



REVELATION

John, the Evangelist, brother of James the Martyr (Acts 12), was deported to Patmos Island because of his faith. From there he sent us this “Revelation.” Skies opened, angels and tragedies, corruption of the well-to-do and the blood of martyrs: God’s judgment goes down the centuries. God’s glory has come near and only a curtain divides us. Everything is brought to an end in the heavenly city.

Why does *Revelation* have the reputation of being a mysterious book, hard to understand and why, for many people, does it have a terrifying meaning? Can it be because there, many seek secret figures and messages which might be adapted to current events as if John had announced them in detail?

If we want to avoid misunderstanding the images and the style of the Revelation of John we should first know that “revelations,” or “apocalypses” were a popular form of literature at the time of Jesus. There was an Apocalypse of Isaiah, one of Moses, and many others. It was a way of interpreting contemporary events wrapped up in formidable images, with visions and angels. The author of the book attributed it to a known prophet of the past, but only related events that were already known, trying to draw conclusions and showing what God wanted to achieve.

The style and the images of Revelation (Apocalypse) bewilder many people to the extent that today the term is mostly used to refer to worldwide tragedies. We are going to give the needed explanations, but from the beginning, we have to understand that John was answering the questions that his Christian contemporaries were asking, and questions that we are still asking ourselves today. Why didn’t the Savior bring justice and peace to the world and why do we see so much evil and suffering?

John answers that if centuries follow after Christ’s coming, this is not so that

we may enjoy heaven on earth but rather, because this world is at stake in the conflict between good and evil. John probably wrote at the time of Emperor Domitian, namely, the start of the great Church persecutions in the Roman Empire. John is going to say, again and again, that being Christian means being faithful and if need be, being a martyr.

Understanding the importance of this conflict in today's history is much more useful than searching the Book of Revelation for secret messages that would surely enable us to expect extraordinary events and, perhaps, to have the chance to survive. We will better understand this Revelation if we interpret the visions, numbers and symbols according to the rules of apocalyptic literature. Then we shall see that the Revelation of Jesus Christ is neither difficult nor terrifying but full of joy and hope.

The risen Christ is the center of history; the world is the place of the struggle between the Church, headed by Christ, and Satan's forces; Christians are called to give their witness with courage.

In this book we can see seven series, each with seven elements, in four major parts:

- the seven messages to the churches, Chapters 1–3;
- the fulfillment of the Old Testament, Chapters 4–11;
- the Church faces the Roman Empire, Chapters 12–19;
- the last days and the heavenly Jerusalem, Chapters 20–22.

We have attributed the Book of Revelation to John the Evangelist. In fact, there were many doubts on this point during the first two centuries. The western Church, differently from that in the East, did not see it as the work of John the Evangelist and while today's criticism does not raise major difficulties, it does raise many doubts. It is interesting to notice that the image of the Sacrificed Lamb, a central theme of the book, is found throughout the entire book. This theme, along with the same quotation from the prophet Zechariah (Rev 1:7), bears the personal mark of John in his Gospel (Jn 19:31-37).

1 • ¹ *The Revelation of Jesus Christ.*

God gave it to him, to let his servants know what is soon to take place.

He sent his angel to make it known to his servant, John,

² who reports everything he saw, for this is the word of God, and the declaration of Jesus Christ.

³ Happy is the one who reads aloud these prophetic words, and happy those who hear them, and treasure everything written here, for the time is near.

• ⁴ From John, to the seven churches of Asia:

receive grace and peace from him who is, who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits of God, which are before his throne,

⁵ and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us, and has washed away our sins with his own blood,

⁶ making us a kingdom, and priests for God, his Father, to him, be the glory and power, for ever and ever. Amen.

⁷ See, he comes with the clouds, and everyone will see him, even those who pierced him; on his account, all the nations of the earth will beat their breast. Yes. It will be so.

⁸ "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "the one who is, and who was, and who is to come: the Master of the universe."

• ⁹ I, John, your brother, who shares with you, in Jesus, the sufferings, the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island of Patmos, because of the word of God and witnessing to

Jesus. ¹⁰ On the Lord's day, the spirit took possession of me and I heard a voice behind me, which sounded like a trumpet, ¹¹ "Write down all that you see, in a book, and send it to the

• **1.1** *The time is near* (v. 3). This has been written first of all for John's first readers. Thus the idea of contemporary readers who would wish to read a description of current events into Revelation is unfounded.

• 4. John greets his readers, wishing them the peace that comes from the Father, Christ and the Holy Spirit. As soon as John has named the three divine Persons, all his praise goes to Christ. This was the newness that energized the early Christians so powerfully: Christ, God who came as a human.

The seven spirits means the fullness of God's Spirit.

The one who is and who was, and who is to come. This way of naming God expands what was revealed to Moses: "I am who am" (Ex 3). The living God is a God who is coming.

Then Christ is presented as the Messiah and Judge hoped for by the Jews. *He comes with the clouds* (v. 7). In his trial, Jesus also referred to this text of the prophet Daniel (7:13).

All the nations of the earth will lament him (v. 7). See this prophecy of the murdered Messiah: "the one they pierced" in Zechariah 12:10.

The Alpha and the Omega (v. 8) (that is A to Z). This suggests that God embraces all time.

Revelation is addressed to Christians who are beginning to suffer for their faith, and shows Christ to them, as the model they are imitating. Christ is the "servant and the witness of God the Father." Let us not forget that *martyr* means witness.

• 9. John had been condemned on account of his faith and was living in exile on Patmos. It was around the year 95.

John had this vision on *the Lord's Day*, that is, on Sunday, or the day of the resurrection. So this vision will be enlivened by the triumphant breath of the resurrection.

I saw someone like a son of man (v. 13). This is a symbolic vision of Christ dressed as a priest, and with a golden sash as a king. His white hair is a symbol of his eternity. *His feet like bronze* means that no one will defeat him. Christ appears in the same way as Daniel represents God as the universal judge (see 7:9).

It is I, the First and the Last (v. 17). By these words, Christ identifies with God himself. In Scripture, this is characteristic of God's way

3:14

Ps
89:28;
Col 1:15

1P 2:9

Dn 7:13;
Zec
12:10;
Mt 24:30

seven churches; of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.”

Dn 7:9; 7:13 ¹²I turned to see who was speaking to me; behind me were seven golden lamp stands ¹³and, in the middle of these, I saw someone, like a *son of man*, dressed in a long robe, tied with a golden girdle.

Dn 10:5 ¹⁴*His head and his hair are white, as wool, or as snow, and his eyes are like flames of fire.* ¹⁵His feet are like burnished bronze when it has been refined in a furnace. His voice is like the roaring of the waves.

