the churches, to whom the letters are addressed, as meaning those who rule and protect each church in Christ’s name. He is the only Lord, which is why

which you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

2

Letter to the church of Ephesus

Ps 36:5
Mic 2:1
Rev 1:13, 16, 20

¹“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

et quae sunt et quae oportet fieri post haec. ²⁰Mysterium septem stellarum, quas vidisti ad dexteram meam, et septem candelabra aurea: septem stellae angeli sunt septem ecclesiarum, et candelabra septem septem ecclesiae sunt.

¹Angelo ecclesiae, quae est Ephesi, scribe: Haec dicit, qui tenet septem stellas in dextera sua, qui ambulat in medio septem candelabrorum aureorum: ²Scio

he is shown holding the stars (angels) in his right hand. In the Old Testament the “angel of Yahweh” is the one charged to guide the people of Israel (cf. Ex 14:19; 23:20; etc.); and in the Apocalypse itself angels are given the mission of ruling the material world (cf. Rev 7:1; 14:18; 16:5). So, Christ exercises his loving care and government of each Church through the mediation of “angels”, but it is difficult to say whether this means angels as such, or bishops, or both.

Lampstands may be used as a symbol because the Church is being seen in liturgical terms: it is, from that point of view, like a lamp burning constantly and giving light in praise of Christ. The symbol is reminiscent of the seven-branched candlestick which used to burn continually in the presence of Yahweh (cf. Ex 27:20; Lev 24:2f) and which Zechariah saw in his visions (cf. Zech 4:1f). The lamps are a very good symbol, given that the churches are the light of the world (cf. Mt 5:14; Phil 2:15; etc.).

2:1 - 3:22. These chapters, which form the first part of the book, contain seven letters to the churches already mentioned (cf. 1:11), each represented by an angel to whom the letter is addressed. In these letters Christ (who is referred to in various ways) and the Holy Spirit speak: hence the warning at the end of each, “he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” The first part of that formula is reminiscent of things our Lord said in the Gospels (cf., e.g., Mt 11:15; 13:9, 43; Mk 9:23), while the second part underlines the influence of the Holy Spirit on the churches: one needs to belong to the Church, to “feel with” the Church, if one is to understand what the Spirit says and what is being committed to writing in this book. The book, therefore, must be taken as the true word of God. All Sacred Scripture needs to be approached in this way: “Since all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge

²“I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear evil men but have tested those who call themselves apostles but are not, and found them to be false; ³I know you are enduring patiently

opera tua et labore et patientiam tuam, et quia non potes sustinere malos et tentasti eos, qui se dicunt apostolos et non sunt, et invenisti eos mendaces; ³et

that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures. Thus ‘all scripture is inspired by God, and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work’ (2 Tim 3:16-17)” (Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 11).

Although the letters are different from one another, they all have the same basic structure: there is reference to the past, which is contrasted with the present; various warnings are given and promises made; then there is an exhortation to repentance and conversion, a reminder that the end, and Christ’s definitive victory, will soon come.

1. Ephesus, with its great harbour and commercial importance, was the leading city of Asia Minor at the time. It was also the centre of the cult of the goddess Artemis or Diana (cf. Acts 19:23ff).

St Paul spent three years preaching in Ephesus and had considerable success there: St Luke tells us that “the word of the Lord grew (there) and prevailed mightily” (Acts 19:20). In ancient times it was the most important Christian city in the whole region, especially after the fall of Jerusalem in the year 70. St John spent the last years of his life in Ephesus, where his burial place is still venerated.

In these letters in the Book of Revelation, Christ is depicted with attributes connected in some way with the circumstances of each church at the time. In the case of Ephesus the symbols described in the vision in 1:12, 16 appear again. The seven stars in his right hand signify his dominion over the whole Church, for he is the one who has power to instruct the angels who rule the various communities. His walking among the lampstands shows his loving care and vigilance for the churches (the lampstand symbolizing their prayer and liturgical life). Because the Church in Ephesus was the foremost of the seven, Christ is depicted to it as Lord of all the churches.

2-3. In these verses the church of Ephesus is praised for its endurance and for the resistance it has shown to false apostles. These two attributes—endurance or constancy, and holy intransigence—are basic virtues every Christian should have. Endurance means doggedly pursuing good and holding one’s ground against evil influences; this virtue makes Christians “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (Jas 1:4). Indeed, St Paul asserts, “we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance

and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵Remember then from what

1 Tim 5:12
Rev 2:16,22;
3:3, 19

patientiam habes et sustinuisti propter nomen meum et non defecisti. ⁴Sed habeo adversus te quod caritatem tuam primam reliquisti. ⁵Memor esto itaque unde excideris, et age paenitentiam et prima opera fac; sin autem, venio tibi et movebo candelabrum tuum de loco suo, nisi paenitentiam egeris. ⁶Sed hoc

produces character, and character produces hope" (Rom 5:3-4). In the Epistle to the Hebrews we read, "For you have need of endurance, so that you may do the will of God and receive what is promised" (10:36). Endurance, patience, is also the first mark of charity identified by St Paul (cf. 1 Cor 13:4) and one of the features of the true apostle (cf. 2 Cor 6:4; 12:12). Our Lord has told us that by endurance we will gain our lives, will save our souls (cf. Lk 21:19). As St Cyprian puts it, patience "is what gives our faith its firmest basis; it enables our hope to grow to the greatest heights; it guides our actions so as to enable us to stay on Christ's path and make progress with his help; it makes us persevere as children of God" (*De bono patientiae*, 20).

Another virtue of the church of Ephesus (mentioned again in v. 6) is firm rejection of false apostles. We know from other New Testament writings, especially those of St Paul (cf. 2 Cor 3:1; Gal 1:7; Col 2:8; etc.) and St John (cf. 1 Jn 2:19; etc.) that some people were falsifying the Christian message by distorting its meaning and yet seeming to be very devout and concerned about the poor. Reference is made here to the Nicolaitans, a heretical sect difficult to identify. However, the main thing to notice is the resolute way the Christians of Ephesus rejected that error. If one fails to act in this energetic way, one falls into a false kind of tolerance, "a sure sign of not possessing the truth. When a man gives way in matters of ideals, of honour or of faith, that man is a man without ideals, without honour and without faith" (J. Escrivá, *The Way*, 394).

4. "He does not say that he was without charity, but only that it was not such as in the beginning; that is, that it was not now prompt, fervent, growing in love, or fruitful: as we are wont to say of him who from being bright, cheerful and blithe, becomes sad, heavy and sullen, that he is not now the same man he was" (St Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, 4, 2). This is why our Lord complains that their early love has grown cold.

To avoid this danger, to which all of us are prone, we need to be watchful and correct ourselves every day and return again and again to God our Father. Love of God, charity, should never be allowed to die down; it should always be kept ardent; it should always be growing.

5. This is a call to repentance, to a change of heart which involves three stages. The first is recognizing that one is at fault—having the humility to admit one is a poor sinner: "To acknowledge one's sin, indeed—penetrating still more deeply into the consideration of one's own personhood—to recognize oneself

you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. ⁶Yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'

Rev 2:15
Ps 139:21

Gen 2:9
Rev 22:2

Letter to the church of Smyrna

8 "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.

Is 44:6; 48:12
Rev 1:17
Jas 2:5

habes, quia odisti facta Nicolitarum, quae et ego odi. ⁷Qui habet aurem, audiat quid Spiritus dicat ecclesiis. Vincenti dabo ei edere de ligno vitae, quod est in paradiso Dei. ⁸Et angelo ecclesiae, quae est Smyrnae, scribe: Haec dicit Primus

as being a sinner, capable of sin and inclined to commit sin, is the essential first step in returning to God" (John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, 13). Then comes "love-sorrow" or contrition, which leads us to mend our ways. This is followed by acts of penance which enable us to draw closer to God and live in intimacy with him.

Evangelization is always calling us to repent. "To evoke conversion and penance in man's heart and to offer him the gift of reconciliation is the specific mission of the Church as she continues the redemptive work of her divine Founder" (*ibid.*, 23). The church of Ephesus is given a warning that if it does not change its course it will lose its leading position and possibly disappear altogether.

