

**CHRISTIAN RESISTANCE AND HOPE
IN AN UNJUST WORLD**
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE APOCALYPSE

Xavier Alegre, s.j.

In order to be able to follow this booklet closely and get the most benefit from it, we recommend that readers have at hand a text of the book of the Apocalypse while reading this, since for reasons of space we will not be able to cite all the texts referred to. Wherever there is a citation with no book specified, it is to be understood that it refers to the Apocalypse; otherwise there will be.

¿O Sovereign Lord, holy and true,
how long before you will judge and avenge
our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?
(Ap 6,10)

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1. INTRODUCTION: SOME GUIDELINES FOR READING

The Apocalypse (Ap) is a book with a bad reputation. It inspires fear in many who believe that it is talking about the end of the world and about terrible threats that are about to come upon us because we are nearing the end of history. Statements in the book such as «the time is near» (1,3) give substance to this feeling. Nevertheless, the Apocalypse cannot be read apart from the social and historical context that produced this particular kind of literature, which is called apocalyptic and which flourishes especially in moments of crisis.

1.1. Prophetic language and apocalyptic language

In fact, the end of the world is mentioned only in the last two of the seven visions found at the end of the book. The sixth vision speaks of the *final judgment*, the time when the meaning of history is disclosed and when God reveals his judgment on the world and destroys Evil once and for all (20,11-15). The seventh and final vision tells of the *new creation*, in which God will reign supreme and where there will be no weeping or sorrow or pain because God will make all things new and death will be decisively defeated (21,1-22,5; see 1Co 15,20-28).

The rest of the book of the Apocalypse, in contrast, speaks of the here and now of the Christian churches to which John is addressing his prophetic writing (1,3; 22,7.10.18.19). In this sense, the author is not seeking to reveal what the end of the world will be like; rather, he wishes to show the people of God (the churches) how to interpret the signs of the times so as to be able to discern the best way to act in order to remain faithful to their calling.

The prophets speak of the future only to give people a warning about the evils that will inexorably befall those who refuse to hear God's word and be converted; their prophecies are based on

their own experience of faith and their profound re-reading of the Old Testament. A fine example of this is to be found in the prophet Jonah. The evils announced by the prophet (within 40 days the city of Nineveh will be destroyed!) do not come about, simply because the king and the people are converted. In contrast, when the Egyptian pharaoh ignores the prophecy of Moses, his sin brings forth a punishment in the form of plagues (Ex 7-10).

In the book of the Apocalypse, John draws on his biblical view of history to warn the churches about what will ultimately happen to the Roman empire, which is persecuting the church. Since John believes that the empire will never be converted, he announces that it will end up being destroyed (9,20; 16,11; 17; 18), and he was correct in his prediction. In our own day we can find a similar prophetic role being played by those ecologists who warn us about the evils which will come upon humankind in the future, if we do not change our style of life. Interpreted literally, the images in the Apocalypse could give the impression that they are describing what will happen at the end of the world. They are images taken from the Hebrew prophets and are meant to represent symbolically the radical change that will be brought about when God irrupts dramatically into the world to inaugurate the final stage of its history. Christianity holds that this event happened already, in the resurrection of Jesus; with that victory of death, the decisive time of salvation began. In the book of Acts, after the Spirit descends upon the disciples of

Jesus on Pentecost, the apostle Peter understands this event in terms of a radical change in history, which he describes using images that appear to characterize the end of the world:

When the last days come, I will give my Spirit to everyone. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young men will see visions, and your old men will have dreams. In those days I will give my Spirit to my servants, both men and women, and they will prophesy. I will work miracles in the sky above and wonders on the earth below. There will be blood and fire and clouds of smoke. The sun will turn dark, and the moon will be as red as blood before the great and wonderful day of the Lord appears. Then the Lord will save everyone who asks for his help. (Acts 2,17-21, citing Joel 3,1-5)

Obviously, what happened on Pentecost day did not take the form of the wonders described in this scriptural text. What Luke is doing here is using the symbolic language of the prophet Joel to spell out the definitive, apocalyptic dimensions of the birth of the Church. Since this world of ours is limited, the apocalyptic writer uses symbolic images which speak of the destruction of the world, but they are just that, images aiming to show how all the misfortunes being borne now by humankind are only the birth-pangs of a new world, a world that at the end of history will be a consoling reality:

When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines; this is but the beginning of the birth-pangs [of the new world] (Mk 13,7-8).

Nevertheless, Christian tradition holds that persons truly inspired by God cannot give exact predictions about the events that will precede the end of the world, nor can they say when exactly the end will come. This is something that God reveals to no one, just as the Risen Christ did not want to reveal it to his Apostles (Acts 1,6-8). What is more, according to Jesus, if anyone claims to know when the end is coming and announces it as something already present, then that person is a false prophet:

Take heed that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he' and 'The time is at hand!'. Do not go after them. (Lk 21,8)

It is true that the Apocalypse mentions concrete dates that can give the impression that the author knows how long the things announced will last. However, the numbers of the Apocalypse (as in apocalyptic literature generally) always have some symbolic dimension.

Not only are Christians generally ignorant about the book's contents, but they are confused by the great number of strange symbols that seem aimed at turning it into a sort of coded message.

Some of these symbols are difficult for modern readers to understand, especially if they are not familiar with the Old Testament. For that reason the Apocalypse is a book that is not eagerly read by most people, and rarely is it the subject of preaching in the liturgical celebrations of the mainstream Christian churches. At the same time, it is often manipulated by small sectarian groups that take advantage of their listeners' ignorance of the Bible in order to frighten and deceive them with their simplistic and eccentric interpretations.

1.2. The importance of the Old Testament

The frequent references to the Old Testament made it possible for apocalyptic writers to communicate a theological message during times of persecution, since the imperial officials were ignorant of biblical language. There are three Old Testament books that were especially used in apocalyptic literature:

- 1) Exodus, which speaks of the oppression of the people of Israel in the Egyptian empire and of how God intervened to free them.
- 2) Ezekiel, the prophet who accompanied the people of Israel into exile in Babylon: his prophecy announces the fall of Babylon and the return of Israel to the promised land.
- 3) Daniel, whose prophecy announces the fall of the Seleucid empire that is oppressing Israel.

One dominant idea appears in all three of these books: the God in whom Israel and the Church believe is a God

who is faithful to the promises he made when he established the Covenant, first with Israel (Ex 19-24) and then with the Church (1Co 11,23-27; Ap 1,6). Moreover, he is a liberating God, for in the end he will not allow an unjust empire (and every empire is unjust, though it refuses to admit it) to triumph over the poor and the oppressed. Every empire ends up being destroyed, because it pays no heed to the meaning and the consequences of the plagues brought on by its unjust actions and its service of the idols of wealth and power. The plagues suffered by empire, including the present ones, are the consequence of their assaults on the natural world and their lust for power and wealth. These have led to such tragedies as the war in Iraq and the massacres in Africa; they have contributed to violence against women and children, to the hunger and malnutrition of more than a billion people in today's world, and countless other human miseries. In principle the plagues are meant to be a call to conversion (9,20f; 16,9.11.21), but they frequently are not effective.

