

# The Book of Revelation

## Week #4 – Letters to the Seven Churches (cont'd)

### I. REVIEW OF WEEK #3

John's letters to the seven Churches all have the same basic structure.

- The Lord himself speaks, first to assure the community that he knows their suffering and good works;
- Then he indicts the community for its failings (with the exception of Smyrna).
- Various warnings are given and promises made;
- Then there is an exhortation to repentance and conversion, and
- A reminder that the end, and Christ's definitive victory, will soon come.
- Spiritually, the zeal of these churches is declining.

All of these churches eventually fell away from the Gospel. They have been overrun by Muslim forces, and are under their control to this day.

This is a dire warning for Christians of all locations and times, and is equally applicable in our time.

Will the Church in Canada survive?

#### ***A. Ephesus: Losing that First love***

Jesus praises the community for its steadfast **endurance** and **resistance to false prophets**, but they have lost their fervent love for God and one another.

It is difficult to fight hard for the truth and still love those who oppose it.

- The Christian community have become uncharitable and judgmental of one another.

- *It is essential to speak the truth **in love**.*

They must regain that first love of Christ and of each other they had at the beginning.

### ***B. To Smyrna: A Slandered Community***

The Christians in Smyrna were suffering persecution from the Jews in Smyrna.

The Jews have publicly accused Christians of being hostile to the state religion, of refusing to say, “Cesar is Lord.”

To all the Lord says, “*Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.*”

This is a lesson for all of us who are tempted to compromise or hide our faith in an effort to avoid ridicule or rejection.

### ***C. To Pergamum: Allowing Idolatry***

The Christian community has held fast to the faith despite persecution and the martyrdom of Antipas.

However, they are severely criticized by Jesus because some members of the community are seducing others into sexual sin and idolatry.

- They have been seduced by the prevailing culture!
- The **word of Christ [the Scriptures]** is the antidote to the poison of false prophets and teachers.
- The word of God convicts us of sin, and invites us to return to God. That is why the knowledge of Scripture [as interpreted by the Church] is so important.

### ***D. To Thyatira: Tolerating a False Prophet***

The letter begins with high praise. They have grown in “*love and faith and service and patient endurance.*” But there is also severe criticism [Rev 2:20].

- The problem of this church is the false teaching of Jezebel, who is seducing members of the community “*to practice immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.*”

- She is teaching that members of the community can still be Christians while taking part in idolatry and sexual sin.

She refuses to repent! If she does not, there will be grave consequences for her and her followers – even death.

## **II. LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES (CONT'D)**

### **A. To Sardis: Not Alive, But Dead**

#### **Read: Revelation 3:1-6**

*"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, and you are dead. Awake, 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.*

*Remember 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.*

*Yet 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.*

*He 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.*

*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'*

#### **Background**

- Thirty miles southeast of Thyatira, Sardis was an extremely wealthy city.
- Herodotus [5th century B.C. Greek historian] described the people as immoral and licentious.
- The city was thought to be impregnable and thus became complacent. Because of this it was twice captured by surprise.
- The Christians of the city were probably influenced by the general atmosphere.

#### **State of the Church**

Christ is depicted as possessing the fullness of the Spirit. The “seven spirits of God” signifies the Holy Spirit with His seven-fold gifts. The stars stand for the Churches and their angels.

- This is the first time a letter begins without a compliment.
- The Church of Sardis is accused of appearing to be alive but is in fact spiritually dead. The NT often likens sin to death.
- Externally it appears Christian, but most of its members are living in serious [mortal] sin – devoid of the interior life of grace.
- Anyone who behaves like that is dead in Christ.

Although the Church has become complacent and fallen into sin, there is a faithful remnant, and the dying Church may yet be strengthened and saved.

*Awake, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death.*

*“It has been said that ‘eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.’”  
Likewise, eternal watchfulness is the price of salvation”  
[William Barclay].*

### **Path of Return**

To regain its spiritual life, the Church must do four things:

- ***Remember! Repent! Obey [the Gospel]! Watch!***

*Remember 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.*

The Risen Christ tells the Church to “awake:” to *remember* what they heard in the beginning [the Gospel – the Word of God], and to repent.