6. On the Nicolaitans, see the note on 2:14-16.

7. The image of the tree of life (cf. also Rev 22:2) is a reference to Genesis 2:9 and 3:22, where we find that tree in the middle of Paradise outside the reach of man; it is a symbol of immortality. The fruit of the tree is now to be found in Christ, and he promises to grant it to those who are victorious. This promise of a happiness that will last forever, rather than any threat of punishment, is what spurs us on to strive day in, day out, not knowing whether today's battle, no matter how small it is, may not be our last: "We cannot take it easy. Our Lord wants us to strive harder, on a broader front, more intensely each day. We have an obligation to outdo ourselves, for in this competition the only goal is to reach the glory of heaven. If we do not get there, the whole thing will have been useless" (J. Escrivá, *Christ is passing by*, 77).

8. Smyrna was a port some 60 kilometres (35 miles) north of Ephesus; one of the main cities of the region, it was renowned for its loyalty to Rome and its ritual worship of the emperor. Christ is depicted to this church as truly God, "the first and the last" (cf. 1:8), that is, he who has had no beginning and will have no end. Despite the vigorous emperor worship which was a feature of

2 Cor 11:14, 15 9“‘I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews et Novissimus, qui fuit mortuus et vixit: 9Scio tribulationem tuam et pauper-

Smyrna, its Christians were very assiduous in the practice of their faith in Christ as the only true God and Lord, as verified especially by his glorious resurrection. That is why we are reminded that Christ died and then rose again: the words used emphasize that Christ's death was something quite transitory, whereas his return to life is something permanent and irreversible (cf. 1:18).

9. The Christians of Smyrna had to endure persecution and deprivation, due no doubt to the fact that they refused to take part in ceremonies connected with emperor worship. Their poverty can become something of great value, for God has high regard for the poor and despised (cf. 1 Cor 1:27-28; Jas 2:5). As an ancient Christian writer puts it, “They say that most of us are poor. That is nothing to be ashamed of; rather, we glory in it, because man's soul is demeaned by easy living and strengthened by frugality. Besides, can a person be poor who is in need of nothing, who does not covet the goods of others, who is rich in the eyes of God? That person is truly poor who has much and yet desires to have more [. . .]. Just as the wayfarer is happier the less he has to carry, so in this journey of life the poor person who is unencumbered is happier than the well-to-do person burdened with riches” (Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 36, 3-6).

In addition to poverty, the Christians of Smyrna had to bear with the lies spread by certain Jews, who were accusing them of being agitators against the civil authorities and against pagans in general. Jews were quite influential in the Empire: for example, the *Martyrdom of St Polycarp* tells of how, fifty years after the Apocalypse was written, the saintly bishop Polycarp of Smyrna was martyred because the Jews of that city incited the people to clamour for his death.

Because they were collaborating in this way with idolatry instead of defending worshippers of the true God, these people did not deserve the honourable title of “Jews”: “ministers of Satan”, God's adversary, was a better label for them. In opposing Christians, they were adopting the same attitude as those who opposed Jesus Christ, an attitude which earned them the title of children of the devil (cf. Jn 8:44). Although they bore the name of Jews, they were not really members of the people of God, because, as St Paul teaches, “Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants [. . .]. This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants” (Rom 9:6-8). The new Israel, the true Israel, is the Church of Jesus Christ who “acknowledges that in God's plan of salvation the beginning of her faith and election is to be found in the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. She professes that all Christ's faithful, who as men of faith are sons of Abraham (cf. Gal 3:7), are included in the same patriarch's call” (Vatican II, *Nostra aetate*, 4).

Dan 1:12, 14
Mt 10:28
1 Cor 9:25

Rev 20:14; 21:8

and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.¹⁰Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death.’

tatem tuam—sed dives es—et blasphemiam ab his, qui se dicunt Iudeos esse et non sunt, sed sunt synagoga Satanae. ¹⁰Nihil horum timeas, quae passurus

The harsh accusation made in this passage of the book refers to those Jews who at that time were denouncing Christians in Smyrna: it should not be applied to Jews in general; similarly, “even though the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ (cf. Jn 19:6), neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion. It is true that the Church is the new people of God, yet the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from Holy Scripture” (*ibid.*, 4).

10. The church of Smyrna receives no words of reproach from our Lord, only encouragement: God has foreseen the situation it finds itself in, and things will get even worse for a while—“ten days” (cf. Dan 1:12). He therefore exhorts them to stay true to the very end, even to death, so as to win the crown of victory (cf. 1 Cor 9:25; Phil 3:14; 1 Pet 5:4). The simile of the crown comes from athletic contests of the time, in which victors received a crown of laurels or a floral wreath—a symbol of enduring glory, but in fact something very perishable.

This passage, in fact, provides us with an entire programme for living—faithfulness to commitments, enduring loyalty to the love of Christ. If we want to be saved we need to persevere to the very end; as St Teresa of Avila puts it, “by making an earnest and most determined resolve not to halt until the goal [eternal life] is reached, whatever may come, whatever may happen, however much effort one needs to make, whoever may complain about one, whether one dies on the road or has no heart to face the trials one meets, even if the ground gives away under one's feet” (*Way of Perfection*, 21, 2). “It is easy”, John Paul II has reminded us, “to stay true to the faith for a day or for a few days. The difficult thing, the important thing, is to do so right through life. It is easy to keep the faith when things are going well, and difficult to do so when obstacles are met. Consistent behaviour which lasts one's whole life is the only kind which deserves to be called ‘fidelity’” (*Homily*, 27 January 1979).

11. “Second death”: a reference to irreversible, enduring, condemnation. Further on, the book is more specific about what this involves, and who will suffer it (cf. 20:6, 14; 21:8).

Letter to the church of Pergamum

Rev 1:16; 19:15

Is 49:2

Heb 4:12

Rev 3:8; 14:12

12“*And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.*

13“*I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; you hold fast my name and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who*

es. Ecce missurus est Diabolus ex vobis in carcerem, ut tentemini, et habebitis tribulationem diebus decem. Esto fidelis usque ad mortem, et dabo tibi coronam

12-13. Pergamum, some 70 kilometres (40 miles) to the north of Smyrna, was renowned for its temples, among other things. It was the first city in Asia Minor to erect a temple to the “divine Augustus” and “divine Rome” (in the year 29 B.C.). The temple had a huge altar, of the whitest marble, dedicated to Zeus. The city was also a place of pilgrimage where sick people flooded to the temple of Aesculapius, the god of health and miracles. For all these reasons it is described as the place where Satan has his throne. Pergamum was also noted for its great library and for its manufacture of parchment.

Christ is portrayed to this church as a judge, that is, one whose word distinguishes good from evil, and who distributes rewards and punishments (cf. Rev 1:16; 19:15, 21; Heb 4:12)—the reason being that the church at Pergamum is a mix of truth and error, with some people holding on to sound teaching and others supporting the Nicolaitans (cf. v. 15).

The letter begins by praising the fidelity of this church despite the persecution which has led to the death of Antipas. We do not know for sure who Antipas was; some traditions refer to his undergoing ordeal by fire in the reign of Domitian. The emperors of the time insisted on being acknowledged as *Kyrios* (Lord), which amounted to divine honours: this implied a form of idolatry, to which no Christian could subscribe. Tertullian says that there was nothing against acknowledging the emperor as *Kyrios*, if the title referred to his temporal power, but he could not be given it if it had a different, religious, meaning—“*ut dominum dei vice dicam*”, as if it meant treating him as a god (cf. *Apologeticum*, 34).

The title given to this Christian who died for the faith—“my witness, my faithful one”—was and is an outstanding title of honour for a believer, applied as it is to one who has kept faith with Christ even at the cost of life itself. In the early times of the Church (a time of unique persecution), many Christians followed the example of the first martyr, St Stephen (cf. Acts 7:55-60) and bore heroic witness to the faith by shedding their blood. Their deaths, marked as they were by serenity and hope, played an important part in the spread of Christianity, so much so that, as Tertullian put it, the blood of the martyrs was the seed from which Christians grew (cf. *Apologeticum*, 197). St Justin also notes that the more martyrs there were, the more Christians increased in number; the same is true of the vine when it is pruned: the branches which are pruned put out many more shoots (cf. *Dialogue with Trypho*, 110, 4).