1.3. The social and historical context

The first key for understanding a book of apocalyptic literature is knowing the social and historical context in which it was born and flourished. When the Apocalypse was written, the people of God (Israel first and then the Church) was experiencing a situation of persecution. The persecution came about when the empire of the day became aware that the Jewish and the Christian religions, if

well understood, were positively dangerous to the imperial status quo because of their strong commitment to justice and their fearless defense of the poor and the oppressed. For this reason, the people of Israel, for the first time in their history, were persecuted not just for political or economic reasons, but for specifically religious reasons. Later on, the Christian churches experienced the same sort of persecution, because they kept faith with the liberating project of Jesus (Mk 13, 9-13).

The empire that first woke up to the dangerous nature of biblical religion was that of the Seleucids, heirs of Alexander the Great who had their center of power in Syria. Around the year 170 BCE, the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes persecuted the Judeans simply for their determination to stay true to their Jewish faith. The persecution provoked three types of reactions among the Judeans:

- 1) Some were ready to collaborate with the imperial lords in order to benefit from their good favor. Such collaboration always happens during any domination or dictatorship.
- 2) Others had recourse to arms and guerrilla warfare to oppose the Seleucid empire and win freedom from it. We find this kind of resistance well documented in the biblical books of the Maccabees, which recount the victorious struggle that the Maccabee brothers led against the Syrians.
- 3) Still others, the "apocalyptic," responded to the persecution with literature aimed at encouraging and

fortifying the faithful Judeans. The book of Daniel is a good example of how apocalyptic literature seeks to unmask the duplicity of imperial oppressors and motivate the subject people to oppose the empire on the basis of their faith, even if their resistance leads to further persecution and a martyr's death. Such a struggle, waged not just with arms but with faith, is very threatening in the eyes of the empire. For this reason, apocalyptic literature, in order to avoid undue persecution, is written in coded language, so that it can be understood only by believers who are familiar with the images and symbols of the Old Testament.

1.4. Symbolic Language

This type of language has the advantage of helping the reader to realize how what it says is valid for all time. The apocalyptic vision of humanity and history tends to be on the pessimistic side; it knows that when one empire falls, another will rise in its place. Consequently, the faithful must never lower their guard against whatever new empire appears on the scene. Furthermore, as we have said already, symbolic language has the advantage of using biblical symbols unknown to the censors of the empire.

1.4.1. Images

The apocalyptic symbols often contain complicated, even baroque, images drawn from nature (animals and plants) or from art (e.g., statues), as can be

seen quite well in the book of Daniel. Such complex images should not surprise us, since the starting point for apocalyptic symbolism is the dream, which in the world of the Bible was understood to be a source of revelation from God (see Gn 37,5-10; Dn 7,1ff; Mt 1,18-23). The biblical dreams evolved into apocalyptic visions, which were often so overloaded with images that only an extremely wise person was able to interpret them, often only an "interpreting angel" (see Ap 17,7ff; Mk 16,1-8).

1.4.2. Numbers

The Apocalypse is a book full of symbolic numbers and periods of time. These help John to convey a message of hope to his people, but they do not mean that the prophet knows exactly when the events he announces are going to occur.

The number *three* symbolizes fullness and therefore also God. For that reason the prophet Isaiah, when he wishes to affirm the infinite holiness of God, proclaims: «Holy, holy, holy, Yahweh Sabaoth, all the earth is full of your glory» (Is 6,3; see also Ap 4,8). And when the gospel says that Peter denied Jesus three times, it means he denied him totally (Mk 14,66-72).

The number *four* symbolize the world, as in, for example, the four cardinal points of the compass. For this reason the combination of these two numbers by multiplication or by addition is significant: three multiplied by four is *twelve*, a number symbolizing the union between God and the world. It therefore an appropriate number for symbolizing

the Covenant which God makes with his people, so that Israel as the partner in the Old Covenant is represented by twelve patriarchs and the New Covenant by twelve apostles. On the other hand, the sum of three and four is *seven*, a number that can also symbolize the Covenant; for example, seven deacons were chosen by the Greek-speaking Christian community in Jerusalem to be leaders (Ac 6,1-6). But the number seven also symbolizes plenitude, and for that reason there are seven sacraments in the Catholic Church.

We can understand, then, that other numbers may well also have symbolic significance and should not be understood literally. It is stated in the Apocalypse, for example, that the pagans trampled on the Holy City for *forty-two months* (11,2), but that figure does not indicate an exact length of time; rather, forty-two months is the equivalent of three and a half years, which is half of seven. What the number forty-two means, then, is that the persecution will not last forever, as the old Spanish saying goes: «There is no evil which lasts a hundred years». The next verse (11,3) states that two prophets will be allowed to preach for *1.260 days*, but that means they that will prophesy only for a limited time, since 1.260 days is also the equivalent of three and a half years.

Keeping in mind, then, the symbolic significance of numbers, we should not be bothered by John's statement in Ap 7,1-8 that the number of the saved will be *144,000*. This number results from multiplying twelve by twelve by one thousand and therefore signifies simply that the number of the saved

will be very great. The proof that the passage should be interpreted this way is to be found immediately afterwards, where mention is made of the persons who already enjoy the fullness of life in heaven:

After this, I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, «Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!» (7,9-10).

Among all the symbolic numbers, one of the most popular –and also one of the most manipulated by certain groups– is *666*, a figure that is meant to help the “understanding” reader to decipher the identity of the Beast to which John is referring by this coded name:

This calls for wisdom: let him who has understanding reckon the number of the Beast, for it is a human number; its number is *666* (13,18).

The number refers to a man, and it is possible to know who it is if one possesses enough intelligence to solve the puzzle. The number results from a precise calculation referring to a person who was living at that time. For that reason, even though some sectarian groups like to say that the number refers to the Pope or the Vatican, there was nothing in those days nothing that could have made the author think of those things; at that time they had none of the charac-

teristics that the book of the Apocalypse attributes to the Beast. The real meaning of the number can be discovered when we realize that in biblical times they still did not use Arabic numerals. In the Old Testament numbers were indicated by letters of the Hebrew alphabet (just as the Romans used Roman letters taken from their alphabet). In Hebrew the Emperor Nero's name was written "NRON CSR" (= Neron Caesar). Those seven Hebrew letters, when converted into numerals and added together, yield the number 666 thus: N = 50; R = 200; O = 6; N = 50; C = 100; S = 60; R = 200. Since the sum of all these is 666, we should understand that by that number the author is indicating that the Beast is reincarnated in the Roman emperor of that time, who was Domitian. This was in accord with a very popular legend of the epoch, which held that Domitian was Nero come back to live.

1.4.3. Systematization

In apocalyptic literature, the symbolic numbers, the regularly repeating stages of history, and other motifs that recur repeatedly are attempts on the author's part to illustrate to the reader the fixed parameters of history. For history, even as it moves toward fullness, reveals at the same time certain constants in its different stages.