If not He will come in judgment when they least expect it [“*I will come like a thief*”].

### **Application**

Many parishes may be very active with socials, dances, group activities, bingos, etc, but what really matters is the focus of the parish.

Is it Christ-centered? Is it nourished by Word and Sacrament? “Do more people stand in line for the pancake breakfast than for Confession?” Is the liturgy centered on the Eucharist?

## White Garments

The white garments symbolize both purity and victory. In the early Church, Catechumens were vested in white garments following baptism as a symbol for holiness.

Some in Sardis had stained their robes by reverting to sinful ways. Those who “*have not soiled their garments*” are the ones who have remained faithful.

### ***B. To Philadelphia: The Reward of Endurance***

#### **Read: Revelation 3:7-13**

*"And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: `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.*

*"`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.*

*Behold, 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.*

*Because 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.*

*I am coming soon; hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.*

*He who conquers, I will make him a pillar in 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.*

*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'*

## Background

- *Philadelphos* is Greek for *one who loves his brother*.
- The city suffered constantly from earthquakes, and was devastated in AD 17. The aftershocks continued for years.
- It was the gateway to all of Phrygia and was “an open door” for the spread Greek culture and language.
- This is what the Risen Christ means when he speaks of “an open door” that is set before Philadelphia. The city is a door

through which the message of the Gospel can be spread to the surrounding countries.

- It is a door of missionary opportunity – of evangelization.
- Philadelphia was the last bastion of Asian Christianity to fall to the Turks in the fourteenth century.
- There was a sizeable Jewish community there; hostile to the Christians.

### **State of the Church**

The Church is praised for its fidelity: surprisingly, there is no negative judgment on the community.

- Despite their weakness and harassment by the Jews [*the synagogue of Satan*] they have not denied Christ.
- On the contrary, they have witnessed to him - they have been successful in evangelization [*you have kept my word and have not denied my name*].
- They will be protected from **“the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world”** because they have been faithful.

*I am coming soon; hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.*

The coming of Jesus probably refers not to his final coming in glory but to his coming in judgment [the hour of trial] soon to be visited on the whole world – probably the Mediterranean world ruled by Rome [i.e., the civilized world].

- The coming of Jesus is a warning to the unfaithful but a comfort to the oppressed.

### **Promises and Warnings**

- The crown recalls the crown of life promised to those who remain faithful.
- The Philadelphians are warned to hold on to their Christian faith lest God comes and takes their crowns away because they are not worthy to wear them.

- Many people in the Bible lost their place to someone else because they were unfit to hold it, e.g., Esau to Jacob; Saul to King David; Judas to Matthias, the Jews to the Gentiles, etc.

### **Key Concepts**

Jesus is pictured as the one who holds the **“key of David,”** which is earlier referred to as “the keys of Death and Hades” [Rev 1:18].

This “key of David” is mentioned in Isaiah 22:22, where the faithful Eliakim replaces the corrupt Shebna as the prime minister of the Davidic kingdom, and is given the *“key of the house of David.”*

There the “key” of the kingdom is a symbol of the authority of the Davidic king given to the prime minister who acts with the king’s authority.

Jesus holds the key because he is the Davidic king.

Jesus gives “the keys of the kingdom” [his authority] to Peter making him the “prime minister” of his kingdom. Peter therefore acts with the authority of Jesus!

### **Application**

God has a task for every person and every institution, but sometimes that person or institution proves to be unfit for the task and it is given to another.

In our own time we have seen the demise of some formerly great Catholic religious orders and institutions, and their replacement by new, vibrant, faithful ones.

The same thing may happen to our Catholic school system, if it is not faithful to Christ and His Church.