Num 25:1, 2;

31:16

2 Pet 2:15

Jude 11

Rev 2:6

Rev 1:16; 2:5

was killed among you, where Satan dwells. ¹⁴But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practise immorality. ¹⁵So you also have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and war

vitae. ¹¹Qui habet aurem, audiat quid Spiritus dicat ecclesiis. Qui vicerit non laedetur a morte secunda. ¹²Et angelo ecclesiae, quae est Pergami, scribe: Haec dicit, qui habet romphaeum ancipitem acutam: ¹³Scio, ubi habitas, ubi thronus est Satanae, et tenes nomen meum et non negasti fidem meam et in diebus Antipas, testis meus fidelis, qui occisus est apud vos, ubi Satanus habitat. ¹⁴Sed habeo adversus te pauca, quia habes illic tenentes doctrinam Balaam, qui docebat Balac mittere scandalum coram filiis Israel, edere idolothyla et fornicari; ¹⁵ita habes et tu tenentes doctrinam Nicolitarum similiter. ¹⁶Ergo paenitentiam age; si quo minus, venio tibi cito et pugnabo cum illis in gladio oris mei. ¹⁷Qui habet aurem, audiat quid Spiritus dicat ecclesiis. Vincenti dabo ei de manna abscondito et dabo illi calculum candidum, et in calculo nomen novum scriptum, quod nemo scit, nisi qui accipit. ¹⁸Et angelo ecclesiae, quae

14-16. After being praised for their fidelity, the Christians of Pergamum are told where they are going wrong; some of them are compromising their faith by taking part in pagan ritual banquets and “sacred fornication” rites. A comparison is drawn with Balaam, who encouraged the Moabite women to marry Israelites and draw them to worship the god of Moab (cf. Num 31:16). As regards the Nicolaitans, some early authors suggest that this was a heresy started by Nicholas, one of the first seven deacons (cf. Acts 6:5); but their view is not well founded. It is easy to understand how this aberration could have arisen in a society where Christians were living cheek by jowl with pagans who went in for sacred banquets in honour of idols, and rites of an erotic character. It was a situation which arose more than once (cf., e.g., Rom 14:2, 15; 1 Cor 8:10; 2 Cor 2:16).

As in v. 5, there is a new call to conversion, and the same pattern is found in the subsequent letters. John Paul II states that “in all periods of history this invitation constitutes the very basis of the Church’s mission” (*Address*, 28 February 1982). Elsewhere, he points out where conversion begins: “Authentic knowledge of the God of mercy, the God of tender love, is a constant and inexhaustible source of conversion, not only as a momentary interior act but also as a permanent attitude, as a state of mind. Those who come to know God in this way, who ‘see’ him in this way, can live only in a state of being continually converted to him. They live, therefore, *in statu conversionis*; and it is this state of conversion which marks out the most profound element of ‘pilgrimage of every man and woman on earth *in statu viatoris*’” (*Dive misericordia*, 13).

against them with the sword of my mouth. ¹⁷He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it.'

Letter to the church of Thyatira

¹⁸“And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: ‘The

est Thyatirae, scribe: Haec dicit Filius Dei, qui habet oculos ut flammam ignis,

17. The promise of the hidden manna to the victors can be seen as a counter to the sin of indulging in idolatrous meals. St Paul also contrasts sacrifices to idols with the eucharistic sacrifice; and tells the Corinthians that they cannot "drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons [. . .], cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons" (1 Cor 10:21). Elsewhere, St John tells us of our Lord's referring to manna when speaking about the Eucharist (cf. Jn 6:31-33). The nourishment which Yahweh gave his people in the desert was described as "bread from heaven" (cf. Ex 16:4) and "the bread of the angels" (Ps 78:25), kept in the Ark of the Covenant to be revered by the people (cf. Heb 9:4). Here it is described as "hidden" manna, a reference to the supernatural, divine, character of the reward of heavenly beatitude; we share in this in Holy Communion, to a degree; in eternal life it is partaken of fully.

The "white stone" is a reference to the custom of showing a little stone, with some appropriate mark on it, to gain entrance to a feast or banquet. The name inscribed on the stone referred to here shows that the Christian has a right to partake of the good things which the Lord reserves for those who win the victory.

The fact that only the recipient knows what is written on the stone points to the personal, intimate relationship between God (who issues the invitation) and the invited guest. "Go over, calmly, that divine admonition which fills the soul with disquiet and which at the same time tastes as sweet as honey from the comb: *redemi te, et vocavi te, nomine tuo: meus es tu* (Is 43:1); I have redeemed you, I have called you by your name, you are mine" (J. Escrivá, *Friends of God*, 312).

18. Thyatira, located some 75 kilometres (48 miles) to the south-east of Pergamum, was the least important of the seven churches mentioned; the city was noted for smelting, weaving and dyeing. Acts 16:13-15 gives an account of the conversion of a native of Thyatira, a dealer in purple called Lydia. The city had many craft guilds which organized festivities in honour of the gods. This involved danger for Christians, because they felt obliged to take part.

Jesus Christ is depicted explicitly as "the Son of God". This is the only time he is given this title in the Apocalypse, but it is implicit in the many references

words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

¹⁹"I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. ²⁰But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practise immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. ²¹I gave her time to

et pedes eius similes orichalco: ¹⁹Novi opera tua et caritatem et fidem et ministerium et patientiam tuam et opera tua novissima plura prioribus. ²⁰Sed habeo adversus te, quia permittis mulierem Iezabel, quae se dicit prophetissam,

to God as his Father (cf. 1:6; 3:5, 21; 14:1). As Son of God, Christ appears clothed in the attributes proper to the Godhead—divine knowledge, which enables him to search man's soul (cf. v. 23) and divine power (cf. note on 1:14-15). These attributes are revealed particularly by the way he deals with the church of Thyatira.

19. The letter begins with praise of the good works of this Church, the most outstanding of which is its service (*diakonia*) to the poor (cf. Acts 11:28; Rom 15:25, 31; 1 Cor 16:15; 1 Pet 4:10; etc.). Unlike Ephesus, its "latter works" are more perfect than its earlier works; in other words, it is making progress in virtue.

20-23. Our Lord again inveighs against those Christians who are compromising themselves by taking part in pagan worship, involving, as it does, idolatry and moral aberration. The letter seems to refer to the same (Nicolaitan) heresy, here symbolized by Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab, who led many of the people of Israel into the sin of idolatry (cf. 1 Kings 16:31; 2 Kings 9:22). This may be a reference to a real person (described here symbolically by this biblical name) who projected herself as a prophetess and led many people astray by getting them to take part in idolatrous rites and banquets. When wrong is being done and one fails to point it out, one's silence is really a form of complicity.

The passage reveals how patient God is: he has waited for this people to mend their ways and only at a later stage condemned them for not doing so. This is a warning which those who persist in evil must bear in mind, for "the more we postpone getting out of sin and turning to God", the Curé of Ars warns us, "the greater the danger we run of dying with our sins on us, for the simple reason that bad habits become more and more difficult to shed. Every time we despise a grace, our Lord is going further away from us, and we are growing weaker, and the devil gets more control of us. So, my conclusion is that the longer we remain in sin, the greater the risk we run of never being converted" (*Selected Sermons*, fourth Sunday in Lent).

repent, but she refuses to repent of her immorality. ²²Behold, I will throw her on a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her doings; ²³and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches shall know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve. ²⁴But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay upon you any other burden; ²⁵only hold fast what you have, until I come. ²⁶He who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, I will give him power over the nations, ²⁷and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received power from my Father; ²⁸and I will give him the morning star. ²⁹He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

et docet et seducit servos meos fornicari et manducare idolothya. ²¹Et dedi illi tempus, ut paenitentiam ageret, et non vult paeniteri a fornicatione sua. ²²Ecce mitto eam in lectum et, qui moechantur cum ea, in tribulationem magnam, nisi paenitentiam egerint ab operibus eius. ²³Et filios eius interficiam in morte, et scient omnes ecclesiae quia ego sum scrutans renes et corda, et dabo unicuique vestrum secundum opera vestra. ²⁴Vobis autem dico ceteris, qui Thyatirae estis, quicumque non habent doctrinam hanc, qui non cognoverunt altitudines

The punishment meted out to Jezebel is quite frightening: she will be afflicted with a grievous illness (cf. Ex 21:18; Jud 8:3; 1 Mac 1:5). The same will happen to her followers they are warned, in the hope that this will cause them to repent. In other words, our Lord still has hopes of their conversion, and even uses the threat of punishment to move sinners to think again and repent.

