

The Book of Revelation

Week #2 – Introduction and Inaugural Vision

I. INTRODUCTION

Keep in mind that the Book of Revelation was written during a time of persecution and suffering.

The opening chapter presents Jesus as the “**Son of Man,**” the risen Lord and Messiah now reigning in his Father’s glory.

Revelation is a book of apocalyptic prophecy. It combines disclosures about the future with reflections on the past and urges its hearers to remain faithful in the present.

Revelation removes the veil from God’s plan for the future [previously hidden], drawing back the curtain that hides Christ’s **glory, kingship,** and **control over history** from the naked eye [Rev 4-5]; (CCC 50).

It also reveals [unveils] the **Bride of Christ, the Church.**

After a brief prologue [vv. 1-3], John describes a vision which acts as an introduction to the whole book.

Despite its brevity this prologue (introduction) conveys:

- 1) The scope of the book,
- 2) its authority, and
- 3) the effect it hopes to have on its readers.

A. The Means of God’s Revelation

Read: Revelation 1:1-2

1: The 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,

2: who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

- 1) Revelation begins with God, the source of all truth. We receive truth, we discover it; we do not create it. It comes through *earnest seeking* and *reverent waiting*.

- 2) God gives this revelation to Jesus Christ. It is not a revelation *of* Jesus, but a revelation *by* Jesus of the Father's previously hidden plan.
- 3) It is **God's truth** that Jesus brings to men; and that is precisely why His teaching is unique and final.
- 4) Jesus conveys that truth to John through his angel to "*show his servants what must soon take place.*"
- 5) It is addressed to "*the servants of God*" – people who are completely committed to God and His Son, Jesus Christ. The prophets are also called the servants of God.
- 6) The prophetic message comes from God through the mediation of heavenly beings [Jesus Christ and his angel] as in the OT.

B. Must Soon Take Place

According to the Book of Revelation the message from Jesus Christ is about contemporary **and** future events [Rev 1:19; 4:1]. It is about:

- **the present** [events in John's time], and
- **the future** [events to take place near and at the End of History].
- The initial fulfillment of the book was expected in the lifetime of its first century readers.
- **"Soon:"** As regards to how imminent or not all those events are, we need to remember that the notion of time in Sacred Scripture is not quite the same as ours.

C. Liturgical Blessings

Read: Revelation 1:3

"3. Blessed is the one who *reads aloud* the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those *who hear* and *who keep* what is written in it; for the time is near."

Verse 3 contains a three-fold blessing:

- 1) "*those who **read aloud** the words of the prophecy*" are blessed;

2) “those who **hear** the words of the prophecy” are blessed;

3) “Those who **keep (obey)** the words of the prophecy” are blessed.

To hear God’s word is a blessing and a privilege; to obey it is a duty. This is all the more true because the time is short!

The blessings on “those who read” [lectors], and “those who hear [congregation] implies a *liturgical setting*, as in the Sunday Eucharist. Revelation was meant to be read in the Churches [v. 11].

Therefore, from the outset, the Book of Revelation must be understood not only in its original historical setting, but also **in the context of the Liturgy.**

“The Apocalypse can never be explained properly apart from Christ’s coming to the church in the Eucharistic celebration” [CCC 1137].

Pope Benedict calls Revelation *“the book of the heavenly liturgy which is presented to the Church as the standard for her own liturgy.”*

II. THE MESSAGE TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Read: Revelation 1:4-6

4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶and made* us to be a kingdom, priests serving* his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.*

A. Seven Historical Churches

Revelation is a letter written to seven, specific, historical churches, and to the whole Church.

- The seven churches – Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, etc., were real Christian communities with their own particular virtues and failings.

- Seven is a perfect number and indicates *completeness or wholeness*; hence Revelation applies to the whole Church represented by seven specific churches in Asia Minor.
- To understand John's message we have to understand the historical situation.

B. Liturgical Greeting

Does this greeting "*Grace and peace to you from him who was and is and is to come . . .*" sound familiar? Does it sound like?

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you."

This is how the priest begins Mass. It is a liturgical and Trinitarian greeting.

The greeting in Revelation on is also liturgical and Trinitarian. It is given in the name of the Father [**him who is**], the Son [**Jesus Christ**], and the Holy Spirit [**the seven spirits**].

- The seven spirits refer to the Holy Spirit and his seven-fold gifts.
- "*He who is and who was and who is to come*" is an expansion of the name of "Yahweh" [**I Am Who I Am**] given to Moses at the burning bush.

C. Messianic Titles of Jesus

In this passage three great messianic titles are ascribed to Jesus Christ:

1) The Faithful Witness

Jesus is "the faithful witness" of the fulfillment of God's OT promises of a Saviour, a son of David. The word for "witness" in Greek is "martyr."

2) The First-born of the Dead

The risen humanity of Jesus is the first example of God's new creation. The Resurrection made Jesus the first-born of the dead. He was the first to rise after death.