Dn 10:6; Ezk 1:24 ¹⁶I saw seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp, double-edged sword coming out of his mouth; his face shone, like the sun in all its brilliance.

Is 44:6 ¹⁷Seeing him, I fell at his feet, like one dead; but he touched me with his right hand and said, “Do not be afraid. It is I, the First and the Last.

Mt 16:18 ¹⁸I am the living one; I was dead; and now I am alive, for ever and ever; and mine are the keys of death and the netherworld. ¹⁹Now write what you

have seen, both what is and what is yet to come. ²⁰Know the secret of the seven stars you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lamp stands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lamp stands are the seven churches.

The seven messages to the churches

2 ¹Write this, to the angel of the church in Ephesus, “Thus says the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand, and who walks among the seven golden lamp stands:

• ²I know your works, your difficulties and your patient suffering. I know, you cannot tolerate evildoers, but have tested those who call themselves apostles, and have proved them to be liars. ³You have persevered, and have suffered for my name without losing heart.

⁴Nevertheless, I have this complaint against you: you have lost your first love. ⁵Remember from where you have fallen, and repent, and do what you used to do before. If not, I will

of speaking (see Is 44:6 and 12). The *double-edged sword coming out of his mouth* (v. 16) is the word of God that irresistibly penetrates the heart and is always fulfilled in events. It deals death as effectively as it saves.

There were more than seven churches in Asia. Seven represents fullness, and the seven churches, then, represent all the Christian communities. Seven is the perfect number and this is why in the Book of Revelation, Christ’s name is mentioned seven times, Jesus fourteen times, and the Lamb (who is Christ) twenty-eight times. There are seven prophecies of Christ’s victory with his people and seven beatitudes like those of the Gospel: “Happy those...”

The stars, the angels and the lamp stands: these three images may complement one another to designate a Church, its bishops and believers together.

• **2.1** The seven following messages all begin with the words *I know*. Christ sees, knows and loves his Church. He begins by underscoring what is positive, then he reprimands. Christ remains invisible, but is the Lord of the universe and of history.

The messages reveal the difficulties these churches of Asia are facing:

– On one hand, there are hostilities coming from the Jews as well as from the pagans: they are a test of the believers’ perseverance.

– On the other hand, we have the “Nicolaitans,” those Christians who, not wanting to be cut off from the pagans, accept participation with them in the banquets of the pagan temples where meat sacrificed to idols was eaten: this is a threat to faith.

– The last temptation is the one that comes with time: the love that was awakened in the first moments of conversion was growing cold.

• **2.** Ephesus comes first since it is the mother Church. Paul preached there for two years (Acts 19:8). Later John lived there, thus extending his authority over the churches in the Asian province.

I know your works, your difficulties and your patient suffering. While the apostle was absent, the Church rejected the false prophets and preserved the true faith.

You have lost your first love (v. 4). How many small things—difficult to pinpoint—make

come to you, and remove your lamp stand from its place; this, I will do, unless you repent. ⁶Yet, it is in your favor, that you hate the doings of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Gen 2:9; Rev 22:2 ⁷Let anyone who has ears, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches: To the victor I will give to eat of the tree of life, which is in God's paradise."

• ⁸Write this to the angel of the church in Smyrna, "Thus says the first and the last, he who was dead, and returned to life:

⁹I know your trials and your poverty: you are rich, indeed. I know, how you are slandered, by those who pretend to be Jews, but are not, for they are, in fact, the synagogue of Satan.

Dn 1:12 ¹⁰Do not be afraid of what will happen to you. The devil will throw some of you into prison, to test you, and there will be ten days of trials. Remain faithful, even to death, and I will give you the crown of life.

20:6; 21:8 ¹¹Let anyone who has ears, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches:

The victor has nothing to fear, from the second death."

• ¹²Write this, to the angel of the church in Pergamum, "Thus says the one who has the sharp, double-edged sword: 1:16; 19:15

¹³I know where you live, where Satan's throne is, but you cling, firmly, to my name; you have not renounced me, not even in the days when Antipas, my faithful witness, was killed; in your place, where Satan lives.

¹⁴Nevertheless, I have a few complaints against you: Some, among you, hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak how to make the Israelites stumble, by eating food sacrificed to idols, and committing adultery. Num 22:2; 25:1-3; 1Cor 8:10; 2P 2:15 ¹⁵Also, among you, some follow the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶Therefore, repent; if not, I will come to you, soon, to attack these people, with the sword of my mouth.

¹⁷Let anyone who has ears, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches: To the victor, I will give the hidden manna. And I will also give a white 14:1; Is 62:2; 65:15; Jn 6:32

us feel the fervor of a community, or, on the contrary, reveal that the essence of authentic, passionate and faithful love of God is missing! *I will come you and remove your lamp stand* (v. 5): that is, your prestige as a mother Church.

The *tree of life* (v. 7) is eternal life (see Gen 2:9).

• 8. The church of Smyrna gathers poor people in an extremely rich city. In fact, it is rich in the eyes of God who is going to put it to the test so that it can be more productive.

There will be ten days of trials (v. 10). The number ten is characteristic of the period during which evil ones rule. Thus it announces a trial lasting a short time.

The second death (v. 11; see Rev 20:14). It means eternal condemnation, which separates the soul, not from the body but from God.

John means those Jews who did not believe in Jesus and recognize their Messiah. They are Jews, of course, but their community can no longer boast of this name. The Christian community, both Jews and converted Greeks, is the true remnant of Israel and the authentic descendants of Abraham.

• 12. Pergamum has the privilege of being an important center of pagan worship: it is "Satan's throne."

You cling firmly to my name (v. 13). The name of Christ is "Lord." This is the period when the Roman emperors begin to have themselves called "Lord" and be adored like gods, thus forcing Christians to choose between emperor worship, imposed on everyone under the pain of severe punishment, and faithfulness to Christ.

The church in Pergamum is privileged to have had among its members the first martyr of the province, Antipas, mentioned here. His courage in proclaiming his faith before pagan persecution does not prevent a pagan current from penetrating within the Church through the Nicolaitans mentioned earlier: by taking part in some pagan ceremonies and returning to the sexual freedom of the pagans, they are threatening to destroy the Church.

I will come to you soon to attack these people (v. 16). In the early Church, the intervention of the Holy Spirit is felt. Prophets speak, point to a guilty party, and misfortunes soon occur.

stone, with a new name written on it, which no one knows, except the one who receives it.”

• ¹⁸Write this, to the angel of the church in Thyatira, “Thus says the Son of God, whose eyes are like flames of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze. ¹⁹I know your works: your love, faith, service, patient endurance; and your later works, greater than the first.