24-28. Knowledge of the "deep things of Satan" was another aspect of the Nicolaitan heresy, which claimed to possess secrets leading to salvation. Some scholars link this kind of arcane knowledge with Gnosticism, which was making headway in the East at the time.

The promise made to the victors (taken from Psalm 2:9) involves sharing in Christ's sovereignty and power because one is in full communion with him.

The "morning star" is an expression also applied to Christ in Revelation 22:16. It may refer to the perfect communion with the Lord enjoyed by those who persevere to the end: the symbolism of the power given to the victors (vv. 26-27) is followed in v. 28 by reference to sharing in the resurrection and glory of Christ, expressed by the image of the "morning star", which heralds the day, that is, rebirth, resurrection.

Letter to the church of Sardis

¹"And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

"I know your works; you have the name of being alive,

Satanae, quemadmodum dicunt, non mittam super vos aliud pondus; ²⁵tamen id quod habetis, tenete, donec veniam. ²⁶Et, qui vicerit et qui custodierit usque in finem opera mea, *dabo illi potestatem super gentes*, ²⁷et *reget illas in virga ferrea, tamquam vasa fictilia confringentur*, ²⁸sicut et ego accepi a Patre meo, et dabo illi stellam matutinam. ²⁹Qui habet aurem, audiat quid Spiritus dicat ecclesiis.

¹Et angelo ecclesiae, quae est Sardis, scribe: Haec dicit, qui habet septem spiritus Dei et septem stellas: Scio opera tua, quia nomen habes quod vivas, et mortuus es. ²Esto vigilans et confirma cetera, quae moritura erant, non enim

1. Sardis, about 50 kilometres (30 miles) south-east of Thyatira, was an important hub in the highway system; it was also famous for its acropolis, which was located in an unassailable position. Herodotus describes its inhabitants as immoral, licentious people (cf. *History*, 1, 55). The Christians of the city were probably somewhat infected by the general atmosphere.

Christ is now depicted as possessing the fulness of the Spirit, with the power to effect radical change by sanctifying the churches from within (cf. note on 1:4). He is also portrayed as the sovereign Lord of the universal Church (cf. note on 2:1), ever ready to imbue it with new life.

The church of Sardis is accused of seeming to be alive but in fact being dead: in other words, although its external practice of religion makes it look Christian, most of its members (not all: cf. v. 4) are estranged from Christ, devoid of interior life, in a sinful condition. Anyone who lives like that is dead. Our Lord himself described the situation of the prodigal son as being a kind of death: "my son was dead, and is alive again", the father exclaims in the parable (Lk 15:24); and St Paul invites Christians to offer themselves to God "as men who have been brought from death to life" (Rom 6:13). Now, in this passage of Revelation, we are told that the cause of this spiritual, but real, death is the fact that the works of this church are imperfect in the sight of God (v. 2); they were works which led to spiritual death, that is, what we would term mortal sins. "With the whole tradition of the Church", John Paul II says, "we call *mortal sin* the act by which man freely and consciously rejects God, his law, the covenant of love that God offers, preferring to turn in on himself or to some created and finite reality, something contrary to the divine will (*conversio ad creaturam*) [. . .]. Man perceives that this disobedience to God destroys the bond that unites him with his life-principle: it is a *mortal sin*, that is, an act which gravely offends God and ends in turning against man himself with a dark and powerful force of destruction" (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 17).

and you are dead. ²Awake, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. ³Remember then what you received and heard; keep that, and repent. If you will not awake, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you. ⁴Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy.

invenio opera tua plena coram Deo meo; ³in mente ergo habe qualiter acceperis

2-3. Vigilance is always necessary, particularly in certain situations like that of Sardis where there was a number of people who had not fallen victim to sin. In this kind of peril, Christians need to be alerted and confirmed in the faith. They need to remember what they learned at the beginning, when they were instructed in the faith, and try to bring their lives into line with that teaching. And so they are not simply exhorted to conversion but told how to go about it—by comparing their lives with the Word of God and making the necessary changes: “no one is safe if he ceases to strive against himself. Nobody can save himself by his own efforts. Everyone in the Church needs specific means to strengthen himself—humility, which disposes us to accept help and advice; mortifications, which temper the heart and allow Christ to reign in it; the study of abiding, sound doctrine, which leads us to conserve and spread our faith” (J. Escrivá, *Christ is passing by*, 81).

“I will come like a thief”: an image also found elsewhere in the New Testament (cf. Mt 24:42-51, Mk 13:36; Lk 12:39ff; 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Pet 3:10). This does not mean that our Lord is lying in wait, ready to pounce on man when he is unawares, like a hunter waiting for his prey. It is simply a warning to us to live in the grace of God and be ready to render our account to him. If we do that we will not run the risk of being found empty-handed at the moment of death. “That day will come for us. It will be our last day, but we are not afraid of it. Trusting firmly in God’s grace, we are ready from this very moment to be generous and courageous, and take loving care of little things: we are ready to go and meet our Lord, with our lamps burning brightly. For the feast of feasts awaits us in heaven” (J. Escrivá, *Friends of God*, 40).

4-5. Despite the corrupt environment in which they were living, there were some Christians who had not been contaminated by the immoral cults and lifestyles of the pagans: their loyalty is symbolized by white garments. In the course of narrating his visions St John mentions white garments a number of times (cf. 7:9, 13; 15:6; 19:14); this colour symbolizes purity and also the joy of victory.

The symbol of the “book of life”, which occurs often in the Apocalypse (cf. 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27; etc.), is taken from the Old Testament, where those who belong to the people of Israel are described as enrolled in the “book of the

⁵He who conquers shall be clad thus in white garments, and I will not blot his name out of the book of life; I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. ⁶He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

Letter to the church of Philadelphia

⁷“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

et audieris, et serva et paenitentiam age. Si ergo non vigilaveris, veniam

living”, which is also referred to as the book of the Lord (cf. Ps 69:28; Ex 32:32ff). Those whose names are in the book will share in the promises of salvation (cf. Is 4:3), whereas those who are unfaithful to the Law will be excluded from the people of God and their names blotted out of the “book of the living”. Other New Testament texts use the same image (cf., e.g., Lk 10:20; Phil 4:3).

The names of the victors will stay in the “book of life” which lists those who have proved loyal to Christ, as well as those who belonged to the people of Israel.

Finally, on Judgment Day, those Christians who have kept the faith, will be spoken for by Christ (cf. Mt 10:32; Lk 12:8).

7. Philadelphia, in the province of Lydia, was about 45 kilometres (25 miles) south-east of Sardis. Its geographical location made it a gateway to all of Phrygia—hence the sacred writer’s reference to its having an open door (the same turn of phrase is used by St Paul to refer to scope for apostolate: cf. 1 Cor 16:9; 2 Cor 2:12; Col 4:3).

Philadelphia had suffered an earthquake around the year A.D. 17: there is a possible allusion to this in the promise to make it a supportive pillar in God’s temple (v. 12). When the city was rebuilt, it was given the new name of Neocaesarea, but that name soon fell into disuse. Here, however, it is promised another new name (v. 12), the name of God and the name New Jerusalem, and this name will endure forever. There was quite a sizeable and influential Jewish community in Philadelphia (cf. v. 9), many of whom will later become converts and recognize the Church, the beloved Bride of Jesus Christ.