First-born also has priestly implications. Jesus is Priest and Victim – First-born and Martyr!

3) Ruler of Kings on Earth

He is the ruler of the kings on earth – the King of the world – the King of Kings.

D. Praise for What Jesus Did for Us

- 1) He loves us and he set us free from our own sins at the cost of his own blood.

Jesus' love for us knows no bounds; his love led him to sacrifice his life for us, by the shedding of his blood which redeemed us from our sins.

- 2) Not content with setting us free from our sins, Jesus gave us a share in his kingship and priesthood. Like Adam we are priest-kings. [This is the common priesthood of the faithful – not the ministerial/ordained priesthood].

Jesus is the **“first-born”** who makes himself a sacrifice as a **“martyr,”** freeing us by his blood, and making us a **“kingdom of priests.”**

III. THE COMING GLORY

A. Use of the Old Testament

From now on, in almost every passage, we will see John's continuous use of the Old Testament in which he was deeply immersed.

Revelation 1:7 alludes to two passages from the OT – Dan 7:13, and Zech 12:10.

Read: Revelation 1:7

7: Behold, 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.

B. He Is Coming

“Behold he (Jesus) is coming with the clouds” describes the towering expectation of the book – John's confidence in the

triumphant return of Christ – in the words of Daniel 7:13 and Zech 12:10.

- **Dan 7:13 - Son of Man**

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a Son of Man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him.

In Daniel 7, the Son of Man comes in the clouds to receive an everlasting kingdom - not an earthly political power - from the Ancient of Days [God]. He then turns and gives it to the saints who have persevered through persecution.

Although the text is in the present tense, - “*he is coming with the clouds*” – the prophet was seeing future events as if they were actually happening.

- **Zechariah 12:10 – Those Who Will Wail**

The reference to those “*who will wail*” upon seeing him whom they “*pierced*” comes from Zechariah 12:10

"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a first-born.

In Zechariah 12, the people mourn the death of the Davidic king. God gave his people a good shepherd; but the people in their disobedient folly killed him and turned to evil and self-seeking shepherds instead.

But the day will come when by the grace of God they will bitterly repent, and in that day they will look on the good shepherd whom they have pierced and sorrowfully lament for him, and for what they have done.

John takes this picture and applies it to Jesus as the fulfilment of Daniel’s prophecy.

C. Eucharistic Meaning

There is also a deeper Eucharistic meaning to this passage. Just as the Son of Man comes in the cloud, Jesus comes to his Church in every Eucharist.

The Greek word for “coming” is *parousia*, which also means “presence.” Christ’s coming, therefore, is found in His real presence in the Eucharist, where he comes to us “in the unity of the Holy Spirit.”

There are at least three meanings to the word “coming” in relation to Christ in Revelation:

- 1) The Second Coming at the end of time;
- 2) His coming in his Real Presence in the Eucharist;
- 3) His coming in judgment [e.g. destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70].

The book of Revelation shows us that Christ’s coming is **past, present, and future.**

D. Alpha and Omega

Read: Revelation 1:8

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

This is a magnificent description of the God in whom we trust and who we adore.

- 1) He is alpha and omega. *Alpha* is the first letter and *omega* the last of the Greek alphabet. The phrase *alpha to omega* indicates completeness. God is the beginning and end of all creation, as well as sovereign Lord.
- 2) God is “he who is and who was and who is to come.” That is to say, he is Eternal! He was before time began; he is now; and he will be when time ends.
- 3) God is Almighty. “*The Lord our God the Almighty reigns*” [Rev 19:6].

IV. VISION OF CHRIST - THE SON OF MAN

After greeting the churches, John explains his reason for writing. He has been commanded by the Lord to do so in a vision of the risen Christ concerning his Church.

Read: Revelation 1:9

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.

A. Brother in Suffering

John introduces himself, not by any official title, but as a partner in tribulation. He is a brother sharing in the same persecution his readers are experiencing.

[They share this *in* Jesus! There is a level of communion with Jesus which is possible only to those who suffer with him.](#)

What does John share with his brothers? Three things:

- 1) The tribulation;
- 2) The kingdom; and
- 3) The endurance

There is only one way from persecution to the kingdom and that is through patient endurance. This was one reason why the book was written – to encourage this endurance.

B. Patmos

Patmos is a small island in the southern Aegean Sea [off the coast of Turkey, not far from Ephesus] that was used by the Romans as a penal colony for criminals.

John was banished there for being a Christian.

- He has suffered “*on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus,*” that is,
- He publicly *proclaimed the Gospel* and bore *witness* to Christ.

This is a central theme in Revelation!

C. In the Spirit on the Lord's Day

Read: Revelation 1:10-11

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

The Lord's Day

This is the first use of the term "Lord's Day" to describe Sunday, the first day of the week, because it was the day Jesus rose from the dead.

The Christian Sunday superceded the Jewish Sabbath.