In the Apocalypse, the fixed parameters of history appear in the parallel features found in the second, third, and fourth of the five septenaries¹, that is, sevenfold symbol systems. A definite progression is seen, since these three central sets of symbols present the horror of the plagues as increasing

with time, and they depict their destructiveness as growing constantly greater (compare 6,8 with 8,7-12; 9,15), with everything culminating in the final judgment (Ap 20,11-15) and in the new heaven and new earth that await us at the end of history (Ap 21,1ff).

1.4.4. The Biblical Figures

In chapters 17 and 18 of the Apocalypse the author wants to denounce the Roman empire that is persecuting the Christian community, and he does so by calling it «the great Babylon, mother of harlots and the earth's abominations» (17,5). He employs the same images that Isaiah and Ezekiel used to identify the empires that oppressed ancient Israel, above all the empire of Babylon, which became a symbol of evil for the faithful.

Along the same line, the author dubs the empire the «Beast rising out of the sea» (Ap 13,1ff) and describes it by saying that «it was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's jaws» (13,2). By using these images, he is applying to the Roman empire the symbols that the book of Daniel (7,4-6) used to depict the Babylonian, Mede, and Persian empires, and thus emphasizing that the power of Rome is equivalent to that of all three of those empires together. The symbols used to describe the Beast show that the monster seeks to compete with the slaughtered Lamb by imitating him, but they also indicate that the Beast receives its power from the ancient dragon or serpent, the devil (compare 13,2 with 12,9 and the whole of chapter 12). The fact that the Beast has seven

heads (fullness!) helps the reader to identify the political reality of which the author is speaking, for in 17,9 John tells us that those heads symbolize «seven hills» (Rome was known in antiquity as the city of the seven hills) or «seven emperors», which are an allusion to Domitian (cf. 17,10-11).

Using such symbolism, not only does John communicate to readers the Good News that this unjust kingdom of Rome will fall (see 16,18, and notice the joy with which he sings of its fall in Ap 18), but he also warns his readers that said fall should not be the occasion for any lessening of vigilance and militancy on the part of Christians. For, as the recent history of Central America or Africa clearly shows, the monstrous dragon will be reborn over and over again in an unjust world, and this will happen as long as the final triumph of God is not fully realized (20,7-10). That triumph will be final only when the celestial Jerusalem descends to earth and God creates the new heaven and the new earth that have been promised for the end of time.

Given this perspective, therefore, John tells his Christians not to be naïve, for the conflict between the “gospel” and the “world” (in John’s negative sense, cf. Jn 1,10; 3,19f; 15,18ff) is never just an anecdotal conflict, but one of principle. In this sense, the symbolism helps us to realize that the message of the Apocalypse is valid for all epochs, as long as the Church is still a pilgrim on the earth. For we are speaking of an earth in which the «idols of death», prophetically denounced by John in Ap 18,

still require victims to satiate their voracity and their extravagance (think of Archbishop Romero, the martyrs of the UCA, and the impoverished majorities of the third world, victims of institutionalized hunger and violence).

1.4.5. Colors

The color *white* signifies victory, the glory of the elect, who take part in God’s life (7,9.13-18; 19,8). Thus, the first knight of the seven seals rides a white horse as he goes forth to conquer (6,1-2), while in the first vision of the fifth septenary (cf. 19,11-16) it is Christ who appears mounted on a white horse.

The color *red* is the symbol of murder (6,4). In 17,4 the prostitute, as symbol of the Roman empire, «was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls». This symbolism indicates that such luxuries are acquired at the cost of the blood of Christians, who have been impoverished and persecuted for their fidelity to the values of Jesus: «I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus» (17,6; see 13,15-17). In the same line, it is stated that the serpent, symbolizing Satan (12,3), is red, for the devil is murderous by nature (Jn 8,40-41).

The color *black* (6,5-6) symbolizes the suffering brought on by price inflation: just a small part of the basic food-stuffs is costing the poor one denarius, which is the salary for a whole day’s work, as we know from Mt 20.

The color *pale grey* is the symbol of plague and death (6,7-8).

1.4.6. Other Symbols

Some of the symbols are easy to interpret, especially for those who know the Old Testament well.

The *horns* are symbols of power. John therefore presents with seven horns not only Christ (5,6), but also Satan (12,3), the symbol of evil par excellence; also, the Beast of the earth has ten horns and seven heads (13,1; 17,3). The ten crowns on his horns (compare 13,1 with 17,2) represent the vassal kings who receive their power from Rome. The *wings* signify mobility (cf. 4,8; 12,14), and the *eyes* symbol all-penetrating knowledge. It is for that reason that verse Ap 1,14 says that the eyes of Christ «were like a flame of fire», for he sees all things. When Ap 1,16 adds that «a sharp two-edged sword issued» from the *mouth* of Christ, reference is being made to the Word of Jesus, which provokes discernment and judgment². In the Old Testament the *sea* symbolizes evil and death (13,1; see Mc 4,35-41), so that John tells us in 21,1 that in the new creation there will be no sea. The seven *stars* that the Son of Man has in his right hand (1,20) symbolize the seven angels, protectors of the seven churches to which the book of the Apocalypse is addressed, and these churches are symbolized by the seven golden lampstands of the initial vision (1,12.16.20).

The famous *Armageddon* (16,16), so often evoked by sectarian groups, is the Greek version of the Hebrew phrase *har Megiddo*, which means «mountain of Megiddo». The choice of the name is not accidental, since Megiddo was infamous among the people

of Israel for being the place where King Josiah was defeated (2 Kgs 23,29-30).

After that defeat Megiddo became a symbol for the base of any army that is condemned to defeat. With this in mind, we are told in Ap 16,16 that the armies of evil «were assembled at the place called in Hebrew Armageddon» to wage the final battle against God and the forces of good (a battle we find described in 20,7-10, the fifth vision of the final septenary). That is good news for the community, since this symbol indicates that the same forces of evil that now appear to dominate the empire will be finally overcome.

1.4.7. The End of the World

All that we have just seen confirms the thesis that the images presented in the Apocalypse are not to be understood literally, as if we were dealing with a documentary film giving a precise depiction of the future of the Church or the end of the world. Even so, we read in the Apocalypse texts like 6,12-17, which could make us think that they are indeed speaking of the end of the world, but which needs to be read with care:

And I saw when he opened the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the whole moon became as blood; and the stars of the heaven fell unto the earth, as a fig tree casts her unripe figs when she is shaken by a great wind. And the heaven was removed as a scroll when it is rolled up; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. And the

kings of the earth, and the princes, and the chief captains, and the rich, and the strong, and every bondman and freeman, hid themselves in the caves, and in the rocks of the mountains; and they say to the mountains and to the rocks, «Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: for the great day of their wrath is come; and who is able to stand?».

We should not think that the author of this passage has received a revelation about how precisely the world will end; rather we should understand that he is making use of Old Testament texts³. These are the same images used by the Hebrew prophets to announce that this world, given the wickedness that is rife in it, will have to disappear in order to give way to the new creation. Thus, they serve also as stereotypical images for the New Testament authors when they want to indicate that the event they are narrating has an apocalyptic, decisive dimension, since it is the commencement of God's definitive irruption into history.