²⁰Nevertheless, I have a complaint against you: you tolerate your Jezebel, this woman, who calls herself a prophetess; and is deceiving my servants; she teaches them prostitution, and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. ²¹I have given her time to repent, but she is unwilling to leave her prostitution. ²²So, I am going to throw her onto a bed, and inflict severe trials on her partners in adultery, unless they repent of their evil. ²³I will strike her children dead, and all the churches will know, that I am he, who probes the heart and mind; I will give each of you what your conduct deserves.

²⁴Listen to me, now, the rest of you in Thyatira. You do not hold with this teaching, and have not learned ‘the secrets,’ as they are called, which are, in fact, those of Satan. So I have no cause to reproach you, ²⁵only, hold on to what you have, until I come.

²⁶To the victor, who keeps to my ways to the end, *I will give power over the nations,* ²⁷*to rule them with an iron rod, and shatter them like earthen pots;* he will be like me, who received this power from my Father. ²⁸Moreover, I will give him the Morning Star.

²⁹Let anyone who has ears, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.”

3 • ¹Write this, to the angel of the church in Sardis, “Thus says he, who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars:

I know your worth: you think you live, but you are dead. ²Wake up, and strengthen that which is not already dead. For I have found your works to be imperfect in the sight of my God. ³Remember what you were taught; keep it, and change your ways. If you do not repent, I will come upon you, like a thief, at an hour you least expect.

⁴Yet, there are some left in Sardis who have not soiled their robes; these will come with me, dressed in white, since they deserve it. ⁵The victor will be dressed in white, and I will never erase his name from the book of life; instead, I will acknowledge it before my Father and his angels.

⁶Let anyone who has ears, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.”

The white stone (v. 17) is a sign of happiness. The *new name* (see Is 65:15) means the renewal of the Christian in the depth of his being: our living and growing in the faith is the beginning of a new personality that will appear clearly in heaven. *The hidden manna* (v. 17): Christ becomes power and source of life (Jn 6:48) for those who are faithful to him.

• 18. In Scripture, Jezebel is the name of an impious woman (see 1 K 19) and here it refers to some Nicolaitan prophetess. Her lovers and sons are her followers.

Idolatry is often called *adultery* or *prostitution*: the believing people belong to God as a wife to her husband, and to be unfaithful is to prostitute oneself. In fact, those who worship idols do not usually respect the sexual discipline

proceeding from faith. Thus when Revelation speaks of prostitution, we must understand both idolatry and sexual immorality.

He will *rule them with an iron rod* (v. 27). By these words, the one who overcomes is promised a share in Christ’s victory (see Ps 2); he will receive the *Morning Star*, that is to say, Christ himself (see Rev 22:16).

• 3.1 This is a brief message to a dying church. The universal Church has been promised that it will remain. Yet an individual church can disappear.

To be *dressed in white* (v. 5) means inner life: being clothed with Christ (see Eph 4:24). Throughout the Book of Revelation, white means joy, strength, victory and eternal glory.

1K
16:31

Jer
11:20

Ps 2:8-9;
Rev
19:15

22:16;
Is 14:12;
2P 1:19

1:16;
Is 11:2

16:15;
Mt
24:42;
1Thes
5:2

Mt 10:32

Is 22:22 • ⁷Write this, to the angel of the church in Philadelphia, “Thus says he who is holy and true, who holds the key of David; if he opens, nobody shuts, and if he shuts, nobody opens.

Gal 4:3 ⁸I know your worth; I have opened a door before you, which nobody can close, because you have kept my word, and not renounced me, in spite of your lack of power. ⁹I am giving you some of the synagogue of Satan, who call themselves Jews, but they are only liars. I will make them fall at your feet, and recognize that I have loved you.

¹⁰Because you have kept my words with patient endurance, I, for my part, will keep you safe in the hour of trial, that is coming upon the whole world, to test the people of the earth. ¹¹I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, lest anyone take your crown.

Gal 2:9; 1Tim 3:15; Rev 21:2; Ezk 48:35 ¹²I will make the victor into a column, in the Sanctuary of my God, where he will stay, forever. I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down, from my God in heaven, and my own new name. ¹³Let anyone who has ears, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.”

2Cor 1:19; Pro 8:22; Jn 1:3; Col 1:15; Heb 1:2 • ¹⁴Write this, to the angel of the church in Laodicea, “Thus says the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation:

¹⁵I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would, that, you were cold or hot! ¹⁶You are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold; so I will spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷You think you are rich, and have piled up so much, that you need nothing, but you do not realize, that you are wretched, and to be pitied; poor, blind and naked.

¹⁸I advise you, to buy from me gold, that has been tested by fire, so that you may be rich, and white clothes to wear, so that your nakedness may not shame you; and ointment for your eyes, that you may see. ¹⁹I reprimand and correct all those I love. Be earnest, and change your ways.

Pro 3:12; 1Cor 11:32; Jn 14:23 ²⁰Look, I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my call, and open the door, I will come in to you, and have supper with you, and you, with me. ²¹I will let the victor sit with me, on my throne, just as I was victorious, and took my place with my Father, on his throne. ²²Let anyone who has ears, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.”

• 7. This is a message of consolation and optimism for those who work faithfully with the Holy Spirit, but who are troubled by the thousand difficulties of their ministry.

He who is holy and true, who holds the key of David (see Is 22:22). Christ has absolute power over the “house of David,” namely, his people. He prepares a fruitful ministry for those who were able to persevere in hard times when the fruits of their labors were not seen.

I have opened a door before you (v. 8) means: I have prepared a successful ministry. There is one condition: keeping the word of God and being faithful to him.

• 14. *You are neither cold nor hot* (v. 15).

Neither unbelievers who remain cold toward a faith they do not share, nor believers who take God’s love seriously and show authentic surrender. We can easily imagine this community of nice, comfortable people. They were one more religious group, but not witnesses of Christ the victor.

Laodicea had hot and cold thermal waters. It was also in that city that eyewash famous for improving eyesight was made.

Amen (v. 14) means: it is true, or also: I commit myself this way. Christ is the Father’s Amen. His commitment to us is the fulfillment of God’s promises (see 2 Cor 1:20). Because Christ is the Amen, he calls us to a real commitment to God to realize his plans.

A LOOK AT THE PAST: CHRIST AND ISRAEL

The throne in heaven

Mk 1:10;
Acts
10:11

4 • ¹After this, I looked up, to the wall of the sky, and saw an open door. The voice which I had first heard speaking to me, like a trumpet, said, “Come up here and I will show you what will come in the future.”

