

THE APOCALYPSE

A course of three lectures given to religious communities in 1995-6

An interpretation of the Apocalypse or Book of Revelation as a whole, based on the clarification of its sacred and liturgical elements:

“The liturgy described in the Apocalypse is a liturgy which is currently being celebrated in heaven; it started with the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, continues until the final Judgment at the end of time, and represents a synthesis of the liturgy which was performed on the annual Day of Atonement in the former Temple at Jerusalem. The Apocalypse, in fact, is nothing else but the revelation of the course of this liturgy in heaven and of its consequences for the lives of men on earth. The description of the liturgy embraces all the visions of the Apocalypse, linking them up and unifying them into a unique and coherent Vision dominated by the theme of Atonement, that is to say the love of Christ which reconciles mankind with God.”

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Handout for THE APOCALYPSE IN THREE LECTURES

The Surface Structure of the Apocalypse

Several biblical scholars have emphasized the need to confront the problem of the literary structure of the Apocalypse in order to be able to reach a sound understanding of the book as a whole. One of these scholars, Prof. Ugo Vanni S.J., writes: “When this is undervalued or ignored, one inevitably remains on the surface and, in spite of many acute observations, one’s view of the whole quickly vanishes”. We approach the problem of the literary structure of the Apocalypse by dividing the book in the following way:

1,1-8 Prologue:

the introduction to the book - the title, the type of book, its origin, purpose, and mode of transmission, the author (1,1-2); its beneficial effect (1,3); the greeting (1,4-5a); the ‘now’ (1,5b-6) and the ‘not yet’ (1,7) of Christian life; the divine approval (1,8).

1,9 – 22,5 The main body of the book: this can be divided into three parts, according to the Lord’s instruction to St. John in Rev 1,19:

1,9-20 “So write what you saw...”:

the introductory vision of the Presence of the Lord amongst the local churches.

2,1 – 3,22 “what is now...”:

the letters to the seven churches - spiritual direction from the Lord to the seven local churches which represent the whole Church.

4,1 – 22,5 “and what must take place after these things”:

prophetic visions from the Ascension of Christ up until the fulfilment of the Mystery of God at the end of time, analyzed in three subdivisions:

- (i) the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’
- (ii) the fulfilment of the Mystery of God
- (iii) the interruptions in the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’.

22,6-21 Epilogue:

echoes many statements from the prologue (1,1-8) and contains the last warnings, blessings and promises.

(i) **The ‘baseline prophetic narrative’**

For the following reasons the account of the visions in this part of the text (4,1 – 22,5) should be understood as a narrative of events which follow one another:

- a) the visions are structured in consecutive series; the breaking of the 7 Seals leads to the blowing of the 7 Trumpets which ends in the outpouring of the 7 Bowls of libation;
- b) the text is written in a style which reflects the narrative style of the ancient Hebrew language and is characterized by the continuous repetition of the conjunction ‘and’;
- c) the expression ‘after these things’ is frequently used to link larger sections of text (7,1.9; 15,5; 18,1; 19,1).

By the use of other expressions of time - “what must take place soon” (1,1; 22,6); “what must take place after these things” (1,19; 4,1); “the time is near” (1,3; 22,10); “I am coming soon” (22,7.12.20; cf. 1,7; 16,15) - the narrative is aimed directly towards a conclusion in the future, at the end of time. In the third part of the text, therefore, it is possible to define a **‘baseline prophetic narrative’** which describes, with increasing detail, the events which lead to the fulfilment of the Mystery of God at the end of time:

4,1-11	Initial vision of the Throne of God in heaven
5,1-14	Preparations for the breaking of the 7 Seals of the scroll
6,1-2	Breaking of the 1st Seal
6,3-4	Breaking of the 2nd Seal
6,5-6	Breaking of the 3rd Seal
6,7-8	Breaking of the 4th Seal
6,9-11	Breaking of the 5th Seal
6,12 – 7,1	Breaking of the 6th Seal
7,2-17	INTERRUPTION
8,1	Breaking of the 7th Seal
8,2-6	Preparations for the Blowing of the 7 Trumpets
8,7	Blowing of the 1st Trumpet
8,8-9	Blowing of the 2nd Trumpet
8,10-11	Blowing of the 3rd Trumpet
8,12-13	Blowing of the 4th Trumpet
9,1-12	Blowing of the 5th Trumpet
9,13-21	Blowing of the 6th Trumpet
10,1 – 11,14	INTERRUPTION
11,15-19	Blowing of the 7th Trumpet
12,1 – 15,5	INTERRUPTION
15,6-8	Preparations for the Outpouring of the 7th Bowl
16,1-2	Outpouring of the 1st Bowl
16,3	Outpouring of the 2nd Bowl
16,4-7	Outpouring of the 3rd Bowl
16,8-9	Outpouring of the 4th Bowl
16,10-11	Outpouring of the 5th Bowl
16,12-16	Outpouring of the 6th Bowl
16,17-21	Outpouring of the 7th Bowl
17,1 – 19,5	INTERRUPTION
19,6 – 22,5	The fulfilment of the Mystery of God (see next sheet for details).

(ii) The fulfilment of the Mystery of God (19,6 – 22,5)

- the conclusion of the 'baseline prophetic narrative' defined in the previous sheet.

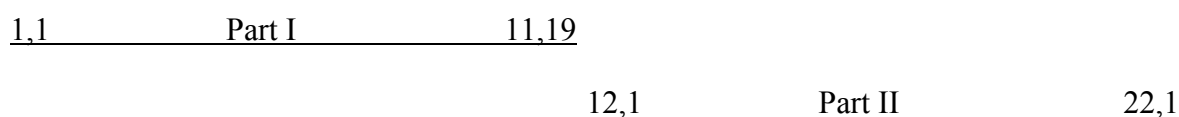
19,6-10	The announcement of the wedding of the Lamb
19,11-16	The manifestation of the 'Lord of lords and King of kings'
19,17-21	The Battle of the Great Day (at Harmagedon, cf. 16,16)
20,1 –10	The story* and condemnation of Satan
20,11-15	The final Judgment
21,1 –8	The new Creation
21,9-22,5	The new Jerusalem - the Wife of the Lamb.

* Here is described the reign of Christ with his saints, which lasts a thousand years and is called the 'first resurrection' (20,4-6) or 'Millennium'. For the following reasons, however, we should not expect an interval of a thousand years between the Battle of the Great Day at the second coming of Christ (19,17-21) and the final Judgment (20,11-15):

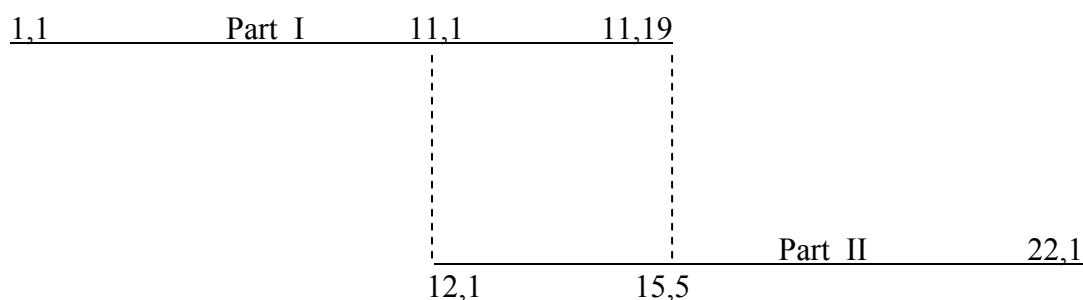
- a) according to the sense of 11,15-19, there is no interval of this length between the announcement of the completion of the Kingdom of God at the second coming (11,15) and the time to judge the dead at the final Judgment (11,18);
- b) such an interval has never been proposed by the Christian tradition; in the 'Creed' we say: "and he (Christ) will come again in Glory to judge the living and the dead". According to this tradition, Christ reigns now with his saints in the Church (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church 664-682);
- c) in the light of the fourth Gospel, St. Augustine confirms that the 'first resurrection' takes place between the Resurrection of Christ and his second coming (City of God, XX chs. 6-9);
- d) according to Psalm 90,4: "In your sight (Lord), a thousand years are like a day that has just passed". Therefore, the thousand-year reign of Christ, or 'Millennium', will not be established after the second coming, but will be revealed then 'as a day that has just passed' to those who have not already accepted it (e.g., the millenarians).

(iii) The interruptions in the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’

The largest of these interruptions (Rev 12,1 – 15,4) breaks the continuity of the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’ at the mid-point of the text of the Apocalypse, and divides it into two more-or-less equal parts:



By means of verbal-thematic links between the two parts, we discover that the end of Part I overlaps the beginning of Part II, creating in this way what we call ‘the overlapping section’:



verbal-thematic links: 1,260 days “And the Sanctuary
 42 months in heaven was opened.....”

The overlapping section (11,1 – 15,5) is joined to the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’ in 11,15-19, and includes those passages which interrupt it at 11,1-14 and at 12,1 – 15,5. By means of other verbal-thematic links, we can confirm that all the other interruptions in the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’ are related to the overlapping section:

a) 7,2-17
the numbered group of 144,000 men (7,2-8) is identical to the assembly of 144,000 men seen on Mt. Zion (14,1-5) and the innumerable crowd of martyrs who pass through the great tribulation (7,9-17) can be identified with the conquerors of the beast (14,2-3; 15,2-4).

b) 10,1-11
the encounter between St. John and the mighty angel forms the background and introduction for the overlapping section (11,1 – 15,5).

c) 17,1 – 19,5
the detailed description of the condemnation and destruction of Babylon refers to the event announced beforehand in the overlapping section (14,8; cf.18,2).

All these interruptions are related to the overlapping section, and together they form a prophecy which stands on its own, within the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’ of the Apocalypse.

The prophecy of the overlapping section (11,1 – 15,5)

Characteristics:

- a) The overlapping section refers to events which immediately precede the sound of the 7th trumpet (the last) at the end of time.
- b) It occupies the central part of the text (11,1 – 15,5); in ancient documents this part was reserved for the most important information (e.g., in the central part of the Pentateuch, Lev ch.16, the most significant event in the ancient Hebrew calendar is described - the Day of Atonement).
- c) The overlapping of the two parts of this section allow the transmission of a greater amount of information than in one part only, even though in a less obvious way.

In summary, the overlapping section contains an eschatological prophecy which is presented as the central message of the Apocalypse.

Significance:

1. Immediately after St. John was told to “prophesy again” (Rev 10,11), he was given a measuring rod and was told to measure “the Sanctuary of God, the altar and those who are worshipping there” (11,1-2). To “prophesy again” therefore implies the doing of the measuring in the construction of the new Temple of God, and the prophecy which follows in the overlapping section represents the measure, or rule, given to St. John to do this. The part of the prophecy with this function terminates with the completion of the new Temple, indicated in the text, as in the Old Testament (Exod 40,34-35; 1 Kgs 8,10-13), by the filling of the Sanctuary with the smoke of the Power and Glory of God (Rev 15,8). This event coincides with the opening of the heavenly Sanctuary described at the conclusion of the overlapping section.

Since, in the New Testament, the new Temple is identified with the Church (cf. Eph 2,19-22; 1 Pet 2,4-10; Heb 12,22-24; Rev 3,12), we note that the prophecy of the overlapping section (11,1 – 15,5) proposes itself in a unique way as a measure, or ‘rule of faith’, for the edification and perfecting of the Church.

2. The first activity mentioned in the prophecy of the overlapping section concerns the prophetic ministry of the two witnesses or prophets. The start of this ministry ‘actualizes’ the prophecy and implies that the two witnesses are its authentic interpreters and announcers.

3. The beast comes up out of the abyss at the end of the period of 1,260 days in which the two witnesses prophesy (11,7), in order to begin its reign of 42 months (13,5). The two periods of time are therefore consecutive (first the period of 1,260 days followed by that of 42 months) and represent a total interval of 7 years (1,260 days plus 42 months). The last half of this interval of 7 years terminates with the completion of the Kingdom of God at the sound of the 7th trumpet (11,15-19). It follows that the two periods of time which structure the information in the overlapping section (the 1,260 days and the 42 months) refer to the last 7 years of history - a final ‘week of years’ (cf. Dan 9,24-27).

Conclusions:

The overlapping section (11,1 - 15,5) contains a prophecy for the perfecting of the Church (1), which will be fulfilled in the last 7 years of history (3) and will be prophesied in the first half of this interval by the two witnesses of the Lord (2).

THE APOCALYPSE

FIRST LECTURE

Approaching the Apocalypse

If we really believe what the Apocalypse says, I am sure we would quickly arrive at the conclusion that it is the most important document ever written in the history of mankind. Let me explain: the Apocalypse presents itself as ‘the Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to him’ (Rev 1,1); it contains the ‘Word of God and the Witness of Jesus Christ’ (1,2.9) and it is the only message addressed to the whole Church by the Lord after his Ascension to throne of God. Its words are faithful and true (19,9; 22,6) and those who contemplate them are blessed (1,3; 22,7). It is a prophecy (1,3; 22,10) of what must take place in heaven and on earth up to, and beyond, the second coming of the Lord, and it concerns the fulfilment of the entire Mystery, or project, of God for mankind (10,7). There are serious consequences for those who add to, or take away from, the words of its text (22,18-19).

We ought to admit, however, that the importance of the Apocalypse is little appreciated because it is a difficult book to understand. There are two main difficulties:

- a) Its symbolical language
- b) The discontinuity of its visions.

The symbolical language of the Apocalypse is a language that takes us straight back to the Old Testament. In fact, the relation between the Apocalypse and the Old Testament is so close that it seems to be the intention of the author that they be compared. On this relation, a biblical scholar (Prof. Ugo Vanni) writes: “*The author never uses an explicit quotation, but inserts entire expressions from the Old Testament, often literally but with some slight alteration, so bringing the context of the Old Testament back to life with the prospect that has been added to it by the New*”.