The titles given to Jesus in this letter clearly indicate his divinity: “the holy one” is proper to Yahweh, as can be seen frequently in the Old Testament (cf. Lev 11:44; Josh 24:19; Is 6:3; 12:6; Job 6:10, etc.). The title of “the true one” (also used by St John in his Gospel: cf., e.g., Jn 1:9; 4:23; 7:28; 15:1; 17:3) conveys the idea of the complete reliability and faithfulness of the Lord with regard to keeping his promises (cf. Ps 86:15; 116; 135). And the words “who has the key of David” and the power to open and shut signify the absolute sovereignty of Christ in the messianic Kingdom. Our Lord used this metaphor when he confirmed St Peter in the primacy (cf. Mt 16:19) and when he passed on his own powers to the College of Apostles (cf. Mt 18:18).

‘The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one shall shut, who shuts and no one opens.

Acts 14:27
1 Cor 16:9

Rev 2:9
Is 43:4; 45:14;
49:23; 60:14

2 Pet 2:9
2 Thess 2:12

Rev 2:25
1 Cor 9:25

8“‘I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut; I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 9Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and learn that I have loved you. 10Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell upon the earth. 11I am coming soon; hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. 12He who conquers, I will make him a pillar in

tamquam fur, et nescies qua hora veniam ad te. 4Sed habes pauca nomina in Sardis, qui non inquinaverunt vestimenta sua et ambulabunt mecum in albis, quia digni sunt. 5Qui vicerit, sic vestietur vestimentis albis, et non delebo nomen

8-12. The fidelity of these Christians is praised despite their limitations. As a reward they are given an open door which no enemy can shut—an assurance of evangelical success, despite opposition and perhaps also a promise of unimpeded access to the Kingdom.

On the “synagogue of Satan, see the note on Revelation 7:9. The promise that their enemies will admit defeat and do obeisance to the victor is reminiscent of Isaiah 49:23 and 60:14, which contain a prediction that the nations will do homage to the chosen people. Before that happens, however, the entire world will experience tribulation, as described later on in the book (cf. Rev 8-9 and 16); but those who stay faithful will be protected. As to the imminence of these predicted events, see what is said in the note on Revelation 1:1 about the whole matter of timing (cf. also 22:12, 20). When all is over, the strife and the victory, the conquering church will be a pillar of the temple, that is, it will have a place of honour (cf. Gal 2:9).

When it says that despite their weakness they have not denied Christ’s name (v. 8), this implies that the strength which enables them to win victory is something given them by God, who often acts and triumphs amidst man’s weakness and shortcomings. St Paul says as much to the faithful of Corinth: “Consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (1 Cor 1:26-29).

the temple of my God: never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. 13He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

Rev 21:2
Gal 2:9
Ezek 48:35
Is 62:2; 65:15

Ps 89:38
2 Cor 1:20

Letter to the church of Laodicea

14“‘And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation.

eius de libro vitae et confitebor nomen eius coram Patre meo et coram angelis eius. 6Qui habet aurem, audiat quid Spiritus dicat ecclesiis. 7Et angelo ecclesiae, quae est Philadelphiae, scribe: Haec dicit Sanctus, Verus, qui habet *clavem David, qui aperit, et nemo claudet; et claudit, et nemo aperit;* 8Scio opera tua—ecce dedi coram te ostium apertum, quod nemo potest claudere—quia modicam habes virtutem, et servasti verbum meum et non negasti nomen meum. 9Ecce dabo de synagoga Satanae, qui dicunt se Iudeos esse et non sunt, sed mentiuntur; ecce faciam illos, ut veniant et adorent ante pedes tuos et scient quia ego dilexi te. 10Quoniam servasti verbum patientiae meae, et ego te servabo ab hora temptationis, quae ventura est super orbem universum tentare habitantes in terra. 11Venio cito; tene quod habes, ut nemo accipiat coronam tuam. 12Qui vicerit, faciam illum columnam in templo Dei mei, et foras non egredietur amplius, et scribam super eum nomen Dei mei et nomen civitatis Dei mei, novae Ierusalem, quae descendit de caelo a Deo meo, et nomen meum novum. 13Qui habet aurem, audiat quid Spiritus dicat ecclesiis. 14Et angelo ecclesiae, quae est Laodiciae, scribe: Haec dicit Amen, testis fidelis et verus, principium creaturae Dei: 15Scio opera tua, quia neque frigidus es neque calidus. Utinam frigidus

14. Laodicea was a city on the border of Phrygia, about 75 kilometres (45 miles) south-west of Philadelphia. It is also mentioned by St Paul when he suggests to the Colossians that they exchange his letter to them for the one he sent the Laodiceans (cf. Col 4:16).

Jesus Christ is given the title of “the Amen”; a similar description is applied to Christ in 2 Corinthians 1:20. Both texts are instances of a divine name being applied to Christ, thereby asserting his divinity. “Amen”, so be it, is an assertion of truth and veracity and connects with the title of “the true one” in the previous letter. It highlights the fact that our Lord is strong, dependable and unchangeable; the words that follow, “faithful and true witness”, spell out the full meaning of the “Amen” title (cf. 1:5).

The most satisfactory interpretation of the phrase “the beginning of God’s creation” is in terms of Jesus Christ’s role in creation: for “all things were made through him” (Jn 1:3) and therefore he, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is the Creator of heaven and earth.

15“‘I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! 16So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. 17For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. 18Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich, and

esses aut calidus! 16Sic quia tepidus es et nec calidus nec frigidus, incipiam te evomere ex ore meo. 17Quia dicis: ‘Dives sum et locupletatus et nullius egeo’, et nescis quia tu es miser et miserabilis et pauper et caecus et nudus, 18suadeo

15-16. The prosperity Laodicea enjoyed may have contributed to the laxity and lukewarmness the church is accused of here (Israel tended to take the same direction when living was easy: the people would become forgetful of Yahweh and adopt an easy-going lifestyle: cf., e.g., Deut 31:20; 32:15; Hos 13:6; Jer 5:7).

The presence of hot springs close to the city explains the language used in this passage, which amounts to a severe indictment of lukewarmness. It shows God’s repugnance for mediocrity and bourgeois living. As observed by Cassian, one of the founders of Western monasticism, lukewarmness is something that needs to be nipped in the bud: “No one should attribute his going astray to any sudden collapse, but rather [...] to his having moved away from virtue little by little, through prolonged mental laziness. That is the way bad habits gain ground without one’s even noticing it, and eventually lead to a sudden collapse. ‘Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall’ (Prov 16:18). The same thing happens with a house: it collapses one fine day due to some ancient defect in its foundation or long neglect by the occupiers” (*Collationes*, VI, 17).

Spiritual lukewarmness and mediocrity are very closely related: neither is the route Christian life should take. As Monsignor Escrivá puts it, “In medio virtus”. . . . Virtue is to be found in the middle, so the saying goes, warning us against extremism. But do not make the mistake of turning that advice into a euphemism to disguise your own comfort, calculation, lukewarmness, easy-goingness, lack of idealism and mediocrity.

“Meditate on these words of Sacred Scripture: ‘Would that you were cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth’” (*Furrow*, 541).

17-19. The Christians of Laodicea did not realize how precarious their spiritual situation was. The city’s flourishing trade and industry, and the fact that the church was not being persecuted in any way, made them feel prosperous and content: they were proud as well as lukewarm. They had fallen victim to that self-conceit the wealthy are always inclined to feel and which moved our Lord to say that rich people enter heaven only with difficulty (cf. Mt 19:23);

white garments to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. 19Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent. 20Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. 21He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on

tibi emere a me aurum igne probatum, ut locuples fias et vestimentis albis induaris, et non appareat confusio nuditatis tuae, et collyrium ad inungendum oculos tuos ut videas. 19Ego, quos amo, arguo et castigo. Aemulare ergo et paenitentiam age. 20Ecce sto ad ostium et pulso. Si quis audierit vocem meam

he often pointed to the dangers of becoming attached to material things (cf. Lk 1:53; 6:24; 12:21; 16:19-31; 18:23-25). The Laodiceans had become proud in their prosperity and did not see the need for divine grace (which is worth more than all the wealth in the world). As St Paul says in one of his letters: “Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil 3:7-8).