Ezk
1:26;
10:1;
Is 61:1

²Immediately, I was seized by the spirit. There, in heaven, was a throne, and one sitting on it. ³He who sat there, looked like jasper and carnelian, and round the throne, was a rainbow, resembling an emerald.

19:16

⁴In a circle, around the throne, are twenty-four thrones, and seated on these, are twenty-four elders, dressed in white clothes, with golden crowns on their heads. ⁵Flashes of lightning come forth from the throne, with voices and thunderclaps. Seven flaming torches burn before the throne; these are the seven spirits of God.

Ezk
1:22;
1:5

⁶Before the throne, there is a platform, transparent, like crystal. Around and beside the throne, stand four liv-

ing creatures, full of eyes, both in front and behind. ⁷The first living creature is like a lion, the second, like a bull; the third has the face of a man, and the fourth looks like a flying eagle. ⁸Each of the four living creatures has six wings, full of eyes, all around as well as within; day and night, they sing without ceasing,

Is 6:2-3

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, master of the universe, who was, and is, and is to come.

⁹Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to the one on the throne, he who lives for ever and ever, ¹⁰the twenty-four elders fall down before him, and worship the one who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns in front of the throne and say,

¹¹Our Lord and God, worthy are you to receive glory, honor and power! For you have created all things; by your will they came to be and were made.

• **4.1** After these messages to the churches of Asian province, we have visions containing the meaning of history.

– In Chapters 4–11, John delivers the meaning of the history of Israel up to the preaching of the Gospel.

– In Chapters 12–21, he prepares us to understand the history we are living and the struggles of the Church.

To begin with, we need to know where we are going and why we are struggling. Those without goals will soon be swept away by conflicting currents. Therefore, before developing his vision of history, John shows us the unchanging center in which things and events have their origin and to which they return.

I looked up to the wall of the sky and saw an open door. This figure of speech had at the time a precise meaning: that of a vision granted to the prophet (compare with: “He saw the heavens opened” Mk 1:10).

In heaven was a throne, and one sitting on it (v. 2). That invisible someone from whom light and life radiate is the divine Being contemplated in its source, that is, the Father. His face cannot be described, but all the elements of nature are

used to express something of the divine Being: the imposing force of the storm, the fascinating power of fire, the purity and freshness of water.

The *elders* are the saints of the Old Testament who represent the faithful people (see Is 24:23). The *four living creatures* (v. 6) refer to angels. These are poetic images to express what is most noble, strong, wise and quick. Their eyes, always alert, are focused on the center of the divine Being and they spread God’s energies throughout the universe (see Ezk 1).

They sing without ceasing: Holy, Holy, Holy (v. 8). This is the first of the hymns found in Revelation. It is taken up from Isaiah 6:3.

Master of the universe (v. 8). The Greek text uses this expression to translate “Sabaoth.” We know that the “Lord Sabaoth” is the Lord of Hosts and this refers to the many visible and unseen beings and forces of Heaven and earth. At the center, where God is and from where all things come, everything will be gathered up in thanksgiving to the Father when the lives of mortal beings are over. What will we do in heaven? All will be admiration, praise and amazing discovery of God’s infinity.

Note how John describes God’s mystery here

The coming of the Lamb

Is 29:11 **5** • ¹Then, I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne, a scroll, written on both sides, sealed with seven seals. ²A mighty angel exclaimed, in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open this and break the seals?"

Gen 49:8; Is 11:1 ³But no one in heaven or on earth, or in the netherworld, was found able to open the book and read it. ⁴I wept much, when I saw that no one was found worthy to open the book and read it. ⁵Then, one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep. Look, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the shoot of David, has conquered; he will open the book of the seven seals."

Jn 1:29 ⁶And I saw next to the throne, with its four living creatures, and the twenty-four elders, a *Lamb*, standing, although it had been slain. I saw him with seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God, sent out to all the earth.

⁷The Lamb moved forward, and took the book from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. ⁸When he took it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders bowed before the Lamb. They all held in their hands, harps, and golden cups full of incense, which are the prayers of the holy ones.

⁹This is the new song they sang: 14:3; Is 42:10
You are worthy to take the book and open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood, you purchased, for God, people, of every race, language and nation;

¹⁰and you made them a kingdom, and priests for our God, 19:10; Is 61:6
 and they shall reign over the land.

¹¹I went on looking; I heard the noise of a multitude of angels, gathered around the throne, the living creatures and the elders, numbering millions of millions, ¹²crying out with a loud voice: Dn 7:10 Phil 2:7-9

by using images from Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1. As to the four animals, Christian art used them to represent the four evangelists: Matthew as the man; Mark, the lion; Luke, the bull; and John as the eagle.

• **5.1** The vision continues with the appearance of two new elements: the sealed book and the *Lamb*. The history of Israel (which can be read in Scripture) and Christ.

John's readers had a book, the Old Testament. For those among them of Jewish origins, it was the history of their people. It was also to be with the New Testament, the book of all the Christians, and in some way it contains the meaning of universal history, since this history was preparing for the salvation of all humankind.

Jerusalem had been destroyed some twenty years before, according to Jesus' prophecy (Mk 13), and Christians of Jewish descent were asking themselves: If Christ is the promised Savior, why did the history of Israel end in such disasters? Why did the Jewish people, instructed by the Scriptures, not recognize their Savior?

Here we are told that though the events are in the book, the book is *sealed*. No one was found able to understand God's plan for his people, or able to call God to account. Only Christ reveals

the mystery of death and resurrection which is being realized in history, and only he can do so, since he himself surrendered to death for all: *you are worthy to take the book* (v. 9).

Now, Christ can read the book of the history and destiny of humankind (*power, riches and wisdom*: v. 12). Still more, he is now the owner of this book, and in being rejected by Israel, a priestly people (Ex 19:6), he formed his own *kingdom and priests*, the Church (1 P 2:9), as is said in verse 10.

A Lamb standing, although it had been slain (v. 6). The vision brings us to the moment of the resurrection. While the Gospels relate the resurrection of Jesus, as his disciples knew it on earth, here we are in heaven to contemplate the risen Christ entering a glorious world. He is standing after being sacrificed, glorious, but forever marked by his Passion.

The seven horns and the seven eyes express the fullness of power and knowledge in the risen Christ. Before all the powers of the world and of heaven, on that day, he comes with authority to take the book from the hands of the Father.

Let us note how on the day of the resurrection, the same praise previously addressed to God now goes to the Lamb: in being raised up, Christ appears with the glory befitting him: that of God.

Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and riches, wisdom and strength, honor, glory and praise.