### **C. To Laodicea: Lukewarm and Complacent**

#### **Read: Revelation 3:14-22**

*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.*

*15 "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot!*

*16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth.*

*17 For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.*

*18 Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich, and 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.*

*19 Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent.*

*20 Behold, 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.*

*21 He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.*

*22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."*

## **Background**

- Laodicea, one of the wealthiest cities in the world and a banking and financial centre, was about 45 miles southwest of Philadelphia. It is mentioned by St. Paul [Col 4:16].
- It was so wealthy it did not even need God. According to Jesus, its material prosperity merely disguised its spiritual poverty [3:17].
- It was situated between two cities, one noted for its cold, refreshing drinking water and the other for its hot springs.
- The water in Laodicea was neither hot nor cold.
- It had a large medical school prized for its eye ointment.

## **State of the Church**

- Laodicea has the grim distinction of being the only Church of which the Risen Christ has nothing good to say. It has no redeeming feature.
- Many years before Revelation was written Paul had to rebuke its Bishop Archippus. He says sternly, **“Say to Archippus, ‘See that you fulfill the ministry you have received from the Lord’** [Col 4:17].
- Obviously, the Bishop was somehow failing in his duties as the leader of his flock, with tragic results for the community.

- Because of their complacency and lukewarmness [*“they are neither hot nor cold”*] they have a nauseating quality about them. Jesus says, **“I will spew (vomit) you out of my mouth.”**
- The Laodiceans had become proud in their prosperity. They were proud as well as lukewarm. Spiritual lukewarmness and mediocrity are very closely related.
- The one attitude Jesus condemns the most is indifference.

### **Titles of Jesus**

Like all the letters it begins with a series of great titles of Jesus Christ.

1. **The Amen:** The divine title means that God’s word is absolutely certain. Jesus Christ is the One whose promises are true beyond all doubt. He is the “Yes” or “Amen” to all the promises of God.
2. **The Faithful and True Witness:** He is the witness on whom we can rely and who is true.
3. **The Beginning of God’s Creation:** [With the Father and the Holy Spirit] Jesus began the process of Creation of heaven and earth [*“for all things were made through Him”*].

### **Path of Return**

The Lord knows that, despite their earthly wealth, they are spiritually bankrupt: **“[Y]ou are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.”**

Jesus prescription for their wretched state is three-fold.

*18 Therefore I counsel you to buy from me **gold refined by fire**, that you may be rich, and **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.*

1. **Gold Refined by Fire.** To overcome their *“wretched, pitiable, poor”* state they need to buy from Jesus *“gold refined by fire,”* a symbol for purification through suffering. Only through suffering will they learn life-giving love. Persecution therefore, is not necessarily a sign of God’s rejection, since:

*“Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent” [Rev. 3:19].*

2. **White Garments.** Laodicea prided itself on its clothing trade, but it is spiritually naked. If it wants to be really clothed it must come to Jesus for the white garments of righteousness and victory to cover its nakedness.
3. **Salve to Anoint Your Eyes.** Laodicea was blind to its own poverty and nakedness. John’s Gospel describes those who refuse to acknowledge guilt and repent as blind. To cure their spiritual blindness they must come to Jesus for the only ointment that will open their eyes.

#### ***D. The Christ Who Knocks***

*20 Behold, 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.*

Christ knocking on the door is one of the most touching images in the Bible. It is a way of describing God’s love for us, inviting us to greater intimacy with him, especially in the Eucharist.

We should be listening for his knock ready to open the door to Christ.

Jesus awaits our response to his call with patience and love. Don’t keep him waiting.

#### ***E. Those Who Conquer***

Jesus promises that those who conquer will sit beside him on his throne, which means that those who stay faithful will share in Christ’s victory and kingship.

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Preparation for Week #5 (Revelation Chapter 4):

**Review**

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

**Read**

1. *Revelation to St. John* – Ignatius Catholic Study Bible  
Chapter 4 – The Heavenly Worship
2. *Coming Soon: Unlocking the Book of Revelation* – Chapter  
6.

**Discuss**

1. Study Questions 1-6 at end of Chapter 5 of *Coming Soon*.