There was an important textile industry in Laodicea which specialized in the manufacture of black woollen cloth. Instead of wearing that material, the Laodiceans must dress in garments which only our Lord can provide and which are the mark of the elect (cf., e.g., Mt 17:2 and par; Rev 3:4-5; 7:9). The city was also famous for its oculists, like Zeuxis and Philetos, who had developed a very effective ointment for the eyes. Jesus offers an even better ointment—one which will show them the dangerous state they are in. This dire warning comes from God’s love, not his anger: it is his affection that leads him to reprove and correct his people: “the Lord reproves whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights” (Prov 3:12). After quoting these same words the Epistle to the Hebrews adds: “It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons” (12:7-8).

“Be zealous”: stop being lukewarm and enter the fervour of charity, have an ardent zeal for the glory of God.

20-21. Christ knocking on the door is one of the most touching images in the Bible. It is reminiscent of the Song of Songs, where the bridegroom says, “Open to me, my sister, my dove, my perfect one; for my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night” (Song 5:2). It is a way of describing God’s love for us, inviting us to greater intimacy with him, as happens in a thousand ways in the course of our life. We should be listening for his knock, ready to open the door to Christ. A writer from the Golden Age of Spanish

my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. ²¹He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’ ”

et aperuerit ianuam, introibo ad illum et cenabo cum illo, et ipse mecum. ²¹Qui vicerit, dabo ei sedere mecum in throno meo, sicut et ego vici et sedi cum Patre meo in throno eius. ²²Qui habet aurem, audiat quid Spiritus dicat ecclesiis.”

literature evokes this scene in poetry: “How many times the angel spoke to me: ‘Look out of your window now, /you’ll see how lovingly he calls and calls.’ / Yet, sovereign beauty, how often/I replied, ‘We’ll open for you tomorrow’,/to reply the same when the morrow came” (Lope de Vega, *Rimas sacras*, Sonnet 18).

Our Lord awaits our response to his call, and when we make the effort to revive our interior life we experience the indescribable joy of intimacy with him. “At first it will be a bit difficult. You must make an effort to seek out the Lord, to thank him for his fatherly and practical concern for us. Although it is not really a matter of feeling, little by little the love of God makes itself felt like a rustle in the soul. It is Christ who pursues us lovingly: ‘Behold, I stand at the door and knock’ (Rev 3:20). How is your life of prayer going? At times during the day don’t you feel the impulse to have a longer talk with him? Don’t you then whisper to him that you will tell him about it later, in a heart-to-heart conversation [. . .]. Prayer then becomes continuous, like the beating of our heart, like our pulse. Without this presence of God, there is no contemplative life; and without contemplative life, our working for Christ is worth very little, for vain is the builder’s toil if the house is not of the Lord’s building (cf. Ps 126:1)” (J. Escrivá, *Christ is passing by*, 8).

Jesus promises that those who conquer will sit beside him on his throne. He gave a similar promise to St Peter about how the Apostles would sit on twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel (cf. Mt 19:28; 20:20ff). The “throne” is a reference to the sovereign authority Christ has received from the Father. Therefore, the promise of a seat beside him is a way of saying that those who stay faithful will share in Christ’s victory and kingship (cf. 1 Cor 6:2-3).

PART TWO ESCHATOLOGICAL VISIONS

4

INTRODUCTORY VISION

God in majesty

¹After this I looked, and lo, in heaven an open door! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, “Come up hither, and I will show you what must take place after this.” ²At once I was in the Spirit, and lo, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne! ³And he who sat there appeared like jasper and carnelian,

Ex 19:16, 24
Dan 2:29
Rev 1:10, 19
Rev 1:10
Ezek 1:26
Is 6:1
Ps 47:9
Ezek 1:26; 10:1f
Is 6:1

¹Post haec vidi: et ecce ostium apertum in caelo, et vox prima, quam audivi, tamquam tubae loquentis mecum dicens: “Ascende huc, et ostendam tibi, quae oportet fieri post haec.” ²Statim fui in spiritu: et ecce thronus positus erat in

1. The second part of the Apocalypse begins at this point and extends to the start of the Epilogue. The author describes visions concerning the future of mankind, particularly the ultimate outcome of history when our Lord Jesus Christ will obtain the final victory at his second coming. It begins with a formal introduction (chaps. 4-5); this is followed by a first section as it were (6:11 - 11:14) covering the visions of the seven seals and the first six trumpets, which describes the event prior to the final battle. The war begins with the sound of the seventh trumpet and it goes on (this is the second section 11:15 - 22:5) until the beast is completely routed and the Kingdom of God is definitively established in the heavenly Jerusalem.

This introductory vision (chaps. 4-5) begins with God in heaven in all his glory being worshipped and celebrated by all creation (chap. 4). He alone controls the destiny of the world and the Church.

Only Jesus knows God’s salvific plans, and he, through his death and resurrection, reveals them to us. All this is expressed in chapter 4 by the image of the Lamb who is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.

1-3. The risen and glorified Christ, who spoke to St John previously (cf. 1:10-13), now invites him, in a new vision, to go up into heaven to be told God’s plan for the world. “I looked,” “I was in the Spirit,” “I went up to heaven” all describe the same phenomenon—God revealing something to the writer. Because the things he is being told are things man could not possibly discover for himself, the writer speaks about going up to heaven: this enables him to contemplate heavenly things, that is, God. Going up to heaven is the same as being in ecstasy, “being in the Spirit”, being taken over by the Holy Spirit so as to be able to understand what God wants to reveal to him (cf. note on 1:10).

of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, loud noises, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

12

The woman fleeing from the dragon

¹And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head

est templum Dei in caelo, et visa est arca testamenti eius in templo eius; et facta sunt fulgura et voces et terraemotus et grando magna.

¹Et signum magnum apparuit in caelo: mulier amicta sole, et luna sub pedibus

Mt 26:26-29 and par.) which will be revealed to all at his second coming when the Church will triumph, as the Apocalypse goes on to describe. The presence of the ark in the heavenly temple symbolizes the sublimity of the messianic kingdom, which exceeds anything man could create. “The vigilant and active expectation of the coming of the Kingdom is also the expectation of a finally perfect justice for the living and the dead, for people of all times and places, a justice which Jesus Christ, installed as supreme Judge, will establish (cf. Mt 24:29-44, 46; Acts 10:42; 2 Cor 5:10). This promise, which surpasses all human possibilities, directly concerns our life in this world. For true justice must include everyone; it must explain the immense load of suffering borne by all generations. In fact, without the resurrection of the dead and the Lord’s judgment, there is no justice in the full sense of the term. The promise of the resurrection is freely made to meet the desire for true justice dwelling in the human heart” (SCDF, *Libertatis conscientia*, 60).

The thunder and lightning which accompany the appearance of the ark are reminiscent of the way God made his presence felt on Sinai; they reveal God’s mighty intervention (cf. Rev 4:5; 8:5) which is now accompanied by the chastisement of the wicked, symbolized by the earthquake and hailstones (cf. Ex 9:13-35).

1-17. We are now introduced to the contenders in the eschatological battles which mark the final confrontation between God and his adversary, the devil. The author uses three portents to describe the leading figures involved, and the war itself. The first is the woman and her offspring, including the Messiah (12:1-2); the second is the dragon, who will later transfer his power to the beasts (12:3); the third, the seven angels with the seven bowls (15:1).

Three successive confrontations with the dragon are described—1) that of the Messiah to whom the woman gives birth (12:1-6); 2) that of St Michael and his angels (12:7-12); and 3) that of the woman and the rest of her offspring (12:13-17). These confrontations should not be seen as being in chronological

a crown of twelve stars; ²she was with child and she cried

Gen 3:15, 16

eius, et super caput eius corona stellarum duodecim; ²et in utero habens, et

order. They are more like three distinct pictures placed side by side because they are closely connected: in each the same enemy, the devil, does battle with God’s plans and with those whom God uses to carry them out.