¹³Then, I heard the voice of the whole universe, heaven, earth, sea, and the place of the dead; every creature cried out:

To him who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb, be praise, honor, glory and power, for ever and ever.

¹⁴And the four living creatures said, *Amen*, while the elders bowed down and worshiped.

The seven seals

Jer
15:2-4

6 • ¹I saw the Lamb opening the first of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures cry out, with a voice like thunder, "Come and see!"

Zec 6:1

²A white horse appeared, and its rider had a bow. He was crowned, and he went out as a conqueror, and he will conquer.

³When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature cry out, "Come!" ⁴Then, another horse, the color of fire, came out. Its rider was ordered to take peace away from the earth, that people might kill one another; so he was given a great sword.

Ezk
4:16

⁵When he opened the third seal, I heard the third creature cry out, "Come!" This time, it was a black horse, and its rider held a balance in his hand. ⁶Then, from the midst

of the four living creatures, a voice was heard: "A measure of wheat for a piece of silver, and three measures of barley for a piece, as well! Do not spoil the oil or the wine."

⁷When he opened the fourth seal, I heard a cry from the fourth living creature, "Come!" ⁸A greenish horse appeared, its rider was called *Death*, and the Netherworld rode behind him. He was allowed to utterly destroy, by sword, famine, pestilence and wild beasts, a fourth of the inhabitants of the earth.

Ezk
14:21

⁹When he opened the fifth seal, I saw, under the altar, the spirits of those who proclaimed the word of God, and were slain, for its sake. ¹⁰They began to cry aloud, "Holy and righteous Lord, how long will it be, before you render justice, and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?" ¹¹Then, each one of them was given a white garment, and they were told to wait a little while, until the number of their brothers and sisters, and fellow servants, who would be killed, as they had been, would be completed.

Dr:32:43;
Zec
1:12;
Lk 18:7

14:13

¹²And my vision continued. When the Lamb opened the sixth seal, there was a violent earthquake. The sun became black, as a mourning dress, and the whole moon turned blood-red, ¹³and the stars in the sky fell to the earth, like dry figs falling from a fig tree shaken by a hurricane. ¹⁴The sky was folded up like rolled parchment; there was no mountain or continent that was not removed from its place. ¹⁵The kings of the earth and their ministers, the generals, the rich

Is 13:10;
Jl 3:4;
Mt 24:29

Is 34:4

Is 2:10

• **6.1** The Lamb opens the seals. The risen Christ explains the great forces that give an impulse to sacred history. At the time of John's writing, the birth of the Church meant that the Old Testament centuries were over and, on the other hand, the Jewish nation had been ruined. This was the time to think things over.

The four horses symbolize the forces shaping biblical history.

The rider of the white horse is "the word of God." It represents God's words given to the prophets in the Old Testament. Christ, who is the word of God had not yet come; he would come later, riding the same white horse (Rev 19:11).

and the powerful, and all the people, slaves, as well as free persons, hid, in caves, or among rocks, on the mountains, ¹⁶saying, "Fall on us, mountains and rocks, and hide us, for we are afraid of him who sits on the throne, and of the wrath of the Lamb. ¹⁷The great day of his wrath has come, and who can endure it?"

Hos
10:8;
Lk 23:30

Rom 2:5

144,000 from Israel and the great crowd from every nation

7 • ¹After this, there were four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the

Jer
49:36

four winds, to prevent their blowing against the earth, the sea, and the trees. ²I saw another angel, ascending from the sunrise, carrying the seal of the living God, and he cried out with a loud voice, to the four angels empowered to harm the earth and the sea, ³"Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God upon their foreheads."

3:12;
22:4;
9:4;
12:7

⁴Then, I heard the number of those marked with the seal: a hundred and forty-four thousand, from all the tribes of the people of Israel:

⁵from the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand were sealed;

from the tribe of Reuben, twelve thousand;

from the tribe of Gad, twelve thousand;

⁶from the tribe of Asher, twelve thousand;

from the tribe of Naphtali, twelve thousand;

from the tribe of Manasseh, twelve thousand;

⁷from the tribe of Simeon, twelve thousand;

from the tribe of Levi, twelve thousand;

from the tribe of Issachar, twelve thousand;

⁸from the tribe of Zebulun, twelve thousand;

from the tribe of Joseph, twelve thousand;

from the tribe of Benjamin, twelve thousand.

The other three horses represent war, hunger and the plague. These are the great plagues troubling sinful people: they make them experience the need for God's salvation.

With the *fifth seal* another invisible power is discovered, one that moves sacred history: the demand for justice for the blood of martyrs. These martyrs, prior to Christ, already share in his victory (that is why they wear a *white garment*); yet they must wait to be joined by other martyrs, the Christian martyrs of the early Church, for God to bring about his justice (see Mt 23:35).

With the *sixth seal* we have the appearance of the signs and plagues which the prophets announced for the Day of the Lord, and which would be fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem (Mk 13:24).

• **7.1** *Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the servants of our God* (v. 3). John takes stock of these centuries of God's blessings and favors for his chosen people.

Seeing how the Jews as a whole did not accept Jesus, we might have the impression of a complete failure. John, however, presents an optimistic vision. The angels point out the elect. There are twelve thousand from each one of the tribes. We know that *twelve* is the number for fullness when it refers to the Jewish people. There were twelve tribes and this is why Jesus chose twelve apostles and we have to understand that the number of elect was the maximum, and that God was not disappointed.

Who are these elect? On one hand, they are the Jews who followed Jesus. They are also those who did not believe in him, through no fault of their own, but who were saved through his death and his resurrection.

Thus we have an inventory of the saved among God's people, Israel. Then a huge crowd that no one could count immediately appears.

After this I saw a great crowd (v. 9). There are the new people gathered by the Messiah, the followers of Christ coming from all the nations of the world, who join the believers of the Old Testament.

Gen
15:5

⁹After this, I saw a great crowd, impossible to count, from every nation, race, people and tongue, standing before the throne, and the Lamb, clothed in white, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰and they cried out with a loud voice, “Who saves, but our God, who sits on the throne, and the Lamb?”

¹¹All the angels were around the throne, the elders and the four living creatures; they, then, bowed before the throne, with their faces to the ground, to worship God. ¹²They said,

Amen. Praise, glory, wisdom, thanks, honor, power and strength to our God forever and ever. Amen!

22:14

¹³At that moment, one of the elders spoke up, and said to me, “Who are these people clothed in white, and where did they come from?” ¹⁴I answered, “Sir, it is you who know this.”

The elder replied, “They, are those who have come out of the great persecution; they have washed, and made their clothes white, in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵This is why they stand before the throne of God, and serve him, day and night, in his Sanctuary.