We can therefore say that, to a great extent, the Apocalypse is a ‘re-reading’ of the Old Testament in the light of the coming, Resurrection and Ascension of Christ to the throne of God in heaven. The most appropriate method of interpretation in this case is expressed as follows in the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission on ‘*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*’ (1993): “*To carry out the ‘actualization’ (of a text) successfully, the interpretation of Scripture by means of Scripture is the most safe and fruitful method, especially in the case of Old Testament texts which have given rise to re-readings in the Old Testament itself and/or in the New Testament*”. In summary, the key for deciphering the symbolical language of the Apocalypse is to be found in comparing it with related passages in the Old Testament.

The second difficulty arises from the fact that not all the prophetic visions of the Apocalypse are written in order. We must look for links within the text which indicate the order in which the prophesied events will take place. This

task is not as difficult as it sounds, however, since the text has a very precise structure which indicates the order to follow. Those passages which do not follow this order are, in fact, related to each other by verbal-thematic links, and form a prophecy which stands apart, as we shall be seeing later.

Using these methods for interpreting the Apocalypse, and guided by the Spirit which inspired it, we can arrive at its precise or 'literal' sense. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (C.C.C.), the literal sense of Scripture is the meaning conveyed by its words and discovered by following the rules of correct interpretation. Quoting St. Thomas Aquinas, the Catechism continues: "*All the senses of Scripture are based on its literal sense*" (C.C.C. 116).

The clarification of the literal sense is therefore the principal aim of biblical exegesis. In fact, in a prophetic text like the Apocalypse, the literal sense has a very special importance owing to the fact that a prophetic text must be fulfilled literally in order to be considered authentic. This can be deduced from the following passage in the Book of Deuteronomy: "*If you say to yourselves 'how can we recognize the words which the Lord has not spoken', you should know that when a prophet speaks in the Name of the Lord and what he says has no effect and does not happen, it is because it does not come from the Lord. The prophet has spoken out of presumption and you need not be afraid of him*" (Deut 18,21-22).

However, when we speak of the literal fulfilment of a prophetic text we do not mean that every single word should be realized as it is written, in a literalistic or fundamentalist way, but rather that the significance of its words should be realized literally, or in other words, that its literal significance should be realized. For this reason, the literal significance or sense of a prophetic text is nothing else but the prophecy itself conveyed by its words.

The other senses of Scripture, the so-called spiritual senses, are those derived from the text in order to illuminate certain aspects of the Faith, morality, or aim of the Christian life (C.C.C. 117). The importance given to the one or the other of these two forms of meaning – literal or spiritual – has determined the history and the almost infinite variety of interpretations of the Apocalypse.

In the Early Church, the predominant interpretation of the Apocalypse was one which underlined its literal sense. It originated in Asia, present-day Turkey, in the second century and is particularly well documented in the writings of two saints: St. Irenaeus of Lyons, and St. Hippolytus of Rome. According to these authors, the Apocalypse communicates a prophecy of the events at the end of time, which will be fulfilled literally.

However, this way of interpreting the Apocalypse was subject to misinterpretation about the nature of the millennial reign of Christ with his saints, mentioned in chapter 20. Those who are nowadays called 'millenarians' were expecting a period of literally a thousand years after the second coming of Christ, characterized largely by the satisfaction of sensual pleasures. Not surprisingly, this way of interpreting the Apocalypse provoked a strong reaction in the Church and as a result, it came to be interpreted in a purely spiritual way

in order to illustrate the Faith, morality and aims of the Christian life. This spiritual form of interpretation originated in Alexandria, Egypt, in the third century and Origen was one of its first exponents.

St. Denis, a bishop of that city in the third century, was compelled to examine the Apocalypse in order to refute the opinions of the millenarians; with arguments of a literary nature he persuaded himself, and many others to this day, that the author of the Apocalypse was not St. John the beloved Apostle, author of the fourth Gospel, as asserted by the tradition. It is important to note, however, that the bishop did not doubt the divine authenticity of the Apocalypse, and admitted to not having understood its meaning very well.

In the fifth century, St. Augustine provided a definitive solution to the problem of the Millennium, based on his exegesis of the fourth Gospel, and his solution continues to be the teaching of the Catholic Church up to this day. He concluded that the Millennium should not be understood literally as a period of time lasting one thousand years, but as the interval between the Ascension of Christ to the throne of God in heaven and his coming in Glory at the end of time. In other words, Christ is reigning now with his saints in the Church.

Despite this solution, the tension between the two ways of interpreting the Apocalypse – the one which underlines its literal sense and the other its spiritual sense – continues up to this day, and allows us to classify current interpretations into two groups:

1. The interpretations which emphasize the spiritual sense of the Apocalypse hold that it represents the continuous struggle between the Kingdom of God and the power of the devil, and that it was written in a symbolical way so that it remains valid for all time as a source of inspiration and encouragement for the Christian life. Even though these interpretations are highly valued by biblical scholars, they have serious defects: they tend to distance themselves from the text, to be too liberal and to neglect the literal sense, on which – as we have just stated – all the other senses should be based.

2. Another group of interpretations which emphasize the literal sense. This includes a historical interpretation that is called ‘preterist’ and holds that the Apocalypse refers primarily to the persecution of Christians in the first century, for whom it was written as encouragement.

However, this interpretation does not adequately explain many of the details described in the text, especially those which describe events that have never taken place in history up to the present time. For example, it does not explain the deceptive miracles performed by the persecutor with the purpose of promoting the worship of the ‘beast which comes up from the abyss’, neither the systematic way of controlling his citizens by branding them with a mark, without which they can not buy or sell (Rev 13,11-17).

Furthermore, in the Apocalypse it is prophesied that the beast will destroy a city called Babylon (17,15-18). According to this interpretation, the beast represents one of the Roman Emperors of the first century (biblical scholars do

not agree which one) and Babylon represents Rome. The fact that no Roman Emperor ever destroyed his imperial city in the definitive way described in the text indicates how imprecise and inadequate this form of interpretation is.

Finally, in the Christian literature of the first three centuries, the beast described in the Apocalypse, otherwise called the Antichrist in the tradition of the Church, is nearly always presented as an eschatological figure, the extreme antagonist of Christ and of Christians at the time of the end. Against the 'preterist' interpretation, therefore, can be added the fact that the Church of the first centuries did not interpret the Apocalypse with reference to the persecution of Christians at that time, but interpreted it instead as a prophecy of the future and especially of the eschatological period.

So this brings us to consider the other kind of literal interpretation called 'futurist'. Seeing that so many things described in the text have not yet taken place in history, these interpretations consider the Apocalypse as a prophetic book which refers primarily to the eschatological period of history. The interpretation which we would like to present in this series of lectures is one of these, since it explains the Apocalypse as a prophecy which, to a great extent, has not yet been fulfilled.

The most common defect of interpretations which emphasize the literal sense is that they have a tendency to ignore the spiritual senses and to adhere too strongly to the literal meaning of the words; they tend to be 'literalistic'. We have already come across an example of this in the interpretation of the Millennium as a literal period of a thousand years following the second coming of Christ. Another is to conceive 'the new heaven and the new earth' as if they were to be established in another part of the universe, or to imagine the descent of the New Jerusalem from heaven as the landing of a 'flying object' from outer space.

Surrounded by so many different explanations and interpretations of the Apocalypse, how can we discern the true one from the others, if not by means of a great familiarity with the text? Since the text is a coherent whole, a work of the Holy Spirit in which there are no contradictions, the truth of an interpretation is shown by the completeness with which it explains the text, without omissions and contradictions. The truth of the interpretation can then be confirmed by its coherence with the rest of Scripture, which is to say with the other parts of the New and Old Testaments. In fact, a correct interpretation should not contradict either the Scripture, or the teaching, or the tradition of the Church, but should contribute to the more profound understanding of some aspect of them. These criteria correspond to the rules of correct interpretation presented by the Church in the Catechism (C.C.C. 112-114) and serve also to detect the defects of the numerous interpretations which are appearing not only from among the fundamentalist sects but also from within the Catholic Church.

The Book of Apocalypse

Now we must consider the book itself, and how we can divide it in order to be able to understand it as a whole. The majority of biblical scholars agree that the book starts with a Prologue and finishes with an Epilogue. The Prologue contains information which serves as an introduction to the book; the Epilogue repeats many features of the Prologue, adds certain warnings and closes the book with the promise of the imminent return of the Lord Jesus. The remaining part of the text can be divided into three parts according to the Lord's instruction to St. John when he appeared to him and said: "*So write what you saw, what is now, and what must take place after these things*" (Rev 1,19).

The first part, 'what you saw', refers to the introductory vision of the presence of the risen Lord amongst the local churches. The second part, 'what is now', refers to the situation in the seven churches, to which the seven letters are addressed with spiritual direction from the Lord. We propose to examine these two parts shortly. The third and most extensive part of the book, 'what must take place after these things', contains St. John's description of the numerous prophetic visions he was given, which span the interval between the Ascension of Christ and the fulfilment of the Mystery of God at the end of time. We will explain our analysis of this part during the next two lectures.

The Prologue

We now suggest a careful reading of the Prologue so that its contents can give us the correct attitude for studying the book in depth. We ask you to excuse us if our observations seem very simple or obvious, but before studying the meaning of the book itself we feel it is necessary to simplify and clarify its introductory elements, since these have been subjected to various misunderstandings and prejudices. The Prologue includes the title and begins like this:

"The Revelation of St. John. The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place and which he made known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bears witness to the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus, to the extent of all that he saw. Blessed is he who reads and blessed are they who hear the words of this prophecy and take to heart what is written in it, for the time is near" (1,1-3).

The title is not original, since many different titles were added to the manuscripts of the book during the centuries. However, the one most commonly used now is far from perfect, because the first few words of the text tell us that it is not precisely 'The Revelation of St. John', but the Revelation of Jesus Christ **witnessed by St. John**.

According to the ancient Hebrew tradition, and without doubt the Apocalypse conforms to this tradition, the first word or words of a book represent its authentic title. For example, in the Bible, the Hebrew title of Genesis is *berashit*, which means 'in the beginning'; of Exodus it is '*eleh hashemot*, which means 'these are the names'; and of Deuteronomy it is '*eleh hadevarim*, which means 'these are the words'. According to the same tradition,

in fact, the titles of the official documents of the Vatican are taken from the first words of their text. The authentic title of the Apocalypse, the title intended by the Author, is therefore 'The Revelation of Jesus Christ' - an optimum title because it emphasizes the messianic importance of the book written by St. John, of which the Revelation of Jesus Christ is the true source and content.

The Church calls the whole Bible 'Revelation' because it reveals, little by little, the mysterious project of God for mankind. The last book is therefore called 'The Revelation of Jesus Christ' not only because it is a true synthesis of the whole Bible, but also because it is only by means of the Lordship of Jesus Christ that we have this definitive revelation of what God has prepared for the future of mankind.

When the text states that this is "*the Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to him*", we should understand that God the Father is its principal Author and origin. The text goes on to say that God gave it to Jesus "*to show his servants what must take place soon*". Therefore what follows is not just consolation, nor exhortation, but a concrete warning of what must happen, and if these things have not yet taken place in history it is because they are yet to take place. If the Lord himself wishes to warn us of these things, it is because he knows we need such a warning in order to prepare ourselves. It is implied that the events will be difficult to undergo unless we are prepared by him in this way.

After telling us why God gave the revelation to Jesus Christ, the text goes on to say that Jesus "*made it known by sending his angel to his servant John*".

The appearance of the Lord's angel in the context of a divine revelation recalls those circumstances recounted in the Old Testament, in which the appearance of the Lord's angel is not distinct from the manifestation of God himself, but is simply the way he made himself visible to men. By means of his angel, the Lord appeared to Hagar beside the well when she fled from her mistress Sarah (Gen 16,7-13); to Abraham when he was about to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah (Gen 22,15-18); to Moses in the midst of the burning bush (Acts 7,30-34; cf. Exod 3,2-6) and then on Mount Sinai (Acts 7,38; cf. Exod 24,16-18); and also to the Israelites in order to protect and guide them in the desert (e.g., Exod 14,19-31). It is by means of his angel therefore, that the Lord reveals himself and communicates his revelation directly to John, as we shall see later.

The mystical encounter between the angel of the Lord and St. John settles the controversy about the literary origin of the Apocalypse. Many commentators make it seem as if the Apocalypse is just the product of the reason and reflection of a human author but the text itself indicates that it is not only this: it is above all the precise account of a mystical experience granted to the human author. Under divine instruction, St. John was fully conscious but totally passive - he was in fact like a dead man (Rev 1,17). He received visions, heard locutions, and experienced sensations which touched all five senses in a spiritual way. He also experienced ecstasy, rapture, and spiritual transport, and received

revelations which regard all the world and its people up to, and beyond, the end of the present age, recording all these things in obedience to a command from the Lord (1,19).

Regarding the identity of the one who witnessed this experience, the Church has always held that it was St. John the Apostle. Unfortunately this conviction is not accepted by many biblical scholars these days, even though it is verified by the written testimony of at least two saints who lived in the same region as the Apostle John, and within living memory of his works - Justin martyr who lived at Ephesus between 132 and 135 AD, and St. Irenaeus of Lyons who was born, raised and educated at Smyrna around 140 AD. The question of the apostolic authorship of the Apocalypse is important, because it was one of the main reasons for including this book in the canon of the New Testament: if the apostolic authorship is doubted, questions naturally arise concerning its canonicity.