1-2. The mysterious figure of the woman has been interpreted ever since the time of the Fathers of the Church as referring to the ancient people of Israel, or the Church of Jesus Christ, or the Blessed Virgin. The text supports all of these interpretations but in none do all the details fit. The woman can stand for the people of Israel, for it is from that people that the Messiah comes, and Isaiah compares Israel to “a woman with child, who writhes and cries out in her pangs, when she is near her time” (Is 26:17).

She can also stand for the Church, whose children strive to overcome evil and to bear witness to Jesus Christ (cf. v. 17). Following this interpretation St Gregory wrote: “The sun stands for the light of truth, and the moon for the transitoriness of temporal things; the holy Church is clothed like the sun because she is protected by the splendour of supernatural truth, and she has the moon under her feet because she is above all earthly things” (*Moralia*, 34, 12).

The passage can also refer to the Virgin Mary because it was she who truly and historically gave birth to the Messiah, Jesus Christ our Lord (cf. v. 5). St Bernard comments: “The sun contains permanent colour and splendour; whereas the moon’s brightness is unpredictable and changeable, for it never stays the same. It is quite right, then, for Mary to be depicted as clothed with the sun, for she entered the profundity of divine wisdom much much further than one can possibly conceive” (*De B. Virgine*, 2).

In his account of the Annunciation, St Luke sees Mary as representing the faithful remnant of Israel; the angel greets her with the greeting given in Zephaniah 3:15 to the daughter of Zion (cf. notes on Lk 1:26-31). St Paul in Galatians 4:4 sees a woman as the symbol of the Church, our mother; and non-canonical Jewish literature contemporary with the Book of Revelation quite often personifies the community as a woman. So, the inspired text of the Apocalypse is open to interpreting this woman as a direct reference to the Blessed Virgin who, as mother, shares in the pain of Calvary (cf. Lk 2:35) and who was earlier prophesied in Isaiah 7:14 as a “sign” (cf. Mt 1:22-23). At the same time the woman can be interpreted as standing for the people of God, the Church, whom the figure of Mary represents.

The Second Vatican Council has solemnly taught that Mary is a “type” or symbol of the Church, for “in the mystery of the Church, which is itself rightly called mother and virgin, the Blessed Virgin stands out in eminent and singular fashion as exemplar both of virgin and mother. Through her faith and obedience she gave birth on earth to the very Son of the Father, not through the knowledge of man but by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, in the manner of a new Eve who placed her faith, not in the serpent of old but in God’s messenger,

out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery. ³And another portent appeared in heaven; behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads. ⁴His tail swept down a third of the stars of

clamat parturiens et cruciatur, ut pariat. ³Et visum est aliud signum in caelo: et without wavering in doubt. The Son whom she brought forth is he whom God placed as the first-born among many brethren (cf. Rom 8:29), that is, the faithful, in whose generation and formation she cooperates with a mother's love" (Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, 63).

The description of the woman indicates her heavenly glory, and the twelve stars of her victorious crown symbolize the people of God—the twelve patriarchs (cf. Gen 37:9) and the twelve apostles. And so, independently of the chronological aspects of the text, the Church sees in this heavenly woman the Blessed Virgin, "taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, when her earthly life was over, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things, that she might be the more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of lords (cf. Rev 19:16) and conqueror of sin and death" (*Lumen gentium*, 59). The Blessed Virgin is indeed the great sign, for, as St Bonaventure says, "God could have made none greater. He could have made a greater world and a greater heaven; but not a woman greater than his own mother" (*Speculum*, 8).

3-4. In his description of the devil (cf. v. 9), St John uses symbols taken from the Old Testament. The dragon or serpent comes from Genesis 3:1-24, a passage which underlies all the latter half of this book. Its red colour and seven heads with seven diadems show that it is bringing its full force to bear to wage this war. The ten horns in Daniel 7:7 stand for the kings who are Israel's enemies; in Daniel a horn is also mentioned to refer to Antiochus IV Epiphanes, of whom Daniel also says (to emphasize the greatness of Antiochus' victories) that it cast stars down from heaven onto the earth (cf. Dan 8:10). Satan drags other angels along with him, as the text later recounts (Rev 12:9). All these symbols, then, are designed to convey the enormous power of Satan. "The devil is described as a serpent", St Cyprian writes, "because he moves silently and seems peaceable and comes by easy ways and is so astute and so deceptive [...] that he tries to have night taken for day, poison taken for medicine. So, by deceptions of this kind, he tries to destroy truth by cunning. That is why he passes himself off as an angel of light" (*De unitate Ecclesiae*, I-III).

After the fall of our first parents war broke out between the serpent and his seed and the woman and hers: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen 3:15). Jesus Christ is the woman's descendant who will obtain victory over the devil (cf. Mk 1:23-26; Lk 4:31-37; etc.). That is why the power of evil concentrates all his energy on destroying Christ (cf. Mt 2:13-18) or deflecting him from his mission (cf. Mt 4:1-11 and par.). By relating this enmity to the beginnings of the human race St John paints a very vivid picture.

heaven, and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth; ⁵she brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, ⁶and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which to be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

ecce draco rufus magnus, habens capita septem et cornua decem, et super capita sua septem diademata; ⁴et cauda eius trahit tertiam partem stellarum caeli et misit eas in terram. Et draco stetit ante mulierem, quae erat paritura, ut, cum peperisset, filium eius devoraret. ⁵Et peperit filium, masculum, qui *recturus est* omnes *gentes in virga ferrea*; et raptus est filius eius ad Deum et ad thronum eius. ⁶Et mulier fugit in desertum, ubi habet locum paratum a Deo, ut ibi pascant

5. The birth of Jesus Christ brings into operation the divine plan announced by the prophets (cf. Is 66:7) and by the Psalms (cf. Ps 2:9), and marks the first step in ultimate victory over the devil. Jesus' life on earth, culminating in his passion, resurrection and ascension into heaven, was the key factor in achieving this victory. St John emphasises the triumph of Christ as victor, who, as the Church confesses, "sits at the right hand of the Father" (*Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed*).

6. The figure of the woman reminds us of the Church, the people of God. Israel took refuge in the wilderness to escape from Pharaoh, and the Church does the same after the victory of Christ. The wilderness stands for solitude and intimate union with God. In the wilderness God took personal care of his people, setting them free from their enemies (cf. Ex 17:8-16) and nourishing them with quail and manna (cf. Ex 16:1-36). The Church is given similar protection against the powers of hell (cf. Mt 16:18) and Christ nourishes it with his body and his word all the while it makes its pilgrimage through the ages; it has a hard time (like Israel in the wilderness) but there will be an end to it: it will take one thousand two hundred and sixty days (cf. notes on 11:3).

Although the woman, in this verse, seems to refer directly to the Church, she also in some way stands for the particular woman who gave birth to the Messiah, the Blessed Virgin. As no other creature has done, Mary has enjoyed a very unique type of union with God and very special protection from the powers of evil, death included. Thus, as the Second Vatican Council teaches, "in the meantime [while the Church makes its pilgrim way on earth], the Mother of Jesus in the glory which she possesses in body and soul in heaven is the image and beginning of the Church as it is to be perfected in the world to come. Likewise she shines forth on earth, until the day of the Lord shall come (cf. 2 Pet 3:10), a sign of certain hope and comfort to the pilgrim people of God" (*Lumen gentium*, 68).

7Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, 8but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9And the great dragon was thrown

illam diebus mille ducentis sexaginta. 7Et factum est proelium in caelo, Michael et angeli eius, ut proeliarentur cum dracone. Et draco pugnavit et angeli eius, 8et non valuit, neque locus inventus est eorum amplius in caelo. 9Et proiectus est draco ille magnus, serpens antiquus, qui vocatur Diabolus et Satan, qui seducit universum orbem; proiectus est in terram, et angeli eius cum illo proiecti

7-9. The war between the dragon with his angels, and Michael and his, and the defeat of the former, are depicted as being closely connected with the death and glorification of Christ (cf. vv. 5, 11). The reference to Michael and the “ancient” serpent, and also the result of the battle (being cast down from heaven), reminds us of the origin of the devil. Once a most exalted creature, according to certain Jewish traditions (cf. *Latin Life of Adam and Eve*, 12-16) he became a devil because when God created man in his own image and likeness (cf. Gen 1:26; 2:7), he refused to acknowledge the dignity granted to man: Michael obeyed, but the devil and some other angels rebelled against God because they regarded man as beneath them. As a result the devil and his angelic followers were cast down to earth to be imprisoned in hell, which is why they ceaselessly tempt man, trying to make him sin so as to deprive him of the glory of God.