He, who sits on the throne, will spread his tent over them.

¹⁶Never again, will they suffer hunger or thirst, or be burned by the sun, or any scorching wind.

¹⁷For the Lamb, near the throne, will be their Shepherd, and he will bring them to springs of life-giving water, and *God will wipe away their tears.*”

Is 4:5

Is 49:10

Ps 23:1;
Is 25:8

8 • ¹When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven, for about half an hour. ²Then, I looked at the seven angels standing before God, who were given seven trumpets.

Zep 1:7;
Zec 2:17

³Another angel came, and stood before the altar of incense, with a golden censer. He was given much incense to be offered, with the prayers of all the holy ones, on the golden altar before

A great crowd, impossible to count (v. 9). The salvation of humanity will be an incredible success, despite appearances that discourage us so often: the people of God are being formed everywhere.

They are those who have come out of the great persecution (v. 14). This multitude of the saved are obviously not all martyrs, and yet John sees them depicted as martyrs. It is because every believer has a model in the martyrs who gave even their lives for their faith. Besides, John is speaking for Christians on the eve of the first great persecution.

Praise, glory and wisdom to our God (v. 12). This is another hymn to God our Savior. Those who sing God’s praises may have already seen, during their lives, that all wisdom, power and strength could only come from above.

• **8.1** *When the Lamb opened the seventh seal.* We have just seen how the multitudes entered into sacred history. What will happen later? John does not know and the silence that occurs at that moment probably covers many centuries. Therefore, Chapters 8 and 9 deal with the great trials that will be like a fore-

taste of judgment: an invasion of the powers of hell, unleashing of the plagues of violence and war...

Judgment was expected but this first vision of the people of Israel, welcoming the multitude of the baptized, concludes precisely then. In Chapter 10, a second vision starts: it begins with the coming of Christ and it is totally oriented to the future. Then, we will have the conflicts of Satan and the Church.

The following chapters often present angels. We have already said that these angels are part of the images used in apocalyptic literature: we are in the presence of a world of images.

We should also add that John shares a conviction that is expressed throughout the Scriptures: God’s creation is much broader than what we see and assess. Not only because it extends much further but also, because it is the theater of a tragedy whose actors are not only human beings. The spirits at God’s service have a place in the events of history and even in our relationship with God (Rev 8:3). Remember Luke’s reproach to the materialistic Sadducees: “They claim that there is neither resurrection, nor angels nor spirits” (Acts 23:8).

the throne; ⁴and the cloud of incense rose, with the prayers of the holy ones, from the hands of the angel, to the presence of God. ⁵Then, the angel took the censer, and filled it with burning coals from the altar, and threw them on the earth: and there came thunder, lightning and earthquakes.

The seven trumpets

• ⁶The seven angels with the seven trumpets prepared to sound them. ⁷When the first angel blew his trumpet, there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, which fell on the earth. And a third of the earth was burned up with a third of the trees and the green grass.

⁸When the second angel blew his trumpet, something, like a great mountain, was thrown into the sea, and a third of the sea was turned into blood. ⁹At once, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships perished.

¹⁰When the third angel sounded his trumpet, a great star fell from heaven, like a ball of fire, on a third of the rivers and springs. ¹¹The star is called *Wormwood*, and a third of the waters was turned into wormwood, and many people died because of the water, which had turned bitter.

¹²The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun, the moon, and the stars was affected. Daylight decreased one third, and the light at night as well.

• 6. With the first four trumpets, punishment comes from the forces of nature that turn against sinners (see Wis 5:20-23). Our sins against creation lead us to death and according to the news, hundreds of millions of human beings are already living this apocalypse.

The fifth trumpet announces terrible conflicts. The images of these conflicts may be inspired from the terror that Parthians had sown in Palestine when their formidable archers had invaded it. In the Gospel, the prophecies about the end of Jerusalem had already seen in this

¹³And my vision continued: I noticed an eagle flying through the highest heaven, and crying with a loud voice, "Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the land, when the last three angels sound their trumpets."

9 • ¹And the fifth angel blew his trumpet. I, then, saw a star fall from heaven to earth. The star was given the key to the depths of the abyss. ²He opened the abyss, and a cloud of smoke rose, as if from a great furnace, which darkened the sun and the air.

³Locusts came from this smoke and spread throughout the earth. They were given the same harmful power as the scorpions of the earth. ⁴Then, they were told not to harm the meadows, the green grass or the trees, but only the people who do not bear the seal of God upon their foreheads. ⁵They were not to kill them, but only torture them for five months. This pain is like the sting of scorpions. ⁶In those days, people will look for death, but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them. ⁷These locusts look like horses equipped for battle; they wear golden crowns on their heads, and their faces are like those of human beings. ⁸Their hair is like women's hair, and their teeth, like lion's teeth; ⁹their chests are like iron breastplates; and the noise of their wings, like the roar of an army of chariots and horses, rushing for battle.

an image of the end of the world. Here, the sixth trumpet announces the punishment of pagans.

• 9.1 This chapter is one of those that most attracts curiosity and it gives to the word "apocalypse" the meaning that many people attribute to it: all the calamities on a world-scale. Throughout time, many people have wanted to read into it an exact description of their own time, to the degree that they were convinced that John thought only about them.

¹⁰Their tails are like those of scorpions and have stings; the power they have to torture people for five months is in their tails. ¹¹These locusts have a king, who is the angel of the abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, or Apollyon in Greek (Destruction).

¹²The first woe has passed. Two others are to come.

¹³The sixth angel blew his trumpet. Then, I heard a voice calling from the corners of the golden altar before God.

^{16:12} ¹⁴It said to the sixth angel, who had just sounded the trumpet, "Release the four angels chained at the banks of the great river Euphrates."

¹⁵And the four angels were released, who had been waiting for this year, this month, this day and this hour, ready to utterly destroy a third of humankind. ¹⁶The number of the soldiers on horses was two hundred million; this is the number I heard.

¹⁷In my vision, I saw those horses and their riders: they wear breastplates the color of fire, hyacinth and sulfur. The heads of the horses look like lions' heads; and fire, smoke and sulfur come out of their mouths.

¹⁸Then, a third of humankind was killed by these three plagues: fire, smoke and sulfur, which the horses released, through their mouths, ¹⁹for the power of the horses was both in their mouths and in their tails. Their tails, in fact, look like serpents, and their heads are able to inflict injury as well.

²⁰However, the rest of humankind

who were not killed by these plagues, did not renounce their way of life: they went on worshiping the demons, keeping those idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood that cannot see, hear or walk. ²¹No, they did not repent of their crimes, or their sorcery, or their sexual immorality or their theft.