For this reason, and without having to argue about the literary characteristics of the Apocalypse, we would like to draw attention to evidence within the text which identifies its author with the beloved Apostle, author of the fourth Gospel: in chapter 11, immediately after the author was told ‘to prophesy again’, he was given a measuring rod and was asked to measure ‘the Sanctuary of God, the altar and those worshipping there’ (11,1-2). ‘To prophesy again’ therefore implies the doing of the measuring for the new Temple of God which is in the process of construction. It is a task which lasts until the new Temple is completed at the end of time, in a way which is indicated later in the text (15,8).

Identifying the new Temple of God with the Church, made up of people reconciled to God by means of Jesus Christ, we can interpret the task given to the author as follows: in witnessing the prophecy given to him ‘to prophesy again’, the author is participating in the edification of the Church, up until she reaches her perfection at the end time. Even though the author is no longer present physically, the witnessing of his prophecy by the Church continues the work entrusted to him. In this way, the author of the Apocalypse continues to have an effective and lasting presence in the Church, which precisely fulfils the Lord’s enigmatic prophecy concerning St. John and identifies the author with this Apostle: **Jn 21, 20-24**

The text of the Apocalypse goes on to say what St. John did following his encounter with the angel of the Lord: “*he bore witness to the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus Christ, to the extent of all that he saw*”. We acknowledge therefore that the book which St. John wrote contains the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus. Further on in the text we read that ‘the Witness of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy’ (Rev 19,10). We conclude that this little book offers us ‘the spirit of prophecy’ in order that we may bring to maturity our baptismal gift of prophecy.

Then we find in the text the first of seven blessings or benedictions which

recall the Lord's sermon on the mount, and counsels of a similar kind in the Psalms (e.g., Pss 1,1-2; 112,1; 119,1-2): "*Blessed is he who reads and blessed are those who hear the words of this prophecy and take to heart what is written in it, for the time is near*".

You may remember that, according to St. Luke, Jesus said almost the same thing in reference to his own teaching: "*Blessed, instead, are those who hear the Word of God and observe it*" (Lk 11,28). The reference to these words of Jesus in St. John's book not only reminds us that this contains the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus, but also invites us to regard it as the teaching, or rather the prophecy, of Jesus himself. So true is this that the same exhortation is repeated towards the end of the book, by a voice which can be identified as that of the Lord himself: "*Behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is he who takes to heart the prophetic words of this book*" (Rev 22,7).

It is here that the Apocalypse challenges us: either we have faith in its words because we believe that they are true words of God, and therefore we respond to their invitation and enter into their logic, or we do not respond because we do not believe. It is a question of one's faith.

I think that a great obstacle in taking to heart and contemplating the words of the Apocalypse is the 'preterist' interpretation, the one which is prevalent in our Church these days and favoured by the majority of biblical scholars. As we have already mentioned, this interpretation states that the Apocalypse was written to encourage Christians being persecuted by the Roman authorities at the end of the first century. It is an obstacle because it makes us think that the Apocalypse refers primarily to the past, so provoking an astonishing underestimation of its importance for faithful Christians in the present and in the future. Instead of reading the text with faithful attention to what it says about the future, we are tempted to read it with a detachment conditioned by the historical perspective of the scholars.

To enter into the logic of the text, however, we must believe in its words. The book presents itself as a prophecy directed towards the second coming of the Lord, and the time is near. Since the second coming of the Lord has not yet taken place, the prophecy is still current. Let us change from an historical perspective to a prophetic one: the greater part of the prophecy of the Apocalypse does not concern the past, but the future which is to come.

The Prologue continues with a greeting from the divine Trinity to the seven local churches in Asia which were responsible for transmitting the entire revelation witnessed by St. John.

Then follow two statements in liturgical form, which summarize the faith and the hope of Christians living in the tension between what has been fulfilled by the first coming of Christ, and what has yet to be fulfilled by his second coming, between the '**now**' and the '**not yet**'. '**Now**' we are a kingdom and priests for God (1,5-6), but '**not yet**' has the whole world become the Kingdom of God. The rest of the world will be converted when it sees Jesus Christ coming in Glory at the end of time (1,7).

With this aim in view, the Prologue closes with an exclamation from God himself: “*I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, the One who is, who was and who is to come, the Almighty*” (1,8). In order that we do not cling too much to the future, and so forget our responsibilities in the present, these words of the Lord remind us of his all-powerful Presence in every age: this omnipresence, indicated by the attribute “the One who is, who was and who is to come”, expresses the full sense of the Name which the Lord revealed to Moses at the burning bush, the Tetragrammaton יהוה.

Furthermore, the Lord’s exclamation at this point assures us of his vigilant Presence during the formation of the book which St. John was writing. It is a sign of divine approval.

The first and the second parts

We come then to the first part of the text, the part in which St. John described “what he saw” in his initial vision: **Rev 1,12-20**.

There are three main elements in this vision:

1. The 7 lampstands which symbolize 7 local churches. Its true that ‘7’ means more than the precise number of churches to whom the Apocalypse was addressed. ‘7’ signifies the ‘totality’ or ‘completeness’ of a thing. Understood in this way, it is probable that the 7 churches in Asia were chosen precisely because they represent the Church in its totality.
2. The second element is the group of 7 stars which symbolize the 7 angels of these 7 churches. In the context of this vision, the stars or angels in heaven also represent the lights of the 7 lampstands.
3. The third element is he who is called ‘one like a son of man’. We identify him as the angel of the Lord, by means of whom the risen Lord reveals himself to St. John in vision and then communicates his revelation.

At the centre of all three of these elements there is the right hand of the angel, which therefore represents the right hand of the Lord. In the Psalms it is always the right hand of the Lord which works miracles and demonstrates its power to save. Here, in the same way, the powerful hand of the Lord has a crucial role at the centre of the three elements: it unites each of the seven churches with its angel in heaven, and also with the other churches. United by means of the right hand of the Lord, the local churches provide a base on earth for their angels in heaven, through whom the Lord communicates with them. Manifesting the light of heaven to men in this way, the Churches witness the Presence of the Lord amongst them.

Many commentaries on the Apocalypse identify the angels of the churches with their bishops, but we consider this interpretation to be too narrow. By analogy with the lights on the seven-branched lampstand (the *menorah* of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem), we can identify the 7 angels of the churches in this vision with the seven flames of fire burning before the throne, described in the following vision (4,5). In the text these flames of fire are then identified with the 7 Spirits of God which stand before the throne (1,4; 4,5) and later on with

the 7 Spirits of God sent out into all the earth by means of the Lamb that was slain (5,6). On account of their position before the throne, we can identify the 7 angels of the churches also with the 7 angels which stand before God (the archangels) who are given the 7 trumpets to sound (8,2) and the 7 bowls to pour out (15, 5-8). Their representation as flames of fire recalls the class of angels called '*seraphim*' in the Old Testament, from a Hebrew word which means 'the burning ones' (cf. Is 6,2). In brief, given that the number '7' signifies 'totality' or 'completeness', the 7 angels, flames or Spirits all represent the Holy Spirit of God in its various operations and characteristics. In the context of the introductory vision, the 7 angels represent that operation of the Holy Spirit by means of which the Lord communicates with his churches.

The introductory vision, therefore, is an ecclesiological vision which explains the relationship between the Lord and his churches, and shows how he guides his people by means of his powerful right hand. This vision recalls an important vision of the prophet Zechariah (Zech 4,1-3,11-14) which we would like to consider because it shows the kind of relation that exists between the Apocalypse and the Old Testament, and also the kind of exactness with which the order of the Old Covenant is fulfilled by the New, Zechariah saw oil dripping from two olive branches hanging from two separate olive trees. Collected and distributed by a series of bowls and tubes, the oil was feeding the seven lamps which sustained the perpetual flame on the seven-branched lampstand, in the Sanctuary of the ancient Temple. In this vision of Zechariah the Lord does not reveal himself, but his Presence among the people of Israel is symbolized by the flames on the seven-branched lampstand placed before the veil in the Sanctuary. Represented by the flames, the Presence of the Lord is effectively maintained by the oil collected from the two olive branches, which are identified in the vision with the two consecrated leaders of the people of Israel. In other words, even though the Lord remains veiled, he reveals that he has consecrated two leaders to guide his people and so maintain his Presence among them.

Returning to the Apocalypse, we can see how the coming of the Lord has fulfilled this vision concerning the direction of his people. In the first place we note that the Lord has revealed himself and replaces the two olive branches and the whole system of bowls and tubes for collecting the oil. Now the Lord himself guides his people and his own Presence keeps the lights of heaven united to their lampstands on earth. These lampstands are no longer united at their base, like the seven-branched lampstand which represented Israel with its base in the Temple at Jerusalem, but instead they are united on high, in the powerful hand of the Lord. This hand, in fact, is in the position of a lamp, and it is precisely a lamp which represents the role of the Lamb in the new Jerusalem (Rev 21,23). There is, therefore, a strong reason for identifying the powerful right hand of the Lord, which unites all three elements in this vision, with the Lamb that was slain.

However, the interpretation of this vision in the Apocalypse is not complete, since we have not yet explored all its symbolism. The activity which

is represented in this introductory vision can be interpreted by comparing it with the instructions given to Moses regarding the trimming and refilling of the seven-branched lampstand: **Lev 24,2-3**.

Represented in this passage by Aaron, the figure of ‘one like a son of man’ corresponds to the high priest, the sword of his mouth is the instrument with which he trims the lampstands, and the Life that is in him is the oil with which he refills them. Trimming and refilling the lampstands which represent the local churches on earth, he keeps them firmly united to their lights, or angels, in heaven. This vision of the trimming and refilling of the lampstands not only represents precisely the reproof and encouragement expressed to the churches in the subsequent letters, but also introduces us to the liturgical character of the visions in the Apocalypse.

I do not wish to say very much about the letters to the churches because they are very well-known, and contain relatively straightforward spiritual direction for the 7 communities which existed at the time the Apocalypse was written. We should remember, though, that these 7 churches were chosen because they represent the whole Church in every age. The fact that there is a universal significance in the messages to the 7 churches is underlined at the end of each, where it says: “*Whoever has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*”. Even today we can find in these letters, appropriate advice for our own community, for our family or for ourselves.

The heavenly liturgy

Prompted by the activity represented in the introductory vision, we would like to finish with a brief look at the liturgical character of the visions in the Apocalypse.

Since the Sanctuary revealed to St. John and described in the Apocalypse is the same one that was revealed to Moses as the archetype of the Tent that the Lord asked him to build (Exod 25,8-9), a precise typological correspondence exists between the heavenly Sanctuary described in the Apocalypse, the Tent built by Moses and the former Temple in Jerusalem which was modeled on this. It is a correspondence which embraces the whole of the legislation attributed to Moses, regarding the organization, administration and liturgical activity of the ancient sacrificial cult. The importance of this correspondence is that it gives us a basis for interpreting the liturgical features of the Apocalypse, by comparing them with descriptions of the ancient liturgical practice in the Old Testament and in the oral tradition of the Jews compiled in the *Mishnah*.

In making this comparison, we find that the liturgical features of the Apocalypse represent a liturgy which is being celebrated in the heavenly Sanctuary and corresponds closely to that of the daily morning service of the former Temple. We also find that some important features of the heavenly liturgy described in the Apocalypse correspond to elements of the liturgy which was performed specifically on the annual Day of Atonement.

As we have seen, the introductory vision of the seven golden lampstands and the subsequent messages to the churches (Rev 1,9-20; chs. 2-3) represents

the trimming and the refilling of the seven-branched lampstand at the start of the morning service. The appearance of the Lamb before the throne of God in heaven (5,6) corresponds to the entrance of the high priest into the most sacred part of the former temple, on the Day of Atonement, to expiate it with the blood of the victims. The mission of the first four horses and their riders (6,1-8) represents the recital of the ten commandments and the reading of other parts of the Law during the morning service. The souls of the martyrs who appear under the altar in heaven (6,9) correspond to the members of the sacrifice, after they had been carried to the base of holocausts in the former Temple. The 'sealing' of the 144,000 men mentioned in the Apocalypse (7,2-8) corresponds to the pronouncement of the priestly blessing; the great quantity of incense offered on the golden altar in heaven (8,3-4) recalls the same action in the morning service of the former Temple, at the moment when the faithful used to pray. The angel who throws fire from the altar in heaven on to the earth (8,5) evokes the act of throwing the offerings into the fire that was always kept alight on the altar of holocausts. The blowing of the seven trumpets (chs. 8-11) and the outpouring of the seven bowls (chs. 15-16), together with the singing of the celestial choirs described in the Apocalypse (7,9-17; 14,2-3; 15,3-4; 19,1-8) are analogous to the use of trumpets, and libation bowls at the culmination of the morning service, at the time when the Levitical musicians used to sing psalms and praise God. At the end of the heavenly liturgy, the scroll of Life which had been given to the Lamb a long time in advance (5,7-14) is opened and read during the final Judgment (20,11-12), just as the high priest read from the scroll of the Law at the conclusion of the specific rite of expiation that was performed on the Day of Atonement.

These observations can be explained by the fact that the liturgy described in the Apocalypse represents, in a simplified way, the liturgy that used to take place on the Day of Atonement in the former Temple of the Jews at Jerusalem. Being the fulfilment of every kind of sacrifice, the Lamb substitutes all the sacrifices that used to be offered on the Day of Atonement, and therefore corresponds to the first sacrifice of that Day: the lamb chosen to be the 'continual holocaust' for the morning service. As a result the order of the liturgy described in the Apocalypse follows closely the order of the morning service, but added to it are features which correspond to other elements of the liturgy for the Day of Atonement.

In summary, the liturgy described in the Apocalypse is a liturgy which is currently being celebrated in heaven; it started with the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, continues until the final Judgment at the end of time and represents a synthesis of the liturgy which was performed on the annual Day of Atonement in the former Temple at Jerusalem. The Apocalypse, in fact, is nothing else but the revelation of the course of this liturgy in heaven and of its consequences for the lives of men on earth. The description of the liturgy embraces all the visions of the Apocalypse, linking them up and unifying them into a unique and coherent Vision dominated by the theme of Atonement, that is

to say the love of Christ which reconciles men with God.