That is Mark's intention when, to show that Jesus' death on the cross implied the beginning of the new world announced by God (see Am 8,9f), he points out that «from about noon there was darkness over the whole land until around three o'clock» (Mk 15,33). In saying this, he does not mean that an actual three-hour eclipse of the sun preceded the death of Jesus on the cross, but rather is indicating the supreme importance of the cross.

1.4.8. Liturgy

Quite significant in the book of Apocalypse is its clearly liturgical character, which appears in the beatitude with which the author begins his work:

Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein; for the time is near (1,3).

The book includes not only the celestial liturgies found at the end of the five septenaries that structure the work, but also numerous other liturgical hymns. John never tires of proclaiming in these hymns that God is the only Lord of history and the Christ is his only "lieutenant" in heaven and on earth. The hymns are the community's "resistance songs", which help sustain the people's critical spirit and their hope in the final victory of good over evil. They are like *La estaca*, the famous song of Lluís Llach that was sung during the Franco dictatorship, or like the ballads for Oscar Romero and Rutilio Grande, sung today in El Salvador. The sheer number of these songs helps to create the atmosphere of "Good News" and the spirit of resistance which the author wants to prevail throughout the work.

The liturgical tone of the texts conveys another important lesson. The liturgical celebrations are anticipations of the end of history which has already broken into our world with the resurrection of Jesus. They are also effective instruments for God's intervention in history and an aid for mobilizing the Christian people; they serve as a call to

resist and to oppose the empire's incursions by every means possible. Thus in the Apocalypse worship itself becomes an outstanding instrument for resistance; it is quite different from the often alienating liturgies of many present-day Pentecostal or charismatic groups.

A common theme of apocalyptic literature is that in the midst of persecution prayer becomes more necessary than ever. This is emphasized also by Luke in his apocalyptic discourse (Lk 21,36). At the same time, prayer helps people to become aware that their decisive salvation is a pure, gratuitous gift of God (6, 9-11).

1.5. «Eternal Good News»

The Apocalypse calls itself an «eternal good news» (14,6), which in Greek is *aionion euangelion*. Its basic content, as we will see when treating chapter 10, is the gospel message, but it does not communicate that message by recounting the words and deeds of Jesus, as do the four gospels. Rather, by using a different vocabulary, it seeks to express how important the Gospel is for all Christians, since every Christian is called to be a prophet by the simple fact of being a member of the Church. For John, Christians are prophets when they assimilate the contents of the Gospel so profoundly that they speak out and live out its message, even when this leads to persecution (Mk 8,24ff). John is expressing the same theological philosophy as the gospels, but he is applying it to the new situation of the Church many years later, when it is suffering

persecution at the hands of the Roman empire (2,3.10.13; 12,13; 13,7).

In this sense, John believes that his work is an «eternal good news» (14,6), because the values proposed in the Gospel are valid for any situation the Church may have to live through in the course of time. The work is also «eternal good news» in the sense that it draws on biblical wisdom to announce that the Roman empire, persecutor of the Church, will ultimately fall, thus partaking of the fate of every empire: total destruction (chapters 17 and 18).

It is also obvious that the work is “good news” if we just look at the title John gives his work: *Revelation of Jesus Christ*. If the contents of the work and the subject revealed in it are Jesus himself, who cannot help but love his churches (1,5; see Rm 5,6-9), even when these fall short (chapter 2 and 3), then those contents can only be positive, as are the contents of the Gospel as a whole. It is true that, in five of the seven letters addressed to the seven churches, Jesus questions them seriously and exhorts them to be live out their faith in all earnestness, but he does this because, as he indicates in the seventh letter, «Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten» (3,19, quoting Proverbs 3,12).

At the same time, all the churches are said to be found at the «right hand of God» (1,16.20; 2,1; 5,1). In apocalyptic language that means that they are protected by Jesus, for the right hand is the place for good news (of course, this has nothing to do with modern political symbols!). For this reason the angel

who announces the resurrection of Jesus, speaking with divine authority, is found seated at the *right hand* of the empty tomb (Mk 16,5). Also, at the final judgment, those who are going to be saved are found at the *right hand* of Jesus (Mt 25,31-40).

Furthermore, at the beginning of his work, John stresses those aspects of Jesus that will encourage the churches, which are both holy and sinful, to have full confidence in him. The grace and the peace that John desires for the seven churches of Asia, representing all the churches of the world, come precisely from Jesus Christ himself:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, ...*the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.* To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever (1,4-6).

All that is said here, therefore, can only be good news for the Church, for it declares that Jesus is the faithful witness⁴, the one whom God has raised as the first-fruits among the martyrs and as a guarantee that God will also raise those who have died following him. Furthermore, against the political pretensions of the emperor Domitian, who was pursuing Christians because they refused to adore him as Lord and King (*Dominus ac Deus*), the Apocalypse announces that the authentic King of kings and Lord of lords is not the emperor, but Jesus. It is not happenstance, then, that

in this work we find seven beatitudes, three framing the whole work (1,3 and 22,7.14) and four others appearing in key locations (14,13; 16,15; 19,9; 20,6). These beatitudes promise to those who heed the message of Jesus that they will have access to the tree of life (Gn 2-3) and to the celestial Jerusalem (21,9-27).

1.6. The structure of the Apocalypse

By structuring his work very carefully, John gives basic clues to show how he wants us to read it.

The introduction (1,1-8) and the conclusion (22,6-21) are formulated in parallel fashion, the same themes being sounded in both. Together they form an inclusion that frames the whole work. In this way John unifies his work and gives it a concentric structure that highlights the fidelity of the God who is continually acting in history to liberate his impoverished, humiliated people from the powers of evil. It is for this reason that the Apocalypse never tires of calling God (and only God!) the *All-powerful*⁵.

The concatenation and progression within the septenaries (seven letters, seven seals, etc.) reveal that in the world there is no eternal return of all things (this would cause discouragement in the community and does not correspond with reality). Rather, history knows of true progress, a forward movement that draws the world ever closer to the moment when God will become all in all.

Let us examine now the book's outline in a way that highlights its circular or "chiastic" structure:

A. Prologue and epistolary salutation (1,1-3 + 4-8)

B. The seven letters (1,9-4,11)

Preparatory vision (1,9-20)

The seven letters (2,1-3,22)

Final liturgy in heaven (4,1-11)

C. The seven seals (5,1-8,1)

Preparatory vision (5,1-14)

The seven sails: (6,1-17: the first six; cf. 8,1: the seventh)

Interlude: The 144.000 chosen and sealed (7,1-8)

Final liturgy in heaven (7,9-17)

Opening of the seventh seal (8,1)

D. The seven trumpets (8,2-14,5)

Preparatory vision (8,2-5)

The first six trumpets (8,6-9,21)

Interlude (10,1-11,14): a) Prophetic vocation of John (10,1-11)

b) Prophetic mission of Christians (11,1-14)

Announcement of the seventh trumpet (11,15a)

Canticle in heaven (Appearance of the Ark of the Covenant: 11,15b-19)

Interlude (12,1-13,18): a) Battle of God's people with the Dragon (12)

b) Allies of the Dragon: the two Beasts (13)

