

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

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

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

6. *The Virgin Mary* The woman clothed with the sun, crowned with stars, and with the moon under her feet is undoubtedly a symbol of the Church. However, from very early on many Fathers also saw her as representing the Blessed Virgin. It is true that Mary suffered no birth-pangs when her Son was born, and had no children other than him to be "the rest of her offspring" (12:17). However, this vision does evoke the Genesis account, which spew of enmity between the serpent and the woman. The Son who is caught up to God and to his throne is Jesus Christ (cf. 12:5). As in the case of the parables, not everything in the imagery necessarily happens in real life; and the same image can refer to one or more things—particularly when they are closely connected, as the Blessed Virgin and the Church are. So, the fact that this passage is interpreted as referring to the Church does not exclude its referring also to Mary. More than once, the Church's Magisterium has given

it a Marian interpretation. For example, St Pius X says: "Everyone knows that this woman" was the image of the Virgin Mary. Who, in giving birth to our head, remained inviolate. 'And being with child: the Apostle continues, 'she cried out in he, travail and was there in the anguish of delivery' [ ... ]. It was the birth of all of us who, while being exiles here below, are not yet brought forth into the perfect love of God and eternal happiness. The fact that the heavenly Virgin labors in childbirth shows her loving desire to watch over us and through unceasing prayer complete the number of the elect.<sup>2</sup>

John Paul II adopted this interpretation in a sermon at the shrine of Allotting: "Mary [ ... ] carries *the features of that woman* whom the Apocalypse describes [ ... ] The woman, who stands *at the end* of the history of creation and salvation, corresponds evidently to the one about whom it is said *in the first pages* of the Bible that she 'is going to crush the head of the serpent'. Between this promising beginning and the apocalyptic end *Mary has brought to light a son* 'who is to rule all nations with an iron scepter' (Rev 12:5) [ ...]. She it is with whom the *apocalyptic* dragon makes war, for being the mother of the redeemed, she is the image of the Church whom we likewise call mother."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Vatican II, *Christus Dominus*, 68.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Ad Diem illum*, 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Homily*, 18 November 1980.

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### **The Evangelization Station**

Hudson, Florida, USA

E-mail: [evangelization@earthlink.net](mailto:evangelization@earthlink.net)

[www.evangelizationstation.com](http://www.evangelizationstation.com)

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## **Teachings Contained in the Book of Revelation**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. *The Holy Spirit* There are a number of passages which indirectly refer to the Holy Spirit—for example, when the book speaks of the seven spirits who are before the throne, or the seven torches of fire (1:4; 4:5). It also explicitly teaches that it is the Holy Spirit who is speaking to the churches (2:7, II, 17; etc.). And, at the end, the voice of the Spirit joins with that of the Bride to make entreaty for the

coming of Christ. This passage is reminiscent of St Paul's teaching about how the Holy Spirit prays by interceding for us with sighs too deep for words (cf. Rom 8:26). In the Book of Revelation, the Holy Spirit is presented in relation to the Church: he nourishes the Church with his word and moves it interiorly to pray earnestly for the coming of the Lord.

4. *The Church* In a more or less explicit way the Church is present throughout the Book of Revelation. It teaches that the Church, which is one and universal, is the Bride of Christ, insistently making supplication for the Lord's coming (cf. 22:17, 20). But the Church is also depicted as Christian communities located in various cities of proconsular Asia (cf. chaps. 2-3). These communities do not constitute a Church distinct from the Church as such; rather, we can begin to perceive here the idea that all communities, taken together, make up the universal Church: the Church becomes present in these believing communities which are "parts" of the one Church of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

The apocalyptic vision of the woman in heaven (cf. chap. 12) has been interpreted in many different ways, particularly as referring to the Church. This interpretation sees her as the Church undergoing severe affliction. Her crown of twelve stars is taken as symbolizing both the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve Apostles, the pillars of the new Church. The passage is reminiscent of what the prophet Isaiah says when he compares the suffering of the people to those of a woman in labor.

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

The text implies that in both its earthly stage and its heavenly stage, the Church is the chosen people of

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

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

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

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

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