The clarification of the heavenly liturgy described in the Apocalypse not only reveals Jesus Christ fulfilling the sacrificial cult that formed the basis of the liturgical activity in the former Temple, so nullifying every effort to reconstruct that Temple, but it also has two important consequences for the interpretation of the text:

1. The first concerns the fact that, analogously to the liturgy of the former Temple, the liturgy revealed in the Apocalypse follows a very precise chronological order. Since the events described in the visions of the Apocalypse are determined by this order, it follows that these events also succeed one another in a definite temporal order.
2. The second consequence derives from the fact that the culmination of the liturgy in the former Temple occurred at its conclusion and was indicated by the blowing of trumpets and the pouring of the libation bowl. In an analogous way, the culmination of the liturgy described in the Apocalypse can be identified with its conclusive part, which takes place at the end of time and is also indicated by the blowing of trumpets and the outpouring of libation bowls. The fact that the greater part of the Apocalypse deals with this conclusive part of the heavenly liturgy, from chapter 8 onwards, indicates that the greater part of the Apocalypse is an eschatological prophecy and ought to be interpreted as such.

In conclusion, the liturgical activity represented in the visions of the Apocalypse is so important that the study of this activity gives us the 'key' for interpreting the text as a whole. Even though we do not have time to examine every detail, we will be seeing, in the next two talks, how useful this 'key' is.

SECOND LECTURE

A few words on ‘prophecy’

I would like to start with a short reflection on ‘prophecy’, because in this lecture, and in the next, we will be examining the third and largest part of the Apocalypse, the part in which St. John recorded ‘what must take place’ in the future (Rev 1,19; 4,1).

However, there is more than a little confusion nowadays about what prophecy is. Some biblical scholars say that prophecy has nothing to do with the future, despite the fact that the ordinary definition of prophecy is ‘the prediction of the future by means of divine inspiration’.

Although the gift of prophecy may include a profound perception of the present – which can be called ‘discernment’, and of the past - which can be called ‘wisdom’, it should not be doubted that in the New Testament, as in the Old, the principal task of a prophet is that of correcting the actual behaviour of people, or of a person, in the light of a perception of the future revealed by God. We accept therefore the ordinary definition of ‘prophecy’, as found in the dictionary.

Perhaps the confusion about the meaning of prophecy arises from the fact that the coming of Jesus brought about a change in the role of prophecy - not of prophecy in general, but of the prophecy of the Old Testament in particular. These prophecies are no longer considered by the Church as predictions of future events, but as a witness to the work of salvation already initiated by the coming of Christ. Jesus Christ himself indicated this change when he said: *“The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the Kingdom of God is preached, and everyone is straining themselves to enter”* (Lk 16,16; cf. Mt 11,3).

We should not therefore consult the prophecies of the Old Testament for information about the future, even though many of the things prophesied about the fulfilment of God’s promises have not yet been completely fulfilled. Rather, we should turn to the prophecies of the Old Testament for their witness to the Messiah who has already come in order to bring the promises of God to fulfilment, and therefore to establish precisely what must take place in the future.

In the following passage we read that, before his crucifixion, Jesus Christ promised to provide for his Church a new and definitive source of information regarding the future: *“I have yet many things to say to you, but you can not bear them now. When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you”* (Jn 16,12-14).

We should ask ourselves, then, in what way the Spirit of Truth has announced the things that are to come? Of all the prophecies in the New Testament, the Apocalypse is unique because, as we read in the Prologue, it was given with the specific intention of informing the servants of God on what

must take place in the future (Rev 1,1; 22,6). We suggest, therefore, that it is by means of the Apocalypse that the Spirit of Truth fulfils its task of announcing 'the things that are to come'. In a definitive way, the Apocalypse not only reveals how Jesus Christ completely fulfils the prophecies of the Old Testament, up to and beyond his coming in Glory at the end of time, but it also replaces them as the principal source of information about the future. In the following lectures we will try to demonstrate how the prophecy of the Apocalypse is not only consistent with all the other prophecies of the New Testament, but also how it illuminates, clarifies and completes them.

The third part - the 'baseline prophetic narrative'

Let us go on, then, to the prophetic part of the Apocalypse, which begins when St. John was taken up into heaven to be shown 'what must take place' in the future (Rev 4,1), and finishes with his vision of the realization of the Holy City on earth (22,5).

Since the prophetic visions are not written exactly in the order in which the events happen, we must first find a way of putting them in order. For this purpose, it is significant that the text has a precise structure. The visions are structured in three consecutive series: the breaking of a series of seven Seals leads to the blowing of a series of seven Trumpets, which terminates with the outpouring of a series of seven libation Bowls. Furthermore, we note that the conclusion of this sequence of events is nothing less than the fulfilment of the entire Mystery, or project, of God at the end of time. The sequence defined in this way forms the backbone of the third part of the text, and we call it the 'baseline prophetic narrative'.

We should note, however, that there are substantial interruptions in the sequence of events defined in this way. In the next lecture we aim to speak about these interruptions, showing how they relate to one another and to the 'baseline prophetic narrative', but now we would like to follow the 'baseline prophetic narrative' step by step with the aim of identifying where we are today in the sequence of events which is prophesied here.

In chapters 4 and 5, St. John describes a vision of the throne of God which began when he was raised 'in spirit' and saw an open door in heaven (4,1-2). Entering the door, he found himself before the throne.

The description of this mystical experience recalls certain features of the ancient Temple at Jerusalem. To enter the Sanctuary of that Temple it was necessary to go up some steps; the entrance door was opened at dawn, at the beginning of the morning service, when the lamb chosen to be the holocaust for the morning service was slain.

Returning to the Apocalypse we propose that St. John was raised 'in spirit' because he was about to enter the heavenly Sanctuary, the door was open because the heavenly liturgy had already begun with the slaying of the Lamb, and when St. John entered he saw the throne before him because there is no veil inside the heavenly Sanctuary as there was in the Sanctuary of the former Temple. A sign of the absence of a division within the heavenly Sanctuary is

the breaking of the veil at the death of Jesus on the cross, as stated in the Gospel (Mk 15,38).

In the Old Testament the vision of the throne was experienced and described by various prophets down the centuries, and is an essential element in the prophetic vocation of Isaiah and Ezekiel. In a similar way, the prophetic mission of the author of the Apocalypse begins with the vision of the throne of God inside the heavenly Sanctuary.

Basing ourselves on St. John's description, let us try to visualize the arrangement of the various elements around and in front of the throne, as it radiates the splendour of the One who is sitting there. Keeping watch around the throne, there are 4 living creatures (also called '*cherubim*' in the Old Testament) and around them, 24 elders are seated on their thrones. Spreading out in front of the throne like a pavement, there is a sea as clear as glass, and on the surface of this sea, near the throne, there are 7 flames of fire (which we identified previously with the archangels or '*seraphim*' and the golden altar of incense. There are myriads of angels around the throne and a great act of adoration is in progress.

At a certain point in this heavenly liturgy, the Lamb that was slain appears beside the throne, and takes a sealed scroll from the One that is sitting there. When he takes the scroll, a new song of praise erupts in the Sanctuary which spreads throughout all the creatures of heaven and earth, and begins like this: "*Worthy are you to take the scroll and open its seals, because you were slain and with your blood you bought people for God from every tribe and tongue and race and nation, and made them a kingdom and priests for our God, and they shall reign on the earth*" (Rev 5,9-10).

There is no difficulty in identifying the Lamb with Jesus Christ, whose blood was spilt on the earth (Jn 19,33) in order to redeem people (Rev 5,9) and expiate their sins (1,5); his appearance there beside the throne corresponds to his Ascension to the right hand of God after his Resurrection.

For the deeper meaning of this part of the vision, we must return to the liturgy of the former Temple at Jerusalem, which according to the Letter to the Hebrews was 'a copy and shadow of the celestial reality' (Heb 8,5). The most sacred part of the ancient Temple, the Holy of Holies, contained the Ark of the Covenant, which was considered to be the footstool of the throne of God, because above it the Lord spoke face to face with Moses. In this part of the Temple no one except the high priest was allowed to enter, and even the high priest was only allowed to enter once a year, on the Day of Atonement, in order to expiate the place with the blood of the expiatory sacrifices.

Returning to the Apocalypse, we note that the appearance of the Lamb before the throne in heaven corresponds to the entrance of the high priest in the most sacred part of the ancient Temple, on the Day of Atonement, with the blood of the victims. The Lamb fulfils not only the function of the high priest but also that of the victims which were sacrificed for the expiation of the holy places and the sins of the people. The letter to the Hebrews has already introduced us to this theme: "*But when Christ appeared as high priest of the*

good things to come, through the greater and more perfect Tent (not made with hands...) he entered once and for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption” (Heb 9,11-12).

In the liturgy described in the Apocalypse, the purification of the heavenly Sanctuary by means of the blood of the Lamb is represented by the expulsion of Satan and his angels from heaven, so that there was no place for them any more beside God (Rev 12,7-12).

At the end of the specific rite of expiation on the annual Day of Atonement, the high priest took the scroll of the Law and read some passages to the people who had gathered in the Temple. In the Apocalypse, the Lamb performs an analogous action when he takes possession of the sealed scroll, soon after appearing beside the throne (5,7). The fact that he takes the scroll at this point signifies that the act of expiation has been fulfilled; the sacrifice of the Lamb is unique and eternal and there will not be another sacrifice for sin and for the reconciliation of men with God.

However, the sealed scroll which the Lamb takes is not identical to the scroll of the Law, even though it also has writing on both sides. Perhaps the scroll of the Law was modeled on this one. Further on in the text (13,8; 21,27) we discover that the scroll given to the Lamb is in fact the scroll of Life which is opened and read at the final Judgment (20,12).

We suppose therefore that the breaking of the seals of this scroll occupy nearly all the time between the Ascension of Christ into heaven and the final Judgment; it represents the time given to men to reconcile themselves with God and be converted to his will revealed in Christ. The fact that it is a fairly long time is explained in the following passage from the second Letter of St. Peter: *“The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think it is to be slow, but is forbearing towards you, not wishing that anyone should perish, but that all should come to repentance”* (1Pet 3,9).

In chapters 6 to 8 of the Apocalypse we see what happens when the Lamb begins to break the seals of the scroll. At the breaking of each of the first four seals, a horseman mounted on a vividly coloured horse appears in obedience to the command of one of the four living creatures, and is prepared for a particular mission on earth (6,1-8). The fact that the horsemen are placed under the command of the four living creatures whose task is to guard the throne of God in heaven, implies that the four horsemen have a similar task on earth, namely that of guarding the sovereignty of God among men.

This role, in fact, is evident in the case of the white horse, since it represents the victorious force of the Kingdom of God communicated to men by the preaching of the Gospel. The white horse is that force in creation which urges men to recognize the sovereignty of God. All the other horses, however, seem to have missions which are totally contrary to the wellbeing of mankind. The red horse takes peace away from men, so provoking violence and murder; the black horse causes an increase in the prices of essential foods, so causing

social injustice, misery and oppression; the pale green horse causes the death of many people by means of war, famine, disease and wild animals. We ask ourselves how these coloured horses can be occupied in some way in guarding the sovereignty of God among men?

The negative effects of all these coloured horses recall the prophetic warnings, often quoted in the Old Testament, of what would happen if Israel ignored the commandments of God (Lev 26,14-15; Deut 28,15-69; Jer 29,17-19; Ezek 5,12-17). Following in the steps of the white horse, the coloured horses represent, therefore, the consequences of denying the sovereignty of God and refusing to be conquered by the Love of God in Christ. Turning upside down everything that is not orientated towards God, the coloured horses urge men to seek the Kingdom of God and be converted, and in this way they act indirectly in guarding the sovereignty of God on earth. It should be noted that when the Kingdom of God is not accepted, the order of creation becomes so inverted and distorted that the very forces of creation turn out to be destructive for men.

When the Lamb breaks the fifth seal, St. John saw the martyrs in heaven and heard them asking God how much longer before his judgment would fall on the earth. They were told to wait a little while longer (Rev 6,10). We know then, that the breaking of this seal takes place only ‘a little while’ before the Judgment of God on the earth at the end of time. It is implied therefore that the breaking of the first four seals, and the mission of the four horsemen, occupies almost the whole of history from the Ascension of Christ up to ‘a little while’ before the end of time.

According to the usual translation of this passage, the martyrs were told to wait a little while longer “*until **the number** of their fellow-servants and their brothers **should be complete**, those about to be killed just as themselves*” (6,11). However, this translation is not correct: it seems as though there is a fixed number of martyrs who have to be killed before the end can come. We do not believe that the time of the end is determined in this way, and we know that the word ‘number’ is not found in the original Greek text of this passage. We know furthermore that the martyrs who are referred to in this passage, form an immense multitude described in chapter 7 (7,9-17) which does not have a fixed number since nobody is able to count them all. To maintain that this multitude of martyrs has a fixed number creates confusion between them and the numbered group of 144,000 ‘sealed’ men who do not have to pass through martyrdom.

The literal translation of this passage is this: “*they were told to rest for a short time more, until also their fellow-servants and brothers **had been filled**, those about to be killed just as themselves*” (6,11). The verb ‘to fill’ in this context recalls the Hebrew words *millay yad*, which refer to the ritual procedure for the consecration of priests. It is enough to say that those who are going to be killed, will be ‘filled’ with the beatific vision of the throne and will rank as priests in the heavenly Sanctuary.

This information is important because it warns us of a persecution which

the faithful must undergo before the end comes, and which is called in the text ‘the great tribulation’ (7,14). The martyrs who will be killed in this tribulation form an innumerable and joyful crowd in heaven which is described various times in the subsequent visions, in a way which recalls the chorus of Levitical ministers who accompanied the liturgy in the former Temple.