Final liturgy in heaven (14,1-5)

C'. The seven bowls (14,6-19,8)

Preparatory vision (14,6-20)

The seven bowls (15,1-18,24)

Interlude (17-18): a) Identification of Babylon with Rome (17)

b) Hymn for the fall of Babylon (18)

Final liturgy in heaven (19,1-8)

B'. The seven visions (19,9-22,5)

Introduction (19,9-10)

THE SEVEN VISIONS (19,11-22,5):

1. Appearance of the Messiah as Victorious Judge (19,11-16)

2. Announcement of the victory (19,17-18)

3. First eschatological combat (19,19-21)

4. Defeat of Satan and his being put in chains (20,1-3)

5. Thousand-year reign and second eschatological combat (20,4-10)

6. Final judgment (20,11-15)

7. The new world and the new Jerusalem descending from heaven (21,1-22,5)

A'. Epilogue and epistolary salutation (22,6-20 + 21)

2. ETERNAL GOOD NEWS

If the whole book of the Apocalypse has been configured in the form of an epistle or a letter (1,4-8 and 22,21 frame the whole work), we should not be surprised that the first symbol system consists of seven letters addressed to seven churches, which, by reason of their number, symbolize the universal Church.

2.1. The first septenary: the seven letters (1,9 - 4,11)

A letter is something written, and if it deals with revelation then it said to be a *scripture*, that is, a specific document that can at any time serve as a reference point to judge whether a community is living in accord with the Gospel or not. Such a reference point is fundamental in moments of religious crisis, when a community is suffering persecution that has already cost the lives of its members. For this reason the purpose of John's seven initial letters is to encourage the communities. He therefore begins by showing the churches, in a first vision (1,9-20), that the Son of Man (the slaughtered Lamb, Jesus) is the true Lord of history. In this way he prepares for the definitive Judgment on history that Jesus, the «King of kings and Lord

of lords» (19,16), will carry out in the fifth septenary, with which the first one forms an inclusion.

By means of these letters John points out to his communities both their good qualities and their defects. He attempts to motivate them so that, by remembering their first love (2,4), they once again give prophetic testimony in the face of a hostile world, and correct the defects and heresies that have crept into their midst⁶.

Quite significant are the final words of Jesus in the last letter (3,19ff), since they give a profound meaning to the whole sevenfold symbol and are an anticipatory key for reading the whole work. On the one hand, they announce the promise that in the end time God will become for his people "God-with-us" (21,3); on the other, they encourage

that all be converted, since the unconverted will be the object of God's wrath:

Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on the throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne (3,19-21).

This septenary concludes with a celestial liturgy (Ap 4), in which all creation, symbolized by four animals, and all God's people of the Old and the New Testaments, represented by twenty-four Ancients (the twelve Patriarchs and the twelve Apostles), sing of the glory and power of God, who will triumph definitively in the fifth septenary.

2.2. The second septenary: the seven seals

This sevenfold set of symbols forms a unity with the third and the fourth sets, thus confirming the concentric structure of the Apocalypse. By means of a celestial vision, it reveals the forces that shape history and makes known their profound significance. Thus, this septenary speaks of a book that has seven seals (5,1) and contains God's plan for history, but that plan remains hidden from those human beings who know history only on the surface. This is symbolized in 5,1 by the fact that the book is written on front and back (the author is thinking of a scroll that is rolled up, so that only a small part of it

is visible). Furthermore, he emphasizes that the book is closed with seven seals, that is, it is completely sealed. Who, then, is able to loosen these seals (5,2) and reveal the deepest sense of history? Only Christ (5,3ff), who sets in motion God's plan for history and is able to reveal its most profound significance (5,9-10).

In addition to the unique role played by Christ, John wants to reveal four other aspects of history, which he will describe as he develops the next two septenaries:

a) He exposes the negative forces that attempt to oppose the liberating action of God (6,3-8). It is because of them that the community is being persecuted and people are being martyred.

b) He shows that Christ, the true Lord of history, has already gone forth to conquer (6,1-2). Good will finally triumph over Evil, and God will hear the martyrs' demands for justice (6,11-12). The victory will be decisive because, as the sixth seal indicates (6,12-17), we are already on the threshold of the birth of the new world, and the present sufferings are only the birth pangs of that new world.

c) He reveals that the evils now afflicting the world are not absurd punishments from God, but are rather, as shown by the first four seals, calls to the unbelievers to be converted (as in Ex 7,13.22; 8,15; 9,35). But as happened long ago with the pharaoh in Egypt, John foresees that the logic of the empire

and its allies will prevent the wicked from ever being converted.

d) John reminds the churches that in this situation they must remain faithful to the values of the slaughtered Lamb, even at the cost of martyrdom. And they must do so by trusting in the ultimate salvation that comes from God, a salvation the martyrs are already experiencing by anticipation (7,9-17). A promise is made to them: «They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living waters; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes» (7,16-17).

2.3. The third septenary: the seven trumpets

This symbol system is central to the work and the most developed one of all. With the trumpets, John is calling for the mobilization (cf. Jr 4,5; 1Cor 14,8) of Christians at a decisive moment of history. The seven trumpets announce the misfortunes that await the world if there is no conversion. In this sense, the first six trumpets indicate that the evils of the world are not the result of a terrible God's arbitrariness or malevolence, but are rather a call to conversion. For that reason, there is an increase in the negative consequences of the plagues flowing from the previous septenary: before it was a fourth part of Rome that was destroyed; here it is a third of the city, but not yet the total destruction that

will be described with the next septenary.

The first four trumpets inflict plagues that will affect the natural world, while the fifth and the sixth bring torments upon human beings; the seventh is only announced (11,15a), as is the seventh seal. It is an invitation for the reader to continue reading. The allusions to the Old Testament show that this whole set of symbols is immersed in a paschal atmosphere.

2.3.1. First interlude: prophetic vocation and mission

It is significant that, before the seventh trumpet sounds, John interrupts the narrative in order to develop a long interlude (10,1-11,14), in which he explains to the reader the nature of the Christian vocation. Chapter 10 features the appearance of the majestic angel, who carries in his hand the little book that John is invited to consume⁷; in this way the seer seeks to make reference to his prophetic vocation. Thus the angel indicates to him that, once he has eaten the book (the Gospel), it will taste both sweet and bitter to him: a) sweet because his preaching will contain the eternal Good News (14,6), which consists in God's final victory; b) but bitter also, since John must announce punishment for those who close themselves off to God's message, and such a proclamation will bring upon him persecution and perhaps martyrdom.

The description of John's prophetic vocation has prepared the reader for chapter 11, which expresses symbolically the situation in which the commu-

nity is living, emphasizing the complementary aspects that always are part of the life of the churches.

John recalls that, although the community's sufferings may lead Christians to think the contrary, the churches are protected by God. He expresses this assurance with the order, inspired by Ez 40,1-5 and Zac 2,5-9, to «measure the temple of God and the altar and those who are worship there» (11,1). While he makes clear that the divine protection does not prevent the churches from being persecuted by the empire, he assures them that they will be so persecuted only for a limited time (three and a half years!); this time limit is expressed in the order not to measure the court outside the temple, «for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample over the holy city for forty-two months» (11,2).