In the light of this tradition, the Book of Revelation emphasizes that Christ, the new Adam, true God and true man, through his glorification merits and receives the worship that is his due—which spells the total rout of the devil. God’s design embraces both creation and redemption. Christ, “the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created” (Col 1:15-16), defeats the devil in a war which extends throughout human history; but the key stage in that war was the incarnation, death and glorification of our Lord: “Now is the judgment of this world,” Jesus says, referring to those events; “now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from earth, will draw all men to myself” (Jn 12:31-33). And, when his disciples come to him to tell him that demons were subject to his name, he exclaimed, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Lk 10:18).

In Daniel 10:13 and 12:1 we are told that it is the archangel Michael who defends the chosen people on God’s behalf. His name means “Who like God?” and his mission is to guard the rights of God against those who would usurp them, be they human tyrants or Satan himself, who tried to make off with the body of Moses according to the Letter of St Jude (v. 9). This explains why St Michael appears in the Apocalypse as the one who confronts Satan, the ancient serpent, although the victory and punishment is decided by God or Christ. The Church, therefore, invokes St Michael as its guardian in adversity and its protector against the snares of the devil (cf. *The Liturgy of the Hours*, 29 September, office of readings).

down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. 10And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser

sunt. 10Et audivi vocem magnam in caelo dicentem: “Nunc facta est salus et virtus et regnum Dei nostri et potestas Christi eius, quia proiectus est accusator fratrum nostrorum, qui accusabat illos ante conspectum Dei nostri die ac nocte.

The Fathers of the Church interpret these verses of the Apocalypse as a reference to the battle between Michael and the devil at the dawn of history, a battle which stemmed from the test which angelic spirits had to undergo. And, in the light of the Apocalypse, they interpret as referring to that climactic moment the words which the prophet Isaiah uttered against the king of Babylon: “How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low!” (Is 14:12). They also see this passage of the Apocalypse as referring to the war Satan wages against the Church throughout history, a war which will take on its most dreadful form at the end of time: “Heaven is the Church,” St Gregory writes, “which in the night of this present life, the while it possesses in itself the countless virtues of the saints, shines like the radiant heavenly stars; but the dragon’s tail sweeps the stars down to the earth [. . .]. The stars which fall from heaven are those who have lost hope in heavenly things and covet, under the devil’s guidance, the sphere of earthly glory” (*Moralia*, 32, 13).

10-12. With the ascension of Christ into heaven the Kingdom of God is established and so all those who dwell in heaven break out into a song of joy. The devil has been deprived of his power over man in the sense that the redemptive action of Christ and man’s faith enable man to escape from the world of sin. The text expresses this joyful truth by saying that there is now no place for the accuser, Satan, whose name means and whom the Old Testament teaches to be the accuser of men before God: cf. Job 1:6-12; 2:1-10). Given what God meant creation to be, Satan could claim as his victory anyone who, through sinning, disfigured the image and likeness of God that was in him. However, once the Redemption has taken place, Satan no longer has power to do this, for, as St John writes, “if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (Jn 2:1-2). Also, on ascending into heaven, Christ sent us the Holy Spirit as “Intercessor and Advocate, especially when men, that is, mankind, find themselves before the judgment of condemnation by that ‘accuser’ about whom the Book of Revelation says that ‘he accuses them day and night before our God’” (John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 67).

of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. ¹¹And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. ¹²Rejoice then, O heaven and you that dwell therein! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!"

¹³And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had borne the male child. ¹⁴But the woman was given the two wings

¹¹Et ipsi vicerunt illum propter sanguinem Agni et propter verbum testimonii sui; et non dilexerunt animam suam usque ad mortem. ¹²Propterea laetamini, caeli et qui habitatis in eis. Vae terrae et mari, quia descendit Diabolus ad vos habens iram magnam, sciens quod modicum tempus habet!" ¹³Et postquam vidi draco quod proiectus est in terram, persecutus est mulierem, quae penerit masculum. ¹⁴Et datae sunt mulieri duae alae aquilae magnae, ut volaret in

Although Satan has lost this power to act in the world, he still has time left, between the resurrection of our Lord and the end of history, to put obstacles in man's way and frustrate Christ's action. And so he works ever more frenetically, as he sees time run out, in his effort to distance everyone and society itself from the plans and commandments of God.

The author of the Book of Revelation uses this celestial chant to warn the Church of the onset of danger as the End approaches.

13-17. In these verses the dragon's onslaught is seen in terms of the Church which suffers it. The woman who gives birth to a male child is an image of the Mother of the Messiah, the Blessed Virgin, and of the Church, who "faithfully fulfilling the Father's will, by receiving the word of God in faith becomes herself a mother" (*Lumen gentium*, 64). By means of the Church men become members of Christ and contribute to the growth of his body (cf. note on Eph 4:13). It is in this sense that we can speak of the Church as the woman who gives birth to Christ.

The struggle the Church maintains against the powers of evil is described here in terms of the Exodus (another time of great peril for the people of Israel). God brought the Israelites into the wilderness "on eagle's wings" (Ex 19:4), that is, by ways no man could devise. When the prophet Isaiah announces the liberation from captivity in Babylon he also says that "they shall mount up with wings like eagles" (Is 40:31). Throughout the course of history, the Church enjoys this same divine protection which enables her to have that intimacy with God symbolized by the wilderness. The period of "a time, and times and half a time", that is, three and a half years, is regarded as the conventional duration of any persecution, at least from Daniel 7:25 onwards.

of the great eagle that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. ¹⁵The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. ¹⁶But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river which the dragon had poured from his mouth. ¹⁷Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus. And he stood^e on the sand of the sea.

desertum in locum suum, ubi alitur per tempus et tempora et dimidium temporis a facie serpentis. ¹⁵Et misit serpens ex ore suo post mulierem aquam tamquam flumen, ut eam faceret trahi a flumine. ¹⁶Et adiuvit terra mulierem, et aperuit terra os suum et absorbuit flumen, quod misit draco de ore suo. ¹⁷Et iratus est draco in mulierem et abiit facere proelium cum reliquis de semine eius, qui custodiunt mandata Dei et habent testimonium Iesu. ¹⁸Et stetit super arenam maris.

The river of water symbolizes the destructive forces of evil unleashed by the devil. Just as in the wilderness of Sinai the earth swallowed up those who rebelled against God (cf. Num 16:30-34), so will these forces be frustrated in their attack on the Church, for, as our Lord promised, "the powers of death [hell] shall not prevail against it" (Mt 16:18). "This is nothing new," Monsignor Escrivá comments. "Since Jesus Christ our Lord founded the Church, this Mother of ours has suffered constant persecution. In times past the attacks were delivered openly. Now, in many cases, persecution is disguised. But today, as yesterday, the Church continues to be buffeted from many sides" (*In Love with the Church*, 18).

The Church is holy, but those who make it up—Christians, "the rest of her offspring"—suffer the onslaught of the Evil One, who is unrelenting in his efforts to seduce them. That is why "the Christian is certainly bound both by need and by duty to struggle with evil through many afflictions and to suffer death; but, as one who has been made a partner in the paschal mystery, and as one who has been configured to the death of Christ he will go forward, strengthened by hope, to the resurrection" (Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, 22).

18. Most Greek manuscripts, but not the most important ones, give this verse in the first person singular: "And I stood" (cf. RSV note below), referring to the seer. The New Vulgate, however, prefers the third person, in which case the phrase refers to the dragon, who is thus depicted as causing the powers of evil (in the form of the beasts: 13:1) to emerge.

^eOther ancient authorities read *And I stood*, connecting the sentence with 13:1