The breaking of the sixth seal leads to a vision of great upheaval: Rev 6,12-17. This is a vision of the phenomena which immediately precede the Day of the Lord at the end of time, and it recalls, in a special way, the following part of the prophecy of Joel: *“And I will work wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood, fire and columns of smoke; the sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Day of the Lord, great and terrible”* (Jl 3,3-4).

The upheavals described in the Apocalypse are the changes which take place in heaven and on earth in preparation for ‘the new heaven and the new earth’, an expression which refers to the renewed state of creation after the Day of the Lord. However, in this vision the changes take place so suddenly and so severely that the men hide underground and despair of being able to survive such a catastrophe; in fact, it seems to be the vision of an end which does not leave any survivors.

Instead, the end will not be so sudden and so severe, and there will be survivors. The prophecy of Joel continues: *“Then everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved, because on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be salvation, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors will be those whom the Lord calls”* (Jl 3,5).

In the Apocalypse, therefore, we read that the four winds of the earth are held back in order that the 144,000 men may be sealed, those who in the Old Testament are called ‘the remnant of Israel’. Furthermore, in the following visions we see that even though the upheavals proceeding the Day of the Lord have not been cancelled, they occur in such a way as to give men a last chance to repent and be converted to God.

After the breaking of the seventh seal, there is a silence in heaven for half-an-hour. In the ancient prophetic writings, this silence signified the imminent manifestation of the Lord (Zeph 1,7; Zech 2,17; Hab 2,20) and it seems to have the same significance in the present context, where it accompanies the offering of incense on the golden altar before the throne. The incense comes from the golden bowls in the hands of the 24 elders, and it represents the prayers of the saints of every age (Rev 5,8). When the incense is offered at this time, these prayers rise to the throne of God along with the prayers of all the faithful (8,3-4), in order to be heard by God before the start of the upheavals which lead up to his manifestation, on the Day of the Lord.

The offering of incense reminds us that we are involved in a vast and continuous liturgy similar to the one that was performed in the former Temple in Jerusalem, in which the offering of incense was always held to be a time of prayer for all the people of Israel (Lk 1,10; Ps 141,1-2; Jud 9,1).

After the offering of incense, fire from the golden altar in heaven is thrown to the earth. In the first place, the fire from heaven represents the Holy Spirit of God and has a purifying effect above all. In second place, this act corresponds to the placing of the offerings on the altar of holocausts in the liturgy of the former Temple. The total consumption of these offerings in the fire of the altar was called their 'presentation before God'.

In the Apocalypse the situation is similar but inverted. Instead of throwing the offerings on to the fire of the altar, the fire is thrown on to the offerings to purify them and prepare them to be presented before God. This action could in fact be called a 'new Pentecost'. The time of the Lord's manifestation draws near, and as for the presentation of the offerings in the liturgy of the ancient Temple, it is announced by the blowing of trumpets.

The seven angels who stand before God - the archangels who we have already identified with the angels of the churches - are given seven trumpets to blow, and every time one of the angels blows, extraordinary things happen on earth. The sounds of the first four trumpets herald events which cause considerable damage to the environment in which we live (Rev 8,1-12): a third of the trees and a third of the earth with its vegetation are burned up; a third of the ships sink, a third of the sea becomes contaminated and a third of the creatures in the sea die; a third of the fresh water becomes poisonous; the polluted air obscures a third of the light coming from the celestial bodies.

The sounds of the fifth and the sixth trumpets herald the effects of inventions which torment (9,1-12) and kill (9,13-19) men, but despite all this the men do not detach themselves from the things they make, and neither do they repent from their wickedness (9,20-21). In fact, the great majority of them refuse this last chance to repent.

With the sound of the seventh and last trumpet, we arrive at the completion of the Kingdom of God, announced in the following way: "*The kingdom of the world has become our Lord's and his Christ's and he will reign of ever and ever*" (11,15).

This exclamation is of great interest because it not only announces but also explains the so-called 'end of the world'. It is not the end of life on this planet as so many presume, but the end of *the kingdom* of the world; from that moment onwards, this kingdom is taken up and transformed by the Kingdom of God, so that God will be all in all (1Cor 15,28). After this, there will be no other god such as riches are now, and no other kingdom such as the way of life built up on the possession of riches.

Following this announcement of the completion of the Kingdom of God, the 24 elders respond in a way that confirms they are celebrating the complete fulfilment of the Mystery of God at the end of time: "*We thank you Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken up your great power and have come to reign. The nations were angry and your anger has come, also the time for the dead to be judged, and to give the reward to your servants the prophets and to the saints and to them that fear your name, to the small and to the great, and to destroy those who are destroying the earth*" (Rev

11,16-18).

The thanksgiving of the elders also tells us precisely what the fulfilment of God's plan involves: first the Lord appears in Glory and with great power, then follow the manifestation of his anger, the judgment of the dead and the giving of the reward to his servants. At the end of their expression of thanks, the 24 elders add a surprising warning, all the more so because it is always omitted from this passage when it is used liturgically: they warn us that, at the same time, those who are destroying the earth will be destroyed. Amongst other things, this warning assures us that the Lord does not wish the earth to be destroyed.

The text continues with the description of the events mentioned by the 24 elders: "*And the Sanctuary of God in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen in his Sanctuary, and there were lightnings and noises and thunders, an earthquake and a great hail*" (11,19). Given that the ark of the covenant was considered to be the lowest part of the throne of God (the footstool for his feet: 1Chr 28,2; Ps 99,5; 132,7; Lam 2,1; Ezek 43,7), its revelation at this point indicates the direct vision of the throne on which the Lord Jesus is sitting (Rev 3,21; 7,17) and therefore represents the Parousia or second coming of the Lord, that is to say his coming in Glory and with power at the end of time.

However, at this point the description is interrupted by other visions, which we will talk about next time, and the vision of the opening of the heavenly Sanctuary is not taken up again until chapter 15, where it says: "*And after this I looked, and the Sanctuary of the Tent of Witness in heaven was opened, and out of the Sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues. ...And one of the four living creatures had given to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the passion of God, the One living for ever and ever*" (15,5-7).

In this context the vision of the ark has another impact, related to the fact that the ark contained the tablets of the Law and acted as a witness against those who had transgressed the Law and rebelled against God (Deut 31,24-27). In an analogous way the manifestation of the ark at the opening of the heavenly Sanctuary witnesses against the inhabitants of the earth who continue to rebel against God, and is quickly followed by the hour of God's judgment (Rev 14,7), described elsewhere as "*the hour of trial which is about to fall on the whole world, to put the inhabitants of the earth to the test*" (3,10). In this hour, that is to say in a very short period of time, the seven bowls full of the wine of God's anger are poured out on to the earth.

Leaving aside, for the moment, the disastrous effect on the environment, the greatest danger of the resulting plagues is that of blaspheming God and so falling into the eternal sin (cf. Matt 12,32). Unfortunately those people who continue in their rebellion against God, end up blaspheming him during this hour of testing. The text affirms it three times:

"the people were scorched with a great heat and they blasphemed the Name of God, the One who has power over these plagues, and they did not repent and

give him glory” (Rev 16,9);

“and they bit their tongues with the pain, and they blasphemed the God of heaven for their pains and for their sores, and they did not repent of their deeds” (16,10-11);

“and the people blasphemed God for the plague of hail, because this plague is exceedingly great” (16,21).

These plagues, called also “the wine of the passion of God, mixed undiluted in the cup of his anger” (14,10), correspond to the libation of wine that was poured out at the base of the altar at the conclusion of the liturgy in the former Temple, in the same place, in fact, that the blood of the sacrifice was poured out at the beginning of the liturgy. In the context of the heavenly liturgy described in the Apocalypse, this coincidence indicates that, at the end of time, all those who have not wanted to accept the blood of the Lamb for the remission of their sins, will receive the wine of God’s anger. Next time we will be seeing how those who are redeemed are protected from this test.

It is not necessary to examine in detail the environmental effects of these plagues; it is enough to note that they cause more or less the same kind of damage as the disasters which follow the trumpet blasts, but in a much greater degree. It is more important to recall that the Lord has these plagues in his power (16,9) and so we should not expect their effects to be either permanent or irreversible. We suppose that the Lord will remove the effects of these plagues when they have achieved their purpose, which is to prepare for the Battle of the Great Day in which all the agents of the devil will be defeated and eliminated. In the text, the definitive defeat of the devil is described in two parts: the first part follows the Parousia of the Lord and his manifestation at the Battle of Harmagedon (16,16; 19,17-21), and the second part - the rebellion of Gog and Magog (20,7-10) - precedes the resurrection of the dead at the final Judgment. Between these two phases in the defeat of the devil, an interval of a thousand years is described in which Christ reigns with his saints in a condition called the ‘first resurrection’. As it is written it seems as if there will be an intermediate reign of a thousand years (the famous ‘Millennium’) between the ‘Parousia’ or second coming of Christ and the final Judgment, a proposition which does not agree with other prophecies of the New Testament, nor with the constant tradition of the Church.

The most convincing proof that there will not be such an interval is to be found in the text of the Apocalypse itself, in the passage which we have just examined, in which the Parousia of the Lord and the completion of the Kingdom of God are announced following the sound of the seventh and last trumpet (11,15-18). The fact that the time to judge the dead is celebrated simultaneously confirms that there will be no interval between the Parousia and the final Judgment.

Furthermore, there are indications in the text that the millennial reign of Christ with his saints takes place following his Passion and Resurrection, and includes people from every tribe and language, race and nation who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb and made a kingdom and priests for God

(1,6; 5,10; 20,6). The millennial reign of Christ therefore refers to the Church whilst she is waiting for the Parousia; why, then, is this interval described in the text as if it were after the Parousia?

We suggest two reasons for this displacement: the first is that, despite being *in* the world, the kingdom of Christ *is not* of this world (Jn 18,36), and is therefore most appropriately described after the kingdom of this world has ended at the Parousia of the Lord. The second reason is because, according to the words of Psalm 90: “*a thousand years in your sight (Lord) are like a day that has just passed, like a watch in the night*” (Ps 90,4). That is to say that, in the light of the coming of the Lord in Glory at his Parousia, his thousand-year reign will be revealed as ‘a day that has just passed’ to all those who, for whatever reason, had not already accepted it (cf. Rev 1,7). It is implied, then, that the Lord will appear in Glory before all men enter his kingdom, a fact which is confirmed in the Catechism in the following way: “*The Kingdom will not therefore reach its fulfilment through the historical triumph of the Church, at the end of an ascending process, but through the victory of God over the final unleashing of evil...*” (C.C.C. 677).

Seeing that the description of the millennial reign of Christ in the Apocalypse therefore refers to a retrospective vision, we come to realize that the two parts of the description of the defeat of the evil are in fact two successive phases of the same Battle, which ends with the final Judgment and is called the Battle of the Great Day of God Almighty.

We finish, then, with the vision of the realization of all that God has prepared for the future of mankind, as a reward for his servants. First, however, we must turn back to the event which indicates the Parousia of the Lord – the opening of the heavenly Sanctuary (Rev 11,19; 15,5).

In the ancient Temple there was a curtain at the entrance of the Sanctuary (1Macc 4,51) and this was opened at the start of the great feasts, so that the pilgrims gathered in the inner court could see inside the Sanctuary. By analogy, the opening of the heavenly Sanctuary described in the Apocalypse indicates the start of a great feast: “*Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding-feast of the Lamb*” (Rev 19,9).

The complete fulfilment of the Mystery of God is therefore described as a great feast to celebrate the wedding of the Lamb, whose bride is the multitude of those who have participated in the divine project, those whose names are written in the book of Life. But the bride of the Lamb is also described as the City where these people will live in the full Presence of God, at the heart of the ‘new heaven and the new earth’: “*And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea is no more. And I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: Behold, the dwelling of God is with mankind, and he will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them, and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death; neither sorrow, nor crying, nor pain will there be any more,*

because the former things have passed away” (21,1-4).

In one of his pastoral letters, the former Archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Martini, says: *“The Christian hope is at risk from being reduced in two ways: either to longings of a purely celestial kind, for the other life, or (...) to completely earthly expectations (the Kingdom of God is already here in its fullness!) as in some proposals of political theology. In practice, it is difficult to avoid one or other of these two extremes, because we are limited and it is difficult/or us to comprehend the entire human horizon in one go. We have to adjust our thoughts and our language continually in order to grasp the unity which combines earthly hopes - of which the Bible often speaks - with those which are invisible and definitive, and give flavour to all the rest” (Sto alla porta, 1992-1994, n. 18).*

I wanted to read you this observation for two reasons: firstly because it precisely describes the two forms of misunderstanding that we have come across with respect to ‘the new heaven and the new earth’; secondly because I would like to indicate how the final vision of the Apocalypse can help us to do what the Cardinal proposes, namely ‘to adjust our thoughts and our language in order to grasp the unity which combines earthly hopes with those which are invisible and definitive...’.

Let us begin with the view that the Kingdom of God is already fully present, and that we are now living in the state of perfection which is called ‘the new heaven and the new earth’. We have only just noted, however, that life in ‘the new heaven and the new earth’ is characterized by the absence of every form of suffering and distress. So a brief look around at the suffering in the present state of the world should make us sure that we have not yet arrived at the full realization of the Kingdom of God. The New Jerusalem has not yet been established on earth, but its ‘descent’ from heaven remains our firm hope for the future.

The second misunderstanding is more serious because it nourishes an irresponsible attitude towards the environmental conditions in which we live. It is the view that at the consummation of all things life will exist in a purely spiritual or heavenly form, and that life on earth does not have a future because this planet will be totally destroyed in the upheavals at the end of time.