Subsequently, in 11,3-13, John expands on the prophetic mission that all Christians have received (see Acts 2, 14-21). An apocalyptic text in Mark's gospel has already announced that, before the eschatological culmination of history, the Gospel will be preached to all nations (Mk 13,10). Mark thereby entrusted a great mission to his church, even after the fall of Jerusalem (to which allusion is made in Mk 13,14ff), even though that mission would bring persecution upon the Church (Mk 13,9-13).

John tells his community that it must give prophetic testimony in the world before the seventh trumpet sounds, thereby emphasizing that the two witnesses are prophets (11,3.6.10). That interpretation is not contradicted by the

fact that the prophets are described with features that remind us of the two great Old Testament prophets, Elijah and Moses, whose return was expected for the final times (Dt 18,18; Mal 3,23)⁸. What John is trying to point out here is that the prophetic testimony of Christians is in fulfillment of what was announced in the Old Testament.

At the same time, the Christians are told that they will share in the destiny of Jesus, that is, in his death and resurrection, for they will provoke the opposition of the world, which will not only kill them but will rejoice in their death (13,7-10). But it is revealed to them also that God will not abandon them in this life (11,5): after a short time they will appear to their enemies and will be seen to share in the glorification of Jesus (11,11-13). By means of this setting, John is declaring that the Christian prophets by their testimony will hasten the coming of God's Kingdom. It is therefore for him very important that the Christians be faithful to their prophetic mission.

On the other hand, the news that some people will be converted (11,13) is a message of consolation for those who are living in the midst of the "second woe," that is, in the midst of the eschatological trials being experienced by the community (9,13-11,14). These trials are preparing for the sounding of the seventh trumpet, which will announce God's definitive punishment of the Roman empire. Thus we find here confirmed what we proposed before as a thesis: that the sixth trumpet (9,13-21) and the process of reflection which delays the sounding of the

seventh make reference to the time of the Church⁹, in which the author himself is living.

2.3.2. Appearance of the Ark of the Covenant

However, when the seventh trumpet finally sounds in 11,15a, John, as was the case in the second septenary, does not describe the results of the trumpet blast, but rather lets resound a canticle from the heavens (11,15b-19), anticipating the final victory of God, who will carry out justice by now reestablishing his reign here on earth. Once again, this is John's way of enticing us to understand the next septenary, the seven bowls, as the explanation, and now a definitive one, of what was announced in the preceding set of symbols. It is no accident that precisely here John accentuates the motif that underlies all of the theological reflection of the Apocalypse: God's faithfulness to the Covenant which he established with his people¹⁰.

2.3.3. Second interlude: the forces that configure history

At this point, before letting the final celestial liturgy sound forth, the author takes another little break. This second interlude (12-13) forms an inclusion with the first one (10,1-11,14), thus providing bookends to the sounding of the seventh trumpet. Here John makes manifest the nature of the forces that configure history and the way they continue to affect the world today, even after the resurrection of Jesus.

In Apocalypse 12 John unveils the background of the deadly battle with the empire in which Christians are engaged. We are first presented with "a woman" clothed with the sun, with the moon beneath her feet and a crown of twelve stars (12,1). This woman symbolizes the People of God, and the twelve stars represent the twelve tribes of the people of Israel, which will be reconstituted with the coming and the triumph of the Messiah¹¹.

Opposite the woman, who is about to give birth (Ap 12,2), John places the red dragon, which –by its color, its heads (seven!), its horns (ten!), and its diadems– represents the demonic power¹² that wishes to destroy the woman and her descendents, as Satan tried to do already at the beginning of creation (Gn 2-3).

However, when the woman «brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron» (the Messiah), «her Child was caught up to God and to his throne» (12,5), so that the Devil, who tries to devour him (12,4b), not only fails to destroy him, but suffers the consequences of this exaltation of the Son to God. The author, therefore, rather than referring to the birth of the Messiah, is talking about the exaltation or the resurrection of the Son, using images that are familiar to us from the fourth gospel. As in the gospel of John, the cross is seen as exaltation (Jn 3,14; 8,28; 12,32f), as a throne on which Jesus reigns (12,5).

The next verses (12,7-12) draw out the consequences of this paschal victory and display for us the definitive dimen-

sion of this defeat of the devil with the classical (mythical) image of the battle between Michael, at the head of all his angels, and the Dragon, at the head of his (fallen) angels. This victory means that with the exaltation of Jesus the reign of the slaughtered Lamb has already begun. Satan has been conquered and has lost his power, as is expressed symbolically by his being expelled from heaven¹³.

But this does not mean that Satan, symbol of the Evil that has the world in its grip, is totally lacking in power, for we have not yet reached the fullness of the Kingdom. In 12,12b, therefore, John warns his readers about the ways in which the “powers of evil,” still active on earth, continue to threaten good Christians: «Woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!». Despite this, there is also a positive note here, for in the midst of the struggle the Christian people continue to be protected by God, as was the people of Israel in the desert of Sinai¹⁴. That protection, however, does not prevent the Evil One from continuing to persecute savagely «those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus» (12,17).

2.3.4. *The Two Beasts*

In this way John wants to unmask the demonic forces which seek to use lies to confuse the Christians. Therefore, in the second part of this long interlude, he exposes the earthly powers that are allied with Satan and explains the strategies they use to oppress the Church. They are represented by two Beasts.

The *Beast from the sea* (13,1-10) is the symbol of the politically omnipotent Roman empire, which is an incarnation of all the preceding totalitarian empires¹⁵. This empire in its pride has made itself into an idol and makes martyrs out of the Christians who refuse to adore it (13,4-7). The *Beast from the land* (13,11-17), which is later (in 19,20 and 20,10) called «the false prophet», is the symbol of the religious propaganda and the ideologies¹⁶ that are at the service of the empire (13,12-15). These ideologies, often of a pseudo-religious nature, are very dangerous, since they use their power to deceive naïve persons and to make life difficult, even economically, for anyone who refuses to worship the first Beast. In this sense, the Dragon and its two acolytes (created in its image and so forming a sort of Satanic trinity that emulates the divine Trinity) give expression to the danger that a despotic, totalitarian state represents for Christians. Such was Rome in the time of the emperor Diocletian, who wanted to make himself into an idol and to oblige Christians to renounce their own values and accept those of the empire instead.

Since the persecution of the community is notoriously harsh and since the empire’s power appears unshakable (it took something more than three centuries for it to finally collapse), John does not want to conclude this septenary without having the celestial liturgy (14,1-5) resound again in the triumphant canticle of «those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes and who have been redeemed from humankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb» (14,4).

In this way the author has prepared us to read the fourth septenary, in which he will show us the fate that awaits the cruel empire, which refuses to be converted and continues to persecute Christians.