The term "the Lord's Day" calls to mind two things:

- The day of judgment [the Day of the Lord], and
- In the early Church the Lord's Day was the term used for Sunday, the day on which the Church celebrated the Eucharist.

In the Spirit

John was "*in the Spirit.*" This means that he was in a trance or ecstasy in which he was lifted beyond the things of space and time into the world of eternity where he receives his vision.

The Trumpet

A trumpet blast was the customary Jewish way of calling an assembly. It became a signal of God's final gathering of the elect.

In the Old Testament a trumpet is blown to warn the people that God's judgment is coming.

At the same time the trumpet is a liturgical instrument. It was used in the temple by the priests and in sacred processions.

The trumpet was also used to summon to battle.

In the context of revelation 1: 10-11 it is like the trumpet blast that announced the theophany on Mount Sinai when God revealed his covenant to Moses.

A Voice like a Trumpet

The voice has the power and strength of a trumpet blast.

V. THE INAUGURAL VISION OF REVELATION

Borrowing images from Ezekiel and Daniel the vision describes Jesus in both divine and human terms.

- His hair is white like that of the Lord, the Ancient of Days [Dan 7:9];
- His voice is like the rumbling of God's glory [Ez 43:2];
- His appearance resembles a man [Dan 7:13] ; whose eyes are like torches; and
- Whose feet gleam like bronze, etc

A. Jesus as the Son of Man

Read: Revelation 1:12-13

[12] Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, [13] and 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;

Seven Golden Lampstands

Each lampstand reminds us of the seven-branched candle stick holding seven lamps, or menorah, which burned in the sanctuary in the Jerusalem temple.

They symbolize the seven churches [Rev. 1:20] addressed by John and possibly the heavenly temple.

The Son of Man

A mysterious figure appears in the midst of the lampstands; "one like a son of man," a direct quotation from Daniel 7:13. The heavenly figure is in the form of a man who appears to be guarding and governing the churches.

In Hebrew a "son of man" simply means "a man" a human being. But in Dan 7:13 this is no ordinary human being. This heavenly figure comes on the clouds of heaven to the throne of God to receive eternal kingship.

For Daniel, the “son of man” does not merely describe a human Messiah; this “son” is a supernatural figure. He looks like a “man” but he is much more than that.

As we well know from Jesus’ use of it, Son of Man became nothing less than the title of the Messiah. This was Jesus’ favourite title for himself.

By using the title “Son of Man” John makes it plain that the revelation he is about to receive is coming from Jesus Christ himself.

The Vestments of Christ

- The ankle-length robe shows the priesthood. The long robe and sash were worn by the high priest.
- The golden sash suggests kingship.

Jesus is Priest and King.

Other Characteristics of Christ

Read: Revelation 1:14-16

[14] his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire,

[15] his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters;

[16] in 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.

- White hair suggests great age and eternal existence, like the Ancient of Days.
- Eyes “like a flame of fire,” another image from Daniel, symbolize divine wisdom and knowledge.
- Bronze feet symbolize strength and stability.
- The seven stars in Jesus’ right hand are the angels of the seven churches [Rev. 1:20]. Each church has its own guardian angel, as do each one of us. In Jewish tradition nations and cities also had guardian angels.
- The seven stars could also be the bishops or pastors of the churches.

- The two-edged sword coming out of his mouth is the Word of God. It is the only weapon he needs against his enemies, and it shows the penetrating quality of the Word of God [Heb 4:12].

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

- Jesus' "face shining like the sun in full strength" recalls the Transfiguration. [Heavenly beings, when seen by humans on earth, shine like the sun]. It echoes Daniel's description of the son of man's face [Dan 10:6].
- It also suggests a divine warrior.

B. John Falls at Jesus' Feet

Read: Revelation 1:17-18

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand upon me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, [18] and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.

When the glory of God or the glory of Christ is manifested, man cannot remain standing in its presence. He falls to the ground. Both John and Daniel fall to the ground but are told not to fear.

C. The Keys

The keys of Death and Hades symbolize the royal and judicial power Christ has over life and death. It is the power to lock and unlock the gates of the underworld called Hades.

D. Basic Outline of Revelation

Read: Revelation 1:19-20

*Now write **what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter.** As for the mystery of the seven stars 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.*

The three parts of revelation are set out in Rev 1:19. “Write what you see . . .”

- 1) What John sees is the vision of the Son of Man [chapter];
- 2) “What is” refers to the present state of the churches [chapters 2-3];
- 3) “What is about to take place hereafter’ is narrated in chapters 4-22



Preparation for Revelation Week #3

Review

1. *The Apocalypse* – notes by Archbishop Collins (handout)
2. The Four Senses of Scripture (handout)

Read

3. *Revelation to St. John* – Ignatius Catholic Study Bible – Chapters 2:1 – 3:22 – The Seven Letters
4. *Coming Soon: Unlocking the Book of Revelation* – Introduction and Chapters 4-5