It is possible that this misunderstanding originates from an ancient Alexandrian version of a particular passage in the second Letter of St. Peter; this version is still used as the source of some important modern translations and reads as follows: *“But the Day of the Lord will come as a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up” (2Pet 3,10).*

There is no need to point out the affinity between this statement and the dualistic heresies, nor to explain how it contradicts the Gospel (e.g., *“Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth”*, Mt 5,5), because the text of the New Testament which is derived from the most reliable manuscripts (the ‘critical’ Text) offers a much more coherent version *“...and the earth and the*

works that are upon it will be uncovered”, which is consistent with the fact that the final Judgment takes place at the same time (2Pet 3,7).

Furthermore, in the same Letter of St. Peter, the future transformation of the present world is compared to the destruction of the ante-diluvial world by the flood (2Pet 3,6-7). We know, however, that the flood did not destroy the planet, but simply transformed it into the present heaven and earth. It is therefore implied that the transforming fire which is referred to in this passage, is not aimed at destroying the planet, but at purifying it in a similar way as did the water of the flood; with this function, it seems reasonable to identify this fire with the Holy Spirit.

We have already mentioned some passages of the Apocalypse which indicate that God does not wish the planet ‘earth’ to be destroyed; the confirmation that this planet shall not be destroyed at the end of time lies in the fact there are some features of the present life in the description of ‘the new heaven and the new earth’. There will be ‘nations’ which will need to be healed by the leaves of the Trees of Life (Rev 22,2) so that they can then walk in the light of the new Jerusalem (21,24). There will also be ‘rulers of the earth’ who will bring here the glory and the honour of these nations (21,24-26).

When in the text it is stated that the Holy City will not need the light of the sun or of the moon because her lamp is the Lamb and her light is the Glory of God (21,23; 22,5), we should not understand this to mean that there will be neither sun nor moon in ‘the new heaven and the new earth’, but that there will be a light which is even more essential for Life.

Life in ‘the new heaven and the new earth’ differs from the present way of life mainly as a result of the absence of every negative aspect: after the final Judgment there will not be any sea, synonymous with the waters and the abyss in the Apocalypse (21,1); there will be no more death, nor underworld (20,14; 21,4), nor the devil and his followers (20,10; 19,20; 14,9-11), nor Babylon (19,2-3), nor sorrow, nor crying, nor pain (21,4), nor darkness (22,5) nor any curse (22,3).

In conclusion, the new reality which is called ‘the new heaven and the new earth’ does not by any means imply the annihilation of life on this planet, but rather its total transformation at the final Judgment, following the confrontation of every soul that has ever lived on the earth with the One sitting on the throne (20,11). The consequence of this union between the Creator and his creatures is a new Creation (21,5), new because every trace of the old way of life is obliterated. Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord says: *“Behold, I am about to create a new heaven and a new earth: the things of the past shall not be remembered, they will never again come to mind”* (Is 65,17).

Conclusions

At the beginning, I said that the aim of following the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’ was to discover where we are now in the sequence of events prophesied in this part of the Apocalypse, starting from the Ascension of Christ and finishing with the fulfilment of the Mystery of God at the end of time.

Whilst the interpretation that we have presented up to this point has been based on the objective findings of our comparison with the liturgy of the former Temple, now our work necessarily becomes more subjective because it involves the interpretation of the signs of the times in which we are living. Let us continue, then, in this final phase of interpretation, realizing that opinions may differ according to how these signs are interpreted.

We know that the first four seals have been broken, by the fact that the effects of the four horsemen are clearly evident: the Gospel has gone out into all the world (the white horse); violence and murder are widespread (the red horse); social injustice, misery and oppression have reached an intolerable level (the black horse); many people die because of wars, hunger and disease (the pale green horse). Since the breaking of the fifth seal does not have visible effects on the earth, it is not easy to determine whether or not it has yet occurred. Only the breaking of the next seal indicates that it has, in fact, been broken.

The vision of the catastrophe that follows the breaking of the sixth seal is very curious because, as we have said, it is the vision of an end which appears to leave no survivors. However, in the following visions we saw that this catastrophe, although not cancelled, takes place in such a way as to ensure that there will be those who survive and those who are saved. This curious situation recalls a fearsome aspect of our recent history - the nuclear holocaust. Even if everyone could have hidden in underground shelters, or bunkers, it was not probable that anyone could have survived the consequences of a nuclear war, the so-called 'nuclear winter'. With the sun darkened, the moon having the colour of blood, and all human life exiled underground, who could have survived? Thanks to God the end will not be so sudden or severe because we have been given a little more time to reconcile ourselves with God (cf. The Message of Pope John Paul II to the United Nations Assembly, 5th October 1995, n. 16).

We come then to the breaking of the seventh seal, and to the blowing of the seven trumpets. Already in our environment we can see damage of the same kind as that announced by the first four trumpets: the damage to the earth and the vegetation caused by acid rain and erosion (the first trumpet); the damage to the sea and its creatures caused by oil pollution (the second trumpet); the damage to the rivers caused by industrial accidents and waste (the third trumpet); the damage to the atmosphere caused by gaseous emissions and atmospheric pollution (the fourth trumpet). Nevertheless, even though we can see damage of the same kind as that which is described in the Apocalypse, we can not see yet all the effects which are described, nor the full degree of damage which has been prophesied (a third of the elements affected).

For this reason we can be sure that the first four trumpets have not yet been sounded, and can therefore conclude that we are presently between the breaking of the seventh seal and the sound of the first trumpet – a time of silence in heaven and of prayer for all the faithful.

THIRD LECTURE

The third part – the interruptions in the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’

Now we must examine those passages which interrupt the continuity of the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’, that is to say the chronological sequence of events prophesied in the Apocalypse, which proceeds from the Ascension of Christ and leads up to the fulfilment of the Mystery of God at the end of time.

We have seen that the vision of the opening of the heavenly Sanctuary at the end of chapter 11 (Rev 11,19) is taken up again in chapter 15, where it says: “*And after this I looked, and the Sanctuary of the Tent of Witness in heaven was opened...*” (15,5). Given that these two passages refer to the same unique event, that of the opening of the Sanctuary in heaven, it is possible to link these two passages together and skip the piece in the middle, as we did in the last lecture when we were following the outline of the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’. In fact, this way of reading the text is made possible only because there is a natural break in the continuity of the text at the beginning of chapter 12, where the largest of the interruptions that we have to examine begins.

At the moment, it is enough to note that in this interruption two periods of time are mentioned – 1,260 days (12,6) and 42 months (13,5) – which are mentioned for the first time at the beginning of chapter 11, and indicate an overlapping between this chapter and the largest interruption (12,1 – 15,5). We call this feature of the literary structure of the Apocalypse the ‘overlapping section’, and all it means is that two consecutive parts of the text run parallel with each other to give information which is different, but complementary, about the two short periods of time.

Firstly we should note that the ‘overlapping section’ refers to times and events which immediately precede the blowing of the seventh and last trumpet – the point, in fact, where the ‘overlapping section’ unites with the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’.

Another thing to note is that the ‘overlapping section’ occupies the most central part of the text of the Apocalypse, the part which was reserved for the most important information in ancient documents.

Finally, it is clear that the overlapping of two passages as in the ‘overlapping section’, allows the transmission of a much larger amount of information than in only one passage, even though in a less obvious way.

From these observations, it follows that the ‘overlapping section’ contains an eschatological prophecy which presents itself as the central message of the Apocalypse. In the following discourse, we hope to show you also how all the interruptions in the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’ refer, in one way or another, to the contents of the ‘overlapping section’.

The prophecy of the 'overlapping section'

We would like to start with chapter 10, because this chapter introduces us to the special role of the prophecy in the 'overlapping section'.

After being taken up into heaven 'in spirit', St. John found himself again on the earth and saw a mighty angel coming down, holding a little open scroll in his hand. The angel swore that there will be no more time to repent after the sound of the seventh trumpet, because in those days the mysterious plan of God will be fulfilled. Then St. John was asked to take the little scroll from the hand of the angel and eat it, and so prepare himself to "prophesy again about many peoples, nations and kings" (10,11). The little scroll was sweet in his mouth, but bitter in his stomach.

There are many allusions to the Old Testament in this vision, which help us to interpret it. The mighty angel had a rainbow around his head, which recalls the eternal sign that God gave Noah to indicate that he would never again destroy every living creature (Gen 9,12-16), neither by means of a flood, nor - we suppose - by means of any other catastrophe. Around the head of the angel who is announcing the imminent fulfilment of the Mystery of God at the end of time, this rainbow is a very reassuring sign that the life on this planet will continue.

Other aspects of the vision remind us of the encounter between Moses and the angel of the Lord on Mount Sinai, which was accompanied by cloud and smoke, fire and thunder (Exod 19,16-21): similarly the angel who appeared to St. John was wrapped in a cloud, his legs were like columns of fire, and at the same time the voice of the seven thunders resounded. Furthermore, the little open scroll corresponds in some way to the Word of God given to Moses under the form of the Law.

The most obvious reference to the Old Testament, however, is to the prophetic vocation of Ezekiel, who was given a scroll to eat, on which were written 'laments and cries and woes' (Ezek 2,8 - 3,3). That scroll was as sweet as honey, but left him 'bitter in the centre of his soul' (Ezek 3,14).

In an analogous way, St. John was prepared to 'prophesy again'. Even though everything that he had written up to this point was prophecy, it appears that the prophecy which arises from the assimilation of the little scroll has a special role. To find out what this role may be, it is important to know the significance of the little scroll.

When the angel was sent to St. John with the little open scroll, we know that the Lamb had just broken the last of the seven seals of the scroll which he had taken from the right hand of God, and was therefore able to open it. The fact that the little scroll was also open suggests that there is a relation between the two scrolls.

In the introductory vision of the Lord's angel walking among the 7 lampstands, holding 7 stars in his right hand, St. John was told that the stars represent angels in heaven. By analogy, we suggest that the little open scroll in the left hand of the angel described in chapter 10 represents the contents of the

scroll which the Lamb had just opened in heaven, in a form which could be assimilated by St. John on earth. As we have already seen, this scroll is identified in the text with the scroll of Life (Rev 13,8; 21,27), in which is written everything that God has prepared for the future of mankind.

Furthermore, we note that the first two verses of the Apocalypse have a specific reference to the angel with the little open scroll which was given to St. John to renew his prophetic vocation. In these two verses we read: “*The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to him to show his servants what must soon take place, and which he made known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bears witness to the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus Christ, to the extent of all that he saw*” (1,1-2). Understood as a summary of the vision described in chapter 10, this passage allows us to identify the little open scroll as the ‘Revelation of Jesus Christ’, communicated by his angel to St. John who recorded it in the book of the Apocalypse. The reference to the main aim of the book, “to show his servants what must soon take place” (1, 1), prepares us to confront its most central and important part, the part in which ‘the things which must soon take place’ are revealed. Then begins the ‘overlapping section’ which is the main subject of this lecture.

After St. John was asked to ‘prophesy again’, we suppose he was given a new prophecy to write. The text, however, states that he was given a “reed similar to a rod”, and was asked to “measure the Sanctuary of God, the altar and those worshipping there” (11,1-2). Just here, at the start of the ‘overlapping section’, the language changes and now refers to the construction of the new Temple of God. The ‘reed similar to a rod’ is therefore a way of describing the prophecy given to St. John in order to ‘prophesy again’; the act of measuring signifies the act of witnessing this prophecy; and ‘the Sanctuary of God, the altar and those worshipping there’ refer to the main components of the new Temple which is being built.

In the metaphorical context of this instruction, however, this Temple is not a building made of stones and concrete, but as in other parts of the New Testament (e.g., Eph 2,19-22; 1 Pet 2,4-10; Heb 12,22-24; Rev 3,12), the new Temple of God is one which is made of the people from every age and place whom God has reconciled to himself by means of Jesus Christ, and is called the ‘Universal Church’ (cf. Conc. Vat. II, *Lumen Gentium* 4:13).

In summary, St. John was asked to witness the prophecy that was given to him, in order that this could serve as a measure, or rule-of-faith (a ‘canon’ in the authentic sense of the word), in the edification and perfecting of the Church.

Now, with the purpose of understanding its implications, let us examine in detail the instruction given to St. John: “*Get up and measure the Sanctuary of God and the altar and those who are worshipping in it. And reject the court which is outside the Sanctuary and do not measure it, because it was given to the nations and they will trample the Holy City for forty-two months. And I will give to my two witnesses and they will prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days, dressed in sackcloth*” (Rev 11,1-3).

The former Temple consisted of an inner part which only the people of Israel could enter, and an outer part – a large court – which also people from the pagan nations could enter. Remembering that the new Temple represents the Christian people, we interpret the inner part which is to be measured, as the faithful Christians who come to be edified and perfected by the witnessing of the prophecy given to St. John.

In contrast, the outer part of the new Temple is to be rejected, because it was given to the nations which will also trample the Holy City for 42 months. In the biblical context, the word ‘nations’ recalls the Hebrew word ‘*goyim*’ which signifies people who are idolatrous and immoral, and the Holy City always refers to historical Jerusalem. We therefore interpret the outer part of the new Temple as nominal Christians who allow themselves to be separated from the Faith, and become like the people who are idolatrous and immoral.

In metaphorical language, therefore, the instruction indicates that the witnessing of the prophecy given to St. John causes a disassociation between those Christians who receive it as a measure, or rule-of-faith, which leads to their perfection, and those Christians who love more the values of the world and so separate themselves from the Faith. The instruction alludes to a great apostasy from the Christian Faith, following which Jerusalem falls into the hands of idolatrous and immoral people for 42 months, and so becomes a city of the same character.

At this point we find references to the two specific periods of time that link the two parts of the ‘overlapping section’ and impose a very precise temporal structure to this section. Before examining this structure, however, we must first see what happens in these two periods.