2.4. The fourth septenary: the seven bowls

This sevenfold symbol concludes the central nucleus of the Apocalypse. It makes explicit what it was the second set of symbols pointed toward and the third set prepared us for. For this reason this one is constructed so as to be strictly parallel, as regards the plagues, with the previous set of symbols, but it does so in such a way that there appears to be not only an increased, but a definitive, punishment of the Beast, the Roman empire, whose fall will be narrated (16,17-21) and celebrated in song (Ap 18).

John chooses the symbol of the bowls which, as «bowls of the wrath of God», signify the punishment and decisive ruin that await all totalitarian empires which, like Rome, do not heed the calls to conversion that God makes to them through the plagues; instead they refuse to accept God's sovereignty and seek instead to make themselves into divinities. This image of the «bowl of Yahweh's wrath» goes back to a classic theme of the ancient prophets¹⁷.

John is concerned here with identifying the empire to which his threats are addressed. After calling it «the great harlot who is seated upon many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with

the wine of whose fornication the dwellers on earth have become drunk» (17,1b-2), John tells us that he is speaking of Rome, «the city of seven hills» (cf. 17,9), which gets drunk on the blood of the holy ones and the martyrs of Jesus (17,6). This whole reflection concludes in chapter 18 with a poetic song which expresses great joy at the fall of the oppressive empire, but which also reflects something of the people's admiration for Rome's splendor and their distress at its ruin¹⁸. On the other hand, there is a powerful prophetic critique of the extravagance and injustice of the inhabitants of the earth (that is, the unbelievers), especially the kings and the merchants that are allied with the empire. They, along with their economic ambition, are the causes of the world's woes.

The atmosphere of this set of symbols, therefore, is redolent with the judgment of God. The author knows, through his wise experience of the gospel, that God's becoming incarnate in human realities does not bring the world to conversion. Such was the case in the time of Jesus himself¹⁹, for his Good News "had to" be rejected by a world that loved darkness more than light, since its works were evil (Jn 3,19). A God who, against all "human logic," proposes a "logic of gratuity" that makes possible "universal fraternity" cannot count on the world's approval or on the favor of the powers that constitute the world. A world structured by those powers ends up killing the prophet Jesus who denounces its injustice, just as it also manages to kill all those Christians who through valiant proph-

ecy follow Jesus radically in decrying injustice. For that reason they murdered Archbishop Romero and continue to murder so many other witnesses.

But since judgment is never God's definitive word on history, the whole septenary is framed by a positive tone which projects God's light, even while speaking of definitive punishment. I am referring to the beginning of the septenary's inaugural vision and the celestial liturgy with which it concludes.

The first part of the preparatory vision (14,6-13) announces an «eternal good news» (14,6) to all the peoples of the earth. It includes the judgment on Babylon (14,7-11) and the promise that soon there will be an end to the suffering of the saints who have kept the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus (14,12-13).

This text, linking up with the canticle of Moses and the canticle of the Lamb (15,3-4), forms an inclusion with the celestial liturgy we find at the end of this septenary (19,1-8), which sings of God's triumph and the rejoicing of the Church «since the marriage of the Lamb has come» (19,7). Thus John prepares us for the final septenary, which will conclude with the marriage (21,3-4), and he invites us to keep on reading, for he does not think that history will arrive at its end with the fall of Rome.

Meanwhile, the second part of the introduction to the septenary (14,14-20) urges Christians to discern between the good and the bad, symbolized respectively by the images of the harvest of grain and the gathering of grapes. This part also contains good news for the Church, reminding her that the judg-

ment will be carried out by the Son of Man (14,14), who sustains all the churches in his protective right hand (1,17-20).

2.5. The fifth septenary: the final visions

As we mentioned already, this septenary forms an inclusion with the first one, thus bringing to completion the dynamic that first appeared in the second septenary and reached its culmination in the fourth. Besides forming an inclusion with the first septenary, which speaks of the Church militant, there is also a relation between the first vision of this septenary, which presents Christ as judge and victorious warrior mounted on a white horse, and the opening of the first seal of the second septenary (6,1-2):

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself. He is clad in a *robe dipped in blood* [Is 63,1], and the name by which he is called is The Word of God [Jn 1,1]. And the armies of heaven arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, followed him on white horses. From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations, and *he will rule them with a rod of iron* [Ps 2,9]; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the

Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, *King of kings and Lord of lords* [2 Mac13,4] (19,11-16).

At the same time, the fourth and central vision of this septenary (20,1-3) is in harmony with the central septenary, that of the trumpets, which speaks of the establishment of God's Kingdom on earth²⁰.

By having this septenary form an inclusion with the first one, John makes it clear that the whole of this work is speaking above all of the present time of the Church. Thus, the initial vision of the first septenary (1,9-20) presents a triumphant Christ who holds in his right hand the churches, immersed as they are in bloody persecution and threatened by tepidity and despair (2-3), but now, in the final vision, the Church appears triumphant: it has reached its fullness since the forces of evil, symbolized by the devil and death, have been completely conquered.

At the same time, this septenary is related also to the three central ones, for it is the historical culmination of what the author has been gradually unveiling in the course of his work. Now, however, he broadens the horizon in dramatic fashion, having it embrace everything from the appearance of the Messiah (19,11-16), which is the beginning of God's Kingdom on earth, to the final judgment (20,11-15) and the vision of the new world, the celestial Jerusalem, the recreated Paradise (21,1-22,5), which will appear when the Wedding of the Lamb with the People of God is consummated and God becomes truly "God-with-them" (21,3).

Aside from the fundamental role played by Christ, a theme running through the whole of the Apocalypse, there are two other basic themes that shape this set of symbols:

1) The *chaining of Satan* for a very long time (symbolized by the period of *a thousand years*): this refers to the present time of the Church, which began with the exaltation of Jesus. Now Satan is chained, so that any Christian who gives in to his seductions will have no excuse. The Gospel can be lived by Christians thanks to the victory of Christ, although that victory does not exclude a final, climactic attack at the end of time (compare 20,3b with 20,7-10). When speaking of the duration of the messianic kingdom, both ancient Jewish and primitive Christian texts do so symbolically. It was thought that the new sojourn in paradise, the return of which is announced in Isaiah 65,22, would last one thousand years, for God told Adam, in Genesis 2,27, that he would die the same day that he ate of the forbidden fruit. If one day for the Lord is like a thousand years (Ps 90,4), then we can understand why Gn 5,5 states that Adam died at the age of 930 years. For the same reason the early Christians thought that the stay in the paradise restored by the Messiah would last a thousand years. In symbolic language the *kingdom of a thousand years* means that there will be a partial restoration of the conditions that existed in paradise before the original fall. Thus, the work of Christ brings about the end of the

Dragon's power (12,9; 20,3), and the tree of life can be offered to those who, along with Christ, are conquerors of Satan (2,7; 22,14.19). The martyrs can now enter into God's garden and live a resurrected life, without fear of death. They now reign with Christ and participate in the judgment and the victory, while awaiting the end of the time of the Church.