What has been proclaimed by the prophets is fulfilled

10 • ¹Then, I saw another mighty angel, coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud. A rainbow was around his head, his face was like the sun, and his legs, like pillars of fire. ²I could see a small book open in his hand. He stood, his right foot planted on the sea and his left on the land, ³and called, in a loud voice, like the roaring of a lion. ⁴Then, the seven thunders sounded their own message.

Dn 12:4

I was about to write what the seven thunders had sounded, when a voice from heaven said to me, "Keep the words of the seven thunders secret, and do not write them down."

⁵And the angel I saw standing on the sea and land, raised his right hand to heaven, ⁶swearing by him, who lives for ever and ever, and who created the heavens, the earth, the sea and everything in them.

Dt 32:40

He said, "There is no more delay; ⁷as soon as the trumpet call of the seventh angel is heard, the mysterious plan of God will be fulfilled, according to the good news he proclaimed through his servants, the prophets."

Rom 16:25;
Eph 1:9;
Col 1:26

Dn 5:4;
Ps 135:15

• **10.1** Once again, the end of everything was expected with the seventh trumpet. Yet, before it is sounded, suddenly the seven thunders proclaim a mysterious word for humankind and it is said that: *The mysterious plan of God will be fulfilled* just as it has been proclaimed (v. 7).

The *secret word* (v. 4) may very well be the news that the word of God became human. As to the *small book*, it contains new events that

will accompany the spread of the Gospel. This means that Christ's coming does not put an end to history, nor does it bring heaven on earth.

John must *eat the book*, an expression that we already found in Ezekiel (2:8–3:4). It is both sweet and sour: the voice is sweet, but the task is difficult. Thus we understand that the history of Israel, imaged by the book of the seven seals (5:1), was not all of sacred history but only its first part, the Old Testament.

⁸And the voice I had heard from heaven, spoke again, saying to me, "Go near the angel who stands on the sea and on the land, and take the small book open in his hand." ⁹So, I approached the angel and asked him for the small book; he said to me, "Take it and eat; although it be sweet as honey in your mouth, it will be bitter to your stomach."

¹⁰I took the small book from the hand of the angel, and ate it. It was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, it turned bitter in my stomach. ¹¹Then, I was told, "You must, again, proclaim God's words, about many peoples, nations, tongues and kings."

The two witnesses

Ezk 40:3;
Zec 2:1

11 • ¹Then I was given a staff, like a measuring stick, and I was told, "Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, and count those who worship there. ²Do not bother to measure the outer courtyard, for this has been given to the pagans, who will trample over the holy city for forty-two months. ³Meanwhile, I will entrust my word to my two witnesses, who will proclaim it for one thousand two hundred and sixty days, dressed in sackcloth."

⁴*These are the two olive trees, and the two lamps, which are before the*

Zec 4:3

Lord of the earth. ⁵If anyone intends to harm them, fire will come out of their mouths, to devour their enemies: this is how whoever intends to harm them will perish. ⁶They have the power to close the sky, and hold back the rain, during the time of their prophetic mission; they also have the power to change water into blood, and punish the earth, with a thousand plagues, any time they wish.

2K 1:10

7:17;
1K 17:1;
Jas 5:17

⁷But when my witnesses have fulfilled their mission, the beast that comes up from the abyss, will make war upon them, and will conquer and kill them. ⁸Their dead bodies will lie in the square of the great city, which the believers figuratively call Sodom, or Egypt, where their Lord was crucified. ⁹And their dead bodies will be exposed, for three days and a half, to people of all tribes, races, languages and nations, who will be ordered not to have them buried.

Dn 7:25

¹⁰Then, the inhabitants of the earth will rejoice, congratulate one another, and exchange gifts among themselves, because these two prophets were a torment to them.

¹¹But after those three and a half days, a spirit of life, coming from God, entered them. They, then, stood up, and those who looked at them were seized with great fear. ¹²A loud voice from heaven called them, "Come up

2K 2:11

• **11.1** This is the beginning of Gospel times. During the forty years between Christ's departure and the end of Jerusalem, Christ's witnesses proclaimed the Gospel throughout the pagan world. This beginning of the time that Paul calls "time of the nations" was characterized in Palestine by continual crises. While God protects his true worshipers (those who are *measured* or set apart), the pagan Romans pressure and trample upon the *outer courtyard* representing most of the people of Israel who did not join the Church.

This page glorifies the Christian apostolate: its struggles, its martyrs and its reward.

The two witnesses personify Christian apostles of all times. Do not forget that Jesus sent

his disciples two by two. The fact that there are two is also a reminder that there are a variety of ministries in the Church. The two witnesses are also the two most famous apostles, Peter and Paul, both killed in the great city, Rome, between the years 64-67. Peter, the first head of Jesus' Church, and Paul, the apostle to the pagan nations.

To understand what is said about them, it is useful to know that all the comparisons used are taken from Scripture, especially from the texts that glorify the great prophets Moses and Elijah:

– *They will proclaim my word dressed in sackcloth* (v. 3). The apostle preaches repentance and a more austere life.

here.” So they went up to heaven, in the midst of the clouds, in the sight of their enemies.

¹³At that moment, there was a violent earthquake, which destroyed a tenth of the city, and claimed seven thousand victims. The rest were overcome with fear, and acknowledged the God of heaven.

¹⁴The second woe has passed. The third is coming soon.

• ¹⁵The seventh angel blew his trumpet; then, loud voices resounded in heaven: “The world has now become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ. He will reign for ever and ever.”

¹⁶The twenty-four elders, who sit on their thrones before God, bowed down to worship God, ¹⁷saying,

*We thank you, Lord God,
Master of the universe,*

*who are and who were,
for you have begun your reign,
making use of your invincible
power.*

¹⁸*The nations raged
but your wrath has come,
the time to judge the dead
and reward your servants the
prophets,
the saints and those who honor
your Name—
whether great or small—
and destroy those who destroy the
earth.*

¹⁹Then, the Sanctuary of God, in the heavens, was opened, and the Ark of the Covenant of God could be seen inside the Sanctuary. There were flashes of lightning, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and a violent hail-storm.

12:10;
Ps 2:2;
Dn 2:44

Ps 2:1;
46:7

15:5;
2Mac
2:8

TOWARD THE FUTURE: THE WORLD AND THE CHURCH

The woman and the dragon

12 • ¹A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman, clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her head. ²She was pregnant, and cried

out in pain, looking to her time of delivery.