The period of 1,260 days is characterized by the public ministry of two witnesses or prophets of the Lord. In fact, since this is the first event described in the prophecy given to St. John in order to measure the new Temple of God, it is clear that the ministry of the two witnesses not only ‘actualizes’ the prophecy but, by bearing witness to it, also brings to fulfilment the instruction given to St. John.

Like Jonah, the two witnesses are a sign of the need to repent (cf. Lk 11,29-32); like Moses and Elijah they bring plagues. In order that this feature of the text does not scandalize the faithful, we will try to explain why the two witnesses have the power to bring plagues.

In the first place, the text does not say that all the witnesses of the Lord will have the power to bring plagues, but only these two. We believe, in fact, that during the prophetic ministry of the two witnesses the miracles of compassion which have always accompanied the mission of the Church will flourish.

In second place, the powers given to the two witnesses are very similar to those given to Moses and Elijah, and strongly recall the situations in which these two prophets of the Old Testament were involved. Moses and Elijah brought plagues in order to demonstrate the power of God and communicate his will to people and to societies that did not want either to believe or to listen. We find

the same type of situation in a society like ours, in which the people who refuse the Gospel are no less hard than the adversaries of Moses and Elijah, and for this reason they need a demonstration of the same severity in order to recall them to repentance. At this point, I always remember a saying of the Blessed P. Pio: *“For those who need a purgative, a little sweet is of no use”*. The severity of the prophetic ministry of the two witnesses is therefore a sign of the gravity and urgency of their call to repentance. The precise context which determines the gravity and urgency of their mission is the imminent manifestation of the ‘beast’, about whom we will speak shortly.

The mission of the two witnesses takes them to prophesy in the city ‘where their Lord was crucified’, and there in Jerusalem they give their witness to the Jews who, not believing in Jesus or in John the Baptist, are still awaiting their ‘Messiah’ and his forerunner. In fact, since the Messiah that they are waiting for should be like Moses, and his forerunner like Elijah, we can infer that the severe powers given to the two witnesses have the specific purpose of recalling the Jewish people to the Lord.

At the end of the period of 1,260 days, the two witnesses are put to death in Jerusalem by the ‘beast which comes up from the abyss’: **Rev 11,7-10.**

It is clear that this ‘beast’ is a confirmed enemy of the Faith witnessed by the two prophets, and we propose that he makes a scene of their death in an attempt to discredit not only the Apocalypse, which asserts that they will resurrect, but also the Christian Faith in the Resurrection of Jesus to which their resurrection is a witness. Since those who do not believe in the Resurrection maintain that the disciples removed the body of Jesus from the tomb after three days (Matt 28,11-15), the ‘beast’ leaves the corpses of the two witnesses, under guard, in the sight of the public for three and a half days, half a day more in order to be sure that they do not resurrect: **Rev 11,11-13.**

Their resurrection witnesses to the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ and helps to bring about the conversion of many Jews, thus realizing St. Paul’s hope for the salvation of his people at the end of history: **Rom 11,25-26a.**

Despite all this, the ‘beast’ does not by any means return to the abyss. After having openly revealed his antichristian character, he dedicates himself to exercising his power in the world, as described in chapters 13 and 17 of the Apocalypse. However, before considering this information on the ‘beast’ and his reign, we ought to say that in the language of the Apocalypse the ‘abyss’, the ‘sea’ and the ‘waters’ are all synonymous terms, whose meaning is explained to St. John by an angel as follows: *“the waters which you saw...are races and crowds and nations and tongues”* (Rev 17,15). For St. Augustine also, the abyss represents *“the incalculable number of the irreligious, because their heart is an abyss of wickedness against the Church of God”* (*The City of God*, 20,7.3).

At present concealed under the surface of the waters of the abyss, the ‘beast’ arises from this human sea and reveals himself when he puts the two witnesses to death. At this point, and not before, it will be possible to identify the ‘beast’ with certainty, by means of the details described in the Apocalypse.

The beast is described as a monster which embodies the power of the devil and is formed from parts of all four of the ‘beasts’ revealed in a vision to the prophet Daniel (Dan 7,2-8). Just as these represented four successive powers or kingdoms in the ancient world, so the ‘beast’ described in the Apocalypse represents a power in the contemporary world which reflects elements of all these ancient kingdoms.

The full manifestation of this power is identified in a special way with the last of its seven heads, which represent seven heads of state. After being mortally wounded (Rev 13,3), this leader survives, allies himself with ten other leaders (represented by the ten horns of the beast) and becomes a leader of international fame; it is in this role that he is called the ‘eighth’ head (17,11). The following passage indicates that there is an invincible military force under his command: *“And all the earth followed the beast with wonder, and they worshipped the dragon because he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshipped the beast saying: Who is like the beast and who can make war with him?”* (13,3-4).

We are struck not only by the power of this leader but also by his immense popularity, and by the extent to which he is acknowledged and adored by people of the world. In fact, the exclamation ‘Who is like the beast’, imitates the way in which God is praised in the Psalms (Ps 113,5; 89,7.9; 86,8; 35,10; Exod 15,11). However, in contrast to the worship of God, the adoration of this leader is not totally spontaneous, but is wickedly promoted by a second ‘beast’, a man called the ‘false prophet’ in other parts of the text (Rev 19,20; 20,10).

With a combination of deceit and coercion, this false prophet manages to bring many people to regard the ‘leader’ as God. Those who do not worship the speaking image of this leader (these days a televised image comes to mind) are liable to the death penalty; those who refuse to identify themselves with him by receiving his mark, are prohibited from buying and selling (13,13-17).

With these details of the kingdom of the beast we should be able to recognize its pseudo-messianic character, and so identify the ‘eighth head’ of the beast as the false messiah known as the ‘Antichrist’ in the Christian tradition: *“And all the inhabitants of the earth will worship him, everyone whose name is not written in the scroll of Life from the foundation of the world, of the Lamb that was slain”* (13,8).

What will happen, then, to those who refuse to worship the ‘beast’ because their names are written in the scroll of Life, which belongs to the Lamb that was slain? As the ripe grain at the time of the harvest, these are harvested by the One who is coming on the clouds (14,14-16) and prepare themselves to be received into the heavenly Tent after passing through a great tribulation: during the brief reign of the ‘beast’, they are persecuted, killed and “numbered among the wicked” like their Lord (cf. Luke 22,37), in what the Catechism calls *“the final Easter when the Church will follow its Lord in his death and Resurrection”* (C.C.C. 677). At the end of this great tribulation, St. John saw an immense multitude of martyrs in the heavenly Sanctuary celebrating the

salvation of God in a way which recalls the ancient Hebrew feast of Tabernacles, a feast which takes place after the produce of the threshing floor and the wine press has been gathered in (Exod 23,16; Deut 16,13). Notice in passing how the allusion to the feast of Tabernacles indicates an analogy between the great tribulation and the threshing of the grain, and is consistent with the identification of the martyrs with the grain itself.

This vision of celebration in chapter 7 of the Apocalypse (Rev 7,9-17) is related to the vision of the ‘conquerors of the beast’, seen at the opening of the heavenly Sanctuary and described in chapter 15: “*And I saw what was like a glassy sea mixed with fire and those who had conquered the beast and his image and the number of his name, standing on the glassy sea holding harps of God. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb...*” (Rev 15,2-3).

You may remember that at the culmination of the liturgy in the ancient Temple at Jerusalem, the offerings were thrown into the fire on the altar of holocausts and so ‘presented’ before God. In the heavenly liturgy described in the Apocalypse, however, the situation is reversed and the fire of heaven is thrown on to the earth in order to kindle the offerings (8,5). The end-result of this action is what we see in this vision: the martyrs standing before the throne of God on the glassy sea mixed with fire, like the offerings of the ancient liturgy ‘presented before God’ on the altar of holocausts.

We are therefore at the culmination of the heavenly liturgy, the moment when, apart from the multitude of martyrs before the throne, St. John sees the opening of the heavenly Sanctuary, the consignment of the libation bowls full of the anger of God, and the filling of the Sanctuary with the Glory and the Power of the Lord. The significance of this last sign can be inferred from two important events in the history of the ancient cult of Israel; Moses had just finished the Tent which he was asked to build, when the Lord consecrated it (Exod 29,43-45) in a very similar way: **Exod 40,34-35**.

The same sign appeared also at the completion of the Temple built by King Solomon (1Kgs 8,10-13).

In the context of the heavenly liturgy, therefore, this sign indicates the completion and consecration of the new Temple of God, in whose construction St. John has been participating with the prophecy given to him as a measuring-rod. Since the new Temple is in fact the Church, this sign indicates the moment when our Church will have reached her perfection, and will be celebrating her total consecration to God at the end of time.

At the same time as this celebration is taking place in heaven, the outpouring of the bowls full of the anger of God brings the reign of the ‘beast’ to an end, but before speaking of this I would like to return to this reign and read from the text how the ‘beast’ and his allies do something which is actually willed by God: “*And the ten horns that you saw and the beast, these will hate the prostitute and will leave her desolate and naked, and will eat her flesh and will consume her with fire, for God put it into their hearts to serve his purpose*”

and to be of one mind, and to give their kingdom to the beast until the words of God shall be fulfilled” (Rev 17,15-18).

Further on in the text (18,8) we read that God himself had condemned the prostitute, Babylon, and had ordered her destruction because her sins had reached heaven. First among these sins is her unbridled desire for riches and luxury, and it is this sin which unites her with the leaders and magnates of the earth. Owing to her enormous influence in society, all mankind follow her in her desire for riches and luxury, and so it is her fault that the whole earth becomes corrupted in this way. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is a vast and joyful celebration in heaven following the destruction of this great prostitute (18,20; 19,1-3).

The kingdom of the beast is brought to an end by means of the plagues caused by the outpouring of the bowls filled with the anger of God, in the hour of his judgment. Those who identified themselves with the ‘beast’ by worshipping his image or accepting the mark of his name, will experience a terrible test at this time, which we mentioned in the last talk. The text describes this test, saying that these people will drink *“the wine of the passion of God, poured without being diluted into the cup of his anger”* (14,10). We can trace the origin of this wine to the eschatological grape-harvest of the earth (14,17-19) and to the treading of the grape by the Word of God (19,15). When the wicked are crushed by the truth of the Word of God, the anger they generate reaches heaven and is then returned to the earth in the hour of God’s judgment, as the wine of his anger poured out of the seven bowls of libation (chs. 15-16). As a result, the wicked follow the ‘beast’ in blaspheming God (13,5-6; 16,9-11), exposing themselves in this way to eternal condemnation (14,10-11).

At this point, I would like to remind you of a prophecy of St. Paul, in which the coming of the ‘beast’, whom St. Paul calls the ‘man of iniquity’, is explained as a judgment for those who have not received the love of the truth in order to be saved. Reading this passage of St. Paul, we will also be able to note the points of contact between his prophecy and that of the Apocalypse: **2Thess 2,3-11.**

Returning to the Apocalypse, we can read of the circumstances in which the Lord Jesus will destroy the ‘man of iniquity’ with the breath of his mouth: the series of plagues caused by the outpouring of the seven bowls leads finally to the Battle of the Great Day of God, in a place called ‘Harmagedon’ – from two Hebrew words that mean ‘mountain of Megiddo’ (Rev 16,16). Megiddo refers to the great plain in Northern Israel, famous as a battlefield in Old Testament times, and the mountain which dominates this plain is Mount Carmel. Just here, in the same place as the Lord overcame false religion in the days of Elijah (1Kgs 18,20-40), the Lord manifests himself in order to defeat the beast, the false prophet and all the armies gathered by them in this place (Rev 19,11-21).

According to the text, the reign of the beast lasts only 42 months (13,5), the same period in fact in which Jerusalem is trodden by the ‘nations’ (11,2). In this period Jerusalem is no longer referred to as the Holy City, but like Babylon

it is known as the Great City; its spiritual name is not 'Zion', but 'Sodom and Egypt' (11,8). We have already seen that it is here in Jerusalem that the 'beast' starts his international reign with the killing of the two witnesses of the Lord (11,7).

The fact that the 'beast' arises from the abyss at the end of the period of 1,260 days, during which the two witnesses are active, and then begins his reign of 42 months, indicates the temporal structure of the prophecy in the 'overlapping section': the two periods of time are consecutive, first the period of 1,260 days then that of 42 months, and represent a total period of 7 years proceeding the sound of the seventh trumpet at the end of time (11,15).

In the Old Testament, the prophet Daniel also prophesied a final period of 7 years in his prophecy of the 70 weeks (Dn 9,24-27). In this prophecy, a period of 70 weeks of years (i.e., 490 years) is described, which precede the end of time and in which the last week (i.e. 7 years) is characterized by the alliance between a tyrant and many people. The second half of this last week of years (i.e. the final three years and a half) is described by the prophet in various ways:

- 1) a half-week or 1,290 days (Dn 12,11) which begin with the erection of the 'abomination of desolation' - a term which refers to a false object of worship erected in a part of the ancient Temple;
- 2) 'a time, two times and half a time', when the saints of the Most High will be oppressed and persecuted by the tyrant, who is identified with the little horn of the fourth 'beast' seen by Daniel (Dn 7,23-25; 12,7).

The details of this prophecy help us to understand better the part of the Apocalypse in which we find an analogous period of time, with analogous events. In particular, the last half of the 7 years prophesied by Daniel and all its principal events correspond closely to the period of 42 months described in the Apocalypse. In the prophecy of Daniel, the tyrant identified with the little horn of the fourth beast and the abomination set up by him, correspond, in the prophecy of the Apocalypse, to the leader identified with the eighth head of the 'beast' and to the sophisticated image of himself through which he is worshipped.