2) The *new creation*, which goes along with the themes of the *celestial Jerusalem* and the recovered *Paradise* (21,1-22,5) that await us at the end of time, when God's sovereignty is made fully manifest. This Holy City or new Jerusalem, representing the Church triumphant, «descends from heaven» (21,2). In saying this, John wants to remind us that the heavenly Church is already struggling to make itself present in the earthly Church in which we live. This distinguishes the Apocalypse from the expectations of Jewish apocalyptic of the time²¹, which expected an epoch when paradise would be restored here on earth.

2.6. Conclusion

The Apocalypse, therefore, is not a book that seeks to inspire fear in people by speaking of the dreadful events at the end of the world. Its symbolic language aims at avoiding the persecution of the empire, while at the same time revealing certain constants in history. What it seeks to do is to ground *Christian resistance* to any empire (here, the Roman empire) that does not tolerate a faith that is loyal to the liberating project of Jesus. It is therefore a *message of hope* for the churches that are struggling in the midst of an unjust and hostile world.

The Apocalypse encourages Christians to bear prophetic witness to the Gospel, and it is perennial good news for all believers, for it declares that ultimately the Lord of history is God, not the empire that happens to be in power.

He is the faithful, liberating God of the Old Testament, who will never permit unjust empires to win in the end. And the end of history awaits us as a new creation, completely freed from evil and death.

3. A MESSAGE OF SOLIDARITY

Having seen all this and living as we do in a world so filled with injustice and “plagues” (wars, hunger, financial crisis, drugs, global warming, the arrogance of rich countries in their trade relations, violence against women, etc.), we can understand that the Apocalypse has much to tell us about our present-day reality.

Unfortunately, in the last two millennia there has not been much variation from what John reveals to us about history. The Roman empire fell, but the empires that followed it were no better. Neither the Holy Roman, nor the Spanish, nor the French, nor the English, nor the Russian, nor, in our present time, the American. All acted as “beasts” toward the impoverished and oppressed peoples of the earth, and above all toward the majority who are peasant farmers. The *plagues* which continue to afflict all the world’s countries do not succeed in bringing about conversion, since people continue to worship the idols of wealth and profit at any price.

The empires and their allies, including the religious ones, continue to per-

secute the Christian prophets who have remained faithful to the slaughtered Lamb and not let themselves be seduced by false prophets. False prophets are those who excessively spiritualize the Christian message, leaving it without its scathing denunciation of injustice. False prophets are those who idolize the neo-capitalist system, which is intrinsically incapable of bringing about a world in which all human beings can live in a dignified manner. False prophets are those who ignore the countless victims of the socio-economic system produced and imposed by the empire of the day. All the propaganda emanating from the established powers is aimed at deceiving the people and keeping them alienated and estranged.

This is also clearly true for those “lite” interpretations of Christian commitment which preach a heaven that does not descend to this earth and so does not require us to commit ourselves in favor of God’s reign, which involves opting for the poor and other persons excluded from the system. Such spiritualist forms of religion disfigure the face of Christ, the slaughtered Lamb, who was murdered for refusing to accept the empire’s values and for having made the welfare of all human beings, beginning with those whose life was most threatened by an unjust world, the ultimate and decisive criterion for discerning God’s concrete will for his churches (Mk 3,1-6).

If John were to address our churches directly today, he would do so just as he did in the book of the Apocalypse. Many of us Christians continue to genuflect before the “beast,” we remain indifferent to the pain and the distress of the poor, and we are especially deaf to the cries of the many who have generously given their lives out of fidelity to the slaughtered Lamb.

But John would also point to the thousands of martyrs who, with Oscar Romero at their head²², have been murdered by the empire and its lackeys simply for having been faithful to the project of Jesus and for having been prophets in the midst of a world that could not tolerate their voices. At the same time, in this world of ours engulfed

in despair, as was the world in which the Apocalypse was written, John would again proclaim a *message of hope* in order to provide a firm basis for the resistance and the trust of the Christian communities. As Ernst Bloch said so well, «Man does not live by bread alone; he lives by bread and by hope in utopia».

This is the same message given us by the gospels, which seek to be an «eternal good news» (14,6) for those who «hunger and thirst for justice» (Mt 5,6). Today more than ever we are in need of the Christian utopia which in Jesus became “topia”, a reality that exists *here and now*, in our world.

This is what is so powerfully expressed in the Apocalypse. We need this message so that we won’t let ourselves be fooled by the false propaganda and the manipulation of thought by which the empire dominates our world. We must continue to fight for a world of universal solidarity and fraternity.

One final reflection. Today, at least for believers, the promises made by Jesus at the end of the Apocalypse continue to be true: «Surely I am coming soon» (22,20a), he assures us. For that reason, we, along with the impoverished peoples of the earth who believe in Jesus, also dare to say: «Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!» (22,20b). That is the hopeful song of many Christian communities today: «Come, Savior, come without delay!».

NOTES

1. We use the rare English word “septenary” to translate the Spanish “septenario”. Both words refer simply to a group of seven objects. In the Apocalypse there are many sevenfold symbol systems, as described below in section 6, on the structure of the work. [Translator’s note]
2. See Jn 1,10-14; 3,33-36; 5,24ff; Heb 4,12.
3. Is 34,4; 2,10.18.19; Joel 2,11; 3,4; see Mk 13,24-25.
4. The first Christian martyr, for the meaning of “martyr” in Greek is “witness”.
5. Ap 1,8; 4,8; 11,17; 16,7.14; 19,15; 21,22.
6. This is not a theme particular to the Apocalypse, but is found frequently in the later writings of the New Testament (Heb 10,19ff; 1 Peter 1,3ff; 4,12ff).
7. A clear allusion to the prophetic vocation of Ezekiel: see Ez 3,3.14; 2,8-10.
8. For example, Elijah was said to have the power to close the heavens so that rain would not fall (2 Kgs 3,17), while Moses was able to unleash plagues (Ex 7,17; 11,10) upon the unrepentant Egyptians who were persecuting God’s people (Ap 11,6).
9. Ap 10,1-11,14 is situated before Ap 11,15a.
10. See Ap 11,19, where it is revealed that the Ark of the Covenant will appear in the sanctuary (cf. Ex 19-24)
11. The woman can be considered to be Mary only in a secondary sense, insofar as Mary can be considered to be the mother of the Church and a symbol of it. The author of the Apocalypse was probably not thinking of her explicitly.
12. In Ap 12,9 the dragon is explicitly identified as Satan, who symbolizes the evil dominating the earth.
13. This image is found also in Lk 9,18 and Jn 12,31-32.
14. Compare Ap 12,13-16 with Ex 19,4 and 14,27ff.
15. For this reason, Ap 13,2 applies to Rome the description found in Daniel (7,4-6) of the empires that historically oppressed the people of Israel.
16. Like CNN nowadays.
17. See Is 51,17.22; Jr 25,15-17; Ez 23,32-34
18. The model of lamentation for Ap 18 is Ez 27-28, uttered with regard to Tyre.
19. Notice how Is 6,9 is used in Mk 4,12f.
20. In relation to the exaltation of Jesus and the decisive defeat of evil, which is narrated in the fifth vision: Ap 20,4-10.
21. See 4 Esdras 7,28f; 2 Baruch 29,1ff.
22. In 2010 the 30th anniversary of his martyrdom will be celebrated.