So we find in the Apocalypse a representation of the last week of years prophesied in the Book of Daniel. This correspondence between the Apocalypse and the prophecy of Daniel constitutes a fundamental point of contact between the Apocalypse and the eschatological prophecies presented in the Synoptic Gospels, since these are also based on the same prophecy of Daniel. Given that they are all concerned with the same eschatological events, much of what we have said about the reign of the 'beast' in the Apocalypse, is described in other words in the 'eschatological discourse' reported in the Gospels of St. Mark and St. Matthew: **Matt 24,15-25**.

The reference to the period of 'a time, two times and half-a-time' in the prophecy of Daniel, brings us finally to a most important aspect of the prophecy of the Apocalypse which we have not yet examined; in chapter 12 we read:

“And the two wings of the great eagle were given to the woman to fly to the desert, to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half-a-time away from the face of the serpent” (Rev 12,14). We have just seen how this enigmatic period of three times and a half (i.e., three years and a half) corresponds precisely to the period of 42 months during which the beast is allowed to reign.

In chapter 12 it is also stated that: “the woman fled into the desert, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there they might nourish her for one thousand two hundred and sixty days” (12,6). This period, on the other hand, corresponds to the 1,260 days in which the two witnesses prophesy, which immediately precedes the period of 42 months. Interpreting both these statements together, it is implied that the woman flees to the desert and remains there for the entire final period of 7 years, which is composed of the two shorter, consecutive periods.

But who is this ‘woman’ who is described in chapter 12, and flees to the desert like the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt? This is one of the most mysterious parts in the whole of the Apocalypse, perhaps because it concerns a mystical phenomenon. We must go back and read from the beginning of chapter 12: *“And a great sign was seen in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun and the moon beneath her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars, and she is pregnant and cries out with the pains of labour and the distress of giving birth. And another sign was seen in heaven and behold, a great fiery-red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and with seven diadems on its heads, and his tail drags a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth. And she gave birth to a son, a male, who is to shepherd all the nations with a rod of iron. And her child was caught up to God and to his throne”* (12,1-5).

Once the male child who shepherds all the nations from the throne of God is identified with the Messiah (cf. Ps 2), it follows that the woman who gives birth to him represents the community from whom the Messiah was to come. It is a fact that this community is called ‘Zion’ in the Old Testament, but it is also true that ‘Zion’ is personified in a particular way by the Blessed Virgin Mary. The problem with the interpretation of this vision relates to the apparition of the two signs in heaven; what do they mean, who sees them and what happens next?

The signs summarize the entire mystery of Jesus Christ, representing it symbolically by the rapid passage from his birth to his Ascension into heaven, followed by the defeat of the devil. The remaining part of the vision describes what will happen after these signs are seen in heaven. The seeing of signs in heaven suggests a mystical experience with a visionary character, a kind of divine revelation. Those who see the first sign experience a revelation of Jesus Christ from the innermost part of their soul, just as in the vision the male child is born from the woman clothed with the sun. Those who see the sign and experience the revelation therefore come to identify themselves mystically with this woman, ‘Zion’, and like ‘Zion’ in the vision they flee to the desert for the period of 1,260 days and then for ‘a time, times and half a time’, which is to say

for the entire final period of 7 years.

We know that those who see the signs and identify themselves with 'Zion' in this mystical way form the group of 144,000 men, on account of the fact that later in the vision St. John sees these men on the mountain called by the same name: *"And I looked and behold, the Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand having his name and the Name of his Father written on their foreheads. And I heard a sound from heaven like the sound of many waters, and like the sound of loud thunder, and the sound which I heard was like harpists playing their harps. And they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders, and no one was able to learn the song except the hundred and forty-four thousand, those that were bought from the earth. These are they who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these are they who follow the Lamb wherever he may go. These were bought from among men, first-fruits to God and to the Lamb, and no lie was found in their mouth; they are immaculate"* (14,1-5).

It is not possible to interpret this vision fully without referring to the vision of the opening of the heavenly Sanctuary in chapter 15, in which the musicians who sing the new song are identified with the multitude of martyrs standing on the glassy sea mixed with fire, within the heavenly Sanctuary. Since the martyrs are all inside the heavenly Sanctuary, it is clear that this vision of Mt. Zion describes the proximity of the heavenly Sanctuary to the assembly of the 144,000 men, in such a way that together they represent the new Temple of God. Since the opening of the heavenly Sanctuary indicates the revelation of the throne and the Parousia of the Lord, we also know that this vision concerns the new Temple in its final form, just before its consecration with the smoke of the Glory and the Power of the Lord (15,8).

So the flight of the 144,000 men to the place prepared by God in the desert, for the last 7 years of history, is by no means an evasion of responsibility, but rather an essential part in the preparation of the new Temple, that is to say the Church, for her total consecration to God at the end of time.

We should not doubt the material existence of the 144,000 men, despite their uncommon and immaculate moral quality. We can be sure of this because the text states that they are the only ones who can *learn* the new song, and only those souls which are united to flesh and blood have the need and the faculty to learn. The preparation of the 144,000 men for their mission in the desert, after being shown the signs in heaven, is described in chapter 7 as another kind of mystical experience, one in which they are sealed on their foreheads with the seal of the living God (7,2-8). It is interesting to note, in fact, that the sealing of the 144,000 and the revelation granted to them, correspond respectively to the fifth and sixth 'mansions' described by St. Teresa of Avila in her book *'Interior Castle'*.

The precise location of the place called Mt. Zion, where the 144,000 assemble, is not stated openly in the text, but we have already noted that it coincides with the place in the desert which has been prepared by God for the 'woman'. From the text, all we know is that this mountain in the desert is not

in any way related to contemporary Jerusalem, because in those days Jerusalem is no longer spiritually called 'Zion', but 'Sodom and Egypt' (11,8).

Further on in the text we find another two references to the place where the 144,000 assemble. Since 'Zion' in the Old Testament is the City which God loves (Ps 87,1-3) we can identify the assembly of the 144,000 on Mt. Zion with the 'camp of the saints and the beloved City', which is surrounded by the hostile forces of 'Gog and Magog' in the last phase of the final Battle (Rev 20,7-10). As confirmation of the fact that the Lord fights in favour of the 144,000, divine fire descends from heaven and defeats their enemies.

After the vision of the final Judgment, St. John was transported 'in spirit' on to a great and high mountain, from which he saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, descending from heaven (21,10). Given that, in the Old Testament, the great and high mountain refers to Mt. Zion (Is 2,2-3; Ezek 40,2), we can conclude that within sight of the mountain where the 144,000 have their camp, the Holy City will be established – the place where God will dwell among men.

Conclusions

The prophecy which we have just outlined speaks about two witnesses with similar powers to those of Moses and Elijah, and about a leader who rules a great part of the world, persecutes those who do not want to worship him and destroys a city called Babylon; it also speaks about a certain number of men who flee to the desert whilst these things are happening in the world, and remain there to establish the new Jerusalem on the earth. The life these days goes to extremes, but perhaps you find it difficult to believe that such things can really happen. We would therefore like to finish with the identification of a sign of our times which may help us to believe.

There has been a great deal of speculation about the identity of the 'beast', or Antichrist, and of his false prophet. In the text, however, there are clear indications that these two leaders are specifically linked to the land of Israel:

- 1) The 'beast' begins his reign after killing the two witnesses in Jerusalem (Rev 11,8), which becomes known as the 'Great City' instead of Babylon. As with Babylon (cf. Rev 17), this expression implies that Jerusalem develops an intimate relation with the 'beast'.
- 2) The false prophet performs great signs, and can even make fire fall from heaven on to the earth in front of men (13,13). Firstly, since this sign recalls the divine power given to the prophet Elijah (2Kgs 1,9-14; 1Kgs 18,30-40), the imitation of this sign by the false prophet suggests that he wishes to identify himself with Elijah. Secondly, in the history of the ancient sacrificial cult, this sign frequently appeared at the consecration of a new altar, indicating divine approval (cf. Lev 9,24; 1Chr 21,26; 2Chr 7,1). Its imitation by the false prophet therefore implies his participation in the reestablishment of the ancient cult, a development which would involve the reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and its consecration in this impressive but unauthentic way.
- 3) The reign of the 'beast' finishes at a battle which takes place around the

It is significant therefore that, in the land of Israel, up to this day, Orthodox Jews are still awaiting the appearance of two figures whom Christians identify with John the Baptist and Jesus Christ: they expect a prophet who fulfils the announcement of the return of Elijah (Mal 3,23), and also a powerful leader who fulfils the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. In fact, according to the norms of Judaism (the *'halacha'*), this leader should be a Jew who forces the enemies of his people to submit, reconstructs the Temple in its original place, and rectifies the nations of the world by eliminating the wicked from among them. The reign of the leader who tries to perform these duties literally, would indeed correspond closely to the reign of the 'beast' described in the Apocalypse.

Furthermore, it is expected that this Jewish leader will punish 'Edom', which is identified with Rome in the Jewish tradition, and we suppose that he has to do this in revenge for the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Such an action, however, would further identify this leader with the 'beast', since it is written in the Apocalypse that the 'beast' and his allies destroy a city called Babylon, which is indeed identified with Rome in the Christian tradition (1 Pet 5,13; Rev 17, 9).

However, the fact that Babylon is described in the Apocalypse as a prostitute (17,1.5) implies that this power, which has a kingdom over the rulers of the earth (17,18), should not be identified precisely with the City of Rome. In the language of the Old Testament, prostitution is a metaphor which refers to the idolatry of the people of Israel, representing it as the height of infidelity to their Covenant with God (Deut 31,16; Is 1,21; Jer 3,1-10.20; Ezek 16,13-34; 23,1-21; Hos 2,4-7). As a great prostitute, then, Babylon can not be identified with a secular or pagan power, such as that of imperial Rome, but rather with a religious power that has been unfaithful in its relationship to God, because of its idolatrous love of riches and luxury (cf. Matt 6,24).

There is even an indication in the text as to the specific religious character of this power: it is written that Babylon is "*drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus*" (Rev 17,6). Since the saints generally die a natural death, and are not killed for witnessing their faith like the martyrs, this statement does not mean that Babylon is guilty of shedding the blood of the saints and martyrs of Jesus, as alleged by so many biblical scholars. Neither is there any indication elsewhere in the text that Babylon persecutes or kills the people of God. To be 'drunk' with their blood implies that Babylon appropriates the glory and merit of the saints and martyrs, and exalts herself. This self-exaltation, or spiritual pride, causes her to act in an irresponsible and disordered way, like a woman who is drunk.

Moreover, knowing that the irresponsible and disordered way in which Babylon acts is described as 'prostitution', it is not difficult to recognize her state of 'drunkenness' as the necessary condition for her 'prostitution':

considering the merits of the saints and martyrs as her own (being 'drunk' with their blood), Babylon succeeds in satisfying her lust for riches and luxury (her passion for 'prostitution'). In a few words, Babylon 'glorifies herself and lives luxuriously' (Rev 18,7) by exploiting the merits of the saints and martyrs of Jesus. Allying herself in this way with the saints and the martyrs of Jesus, the religious power that is called Babylon in the Apocalypse can not be anything else but Christian.

Defined as a Christian power with 'a kingdom over the rulers of the earth' (Rev 17,18), and having its base in a city identified as Rome (Rev 17,9), it is difficult to escape the identification of Babylon with the administrative centre of the Catholic Church, or more specifically with the place that is presently called Vatican City.

In his letter about the preparations for the grand Jubilee in the year 2000, His Holiness Pope John Paul II writes: "*Whilst the second millennium of Christianity is coming to a close, it is right that the Church assumes responsibility for the sins of her children with greater awareness, remembering all those circumstances in which, during the course of history, they have distanced themselves from the Spirit of Christ and from his Gospel, offering to the world - instead of the testimony of a life inspired by the values of the Faith - the spectacle of ways of thinking and acting which were really forms of anti-testimony and of scandal*" (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 33).

We trust that the attitude proposed by His Holiness in this document will prepare us to accept the identification of Babylon with the City of the Vatican, which not only answers to the description of the prostitute presented in the Apocalypse but also continues to witness to the Church's love of riches and luxury during the course of history.

However, after confronting this disturbing theme, we should note with great relief that following the destruction of Babylon there is no mourning for the loss of human life, but only for the loss of trade and precious articles (Rev 18,9-20). Nobody dies during the destruction of Babylon since the Church, having repented from her sin, abandons the prostitute shortly before she is destroyed, at the moment in which the Lord says: "*Come out of her my people*" (Rev 18,4). It seems that all those who find themselves inside the prostitute in those days carry out this order of the Lord and leave, for the simple fact that all of them are his people.

It only remains to say that, right now, amongst the Jewish people a vigorous messianic movement is currently being conducted by several Orthodox organizations in Israel and in other parts of the world. The information which we have mentioned about the messianic expectation of the Orthodox Judaism is, in fact, supplied by the Lubavitch or Chabad organization (*The Days of Moshiach, the redemption and coming of Moshiach in Jewish sources*, Rabbi Menachem Brod, 1993). Its leaders have launched a campaign to prepare the Jewish people for the imminent coming of their 'Messiah' because they see anticipatory signs of this event in recent developments: the foundation of the State of Israel, the return of the Jews to their homeland - even from Russia, the changes in the

world towards global peace and the favour shown to the Jews in recent times.

For the Christians, however, the second coming of Jesus Christ does not by any means imply that he is going to reincarnate himself or be born again. For this reason, no leader on earth could be accepted as 'Messiah' by Christians who maintain their faith in Jesus. In fact, any leader who claims to be the Messiah of God, is not only false, but is the incarnation of that antichristian spirit which denies that Jesus is the Messiah.

The Apocalypse warns us to use intelligence in order to identify this pseudo-messianic reign (Rev 13,18) and encourages us not to resist it with violence or with hate, but with our faith in Jesus Christ, even though it brings great tribulation to Christians and to all those who refuse to worship the image of the 'beast', or receive the mark of his name. "*Here is the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and Faith in Jesus*" (14,12).