³Then, another sign appeared: a huge, red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and wearing seven crowns on its heads. ⁴It had just swept

Ps
104:2;
Dt 6:10;
Gen
37:9;
3:16

Mic 4:9;
Is 7:14;
66:7

Dn 7:7;
8:10

– *One thousand two hundred and sixty days* (v. 3), that is to say, three and a half years, meaning a time of trials. Let us recall the three and a half years of drought in Elijah’s time (Lk 4:25; James 5:17), the three and a half times of Daniel (7:25; 12:7).

– *These are the two olive trees* (v. 4), meaning: they are precious in the eyes of God: see Zechariah 4.

– *They have the power to close the sky* (v. 6), like Elijah, that is to say that God allows them to work miracles.

– *When my witnesses have fulfilled their mission* (v. 7). The forces of evil will not overpower them before God allows it. Only then will martyrdom come.

– *After three and a half days* (v. 9; again the symbolic figure for trials) they will be raised. They are already glorified by the Church that has its apostles and martyrs as mediators in heaven.

They already share the resurrection of Christ and their enemies learn that, in killing Christ’s witnesses, they did not destroy his work, which continues to grow victoriously.

Where do they die? The images point to both Jerusalem and Rome, meaning the Jews and the Romans in those first forty years of the Church. Stephen and James have been killed by the Jews; Peter and Paul, by the Romans, not to mention the rest of the early Christian martyrs.

• 15. With the blowing of the seventh trumpet the beginning of the kingdom of God in our world is announced. We see a heavenly temple that replaces the Jerusalem temple; a new Ark symbolizes the new Covenant of God with people of every nation.

• 12.1 Here begins the second part of John’s vision. The Church has left the Jewish

along a third of the stars of heaven with its tail, throwing them down to the earth.

The dragon stood in front of the woman, who was about to give birth, so that, it might devour the child as soon as it was born. ⁵She gave birth to a male child, the one who is to rule all the nations with an iron scepter; then, her child was seized, and taken up to God, and to his throne, ⁶while the woman fled to the desert, where God had prepared a place for her; there, she would be looked after, for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

Ps 29

Dn 12:1;
10:13Gen
3:15

• ⁷War broke out in heaven, with Michael and his angels battling with the dragon. The dragon fought back with his angels, ⁸but they were defeated, and lost their place in heaven. ⁹The great dragon, the ancient serpent, known as the devil, or Satan, seducer of the whole world, was thrown out. He was hurled down to earth, together with his angels.

¹⁰Then, I heard a loud voice from heaven:

*Now has salvation come,
with the power and the kingdom
of our God,
and the rule of his anointed.*

*For our brothers' accuser has been
cast out,
who accused them night and day,
before God.*

¹¹*They conquered him, by the
blood of the Lamb,
and by the word of their testimony,
for they gave up their lives, going
to death.*

¹²*Rejoice, therefore, O you heavens, Is 44:25
and you who dwell in them;
but woe to you, earth and sea,
for the devil has come to you, in
anger,
knowing that he has but a little
time.*

• ¹³When the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to earth, he pursued the woman, who had given

Gen 3:1

world and the horizon is expanded. The Church is going to win over the nations, by struggling against the power of the devil. We have the beginning of a series of seven signs or visions in the sky. The first two present the protagonists of sacred history, the Woman and the Dragon, the People of God and the Devil.

A woman appeared. She seems surrounded with glory, but she is suffering labor pains. This represents humanity. At the beginning of Scripture, it was represented by Eve, the woman who sinned. Now we see humanity the way God wanted it to be: suffering birth pains because our entire history is the painful preparation for our salvation. She gives birth to a boy, who is Christ himself. The Savior is the fruit of God's love for humankind. Salvation comes from God and from people at the same time.

The woman represents humanity cooperating with God's plans; it is also Mary who gives birth to Jesus; it is also the Church *fled to the desert* (v. 6), that is, living spiritually withdrawn from the world and nourished by the word of God during the persecutions: *one thousand two hundred sixty days* (v. 6), or three and a half years.

The snake is the one of the first sin, except that it is better clothed. The seven heads indicate the multiplicity of its inventions; the *ten*

horns (v. 3) (imperfect number) state that its power is surmountable. It was defeated in heaven, even though it managed in its fall to drag down a number of angels (*a third of the stars*; v. 4). See 8:10.

As to the *male child* (v. 4), Satan was preparing to destroy him on the cross, but when he rose he escaped from the evil of the serpent.

• 7. God's plan for the world has just been revealed: the Son of God must become a human and rise as the Savior of all people. This mystery causes a double crisis: in the world of spirits (or angels) and in humankind.

The Jews imagined the angels were a huge army and they called their head Michael. Similarly, the devil is presented as the head of the army of rebellious angels, *the stars fallen from heaven*.

The following chapters will reveal the devil at work in history. He uses disguises and many substitutes. However, those who are ready to suffer for the truth will recognize him: *they conquered him by the blood of the Lamb* and by their courage in proclaiming him (v. 11).

• 13. Sin and rebellion against God began in the world of spirits. Being rejected from that world, the devil attacks those *who keep God's*

19:4;
Is 40:31

birth to the male child. ¹⁴Then, the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that, she might fly into the desert, where she would be looked after for three and a half years. ¹⁵The serpent poured water out of his mouth after the woman, to carry her away in the flood, ¹⁶but the earth came to her rescue: it opened its mouth and swallowed the flood, which the dragon had poured from its mouth. ¹⁷Then, the dragon was furious with the woman, and went off to wage war on the rest of her children, those who keep God's commandments and bear witness to Jesus. ¹⁸And he stood on the seashore.

The beast and the false prophet

11:7;
Dn 7:3

13 • ¹Then, I saw a beast, rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on its horns. On each head was a

title challenging God. ²The beast I saw looked like a leopard, with paws like a bear and a mouth like a lion. The dragon passed on his power, his throne and his great authority to the beast.

Dn 7:4

³One of its heads seemed to be fatally wounded but this wound healed. The whole earth wondered and they followed the beast. ⁴People prostrated themselves before the dragon, who had given such authority to the beast, and they prostrated themselves before the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast? Who can oppose it?"

Lk 4:6

⁵The beast was given speech; and it spoke boastful and blasphemous words against God; it was allowed to wield its power for forty-two months. ⁶It spoke blasphemies against God, his name and his Sanctuary, that is, those who already dwell in heaven.

Dn 7:8

⁷It was allowed to make war on the

Dn 7:25

commandments (v. 17), beginning with the best and most outstanding people in the Church. The struggle will never end. Those who dream of achieving peace in this world are forgetting the presence of the Evil One.

• **13.1** The devil tries to stop Christ's victory and to convince people that, in practice, Christ is not the master of life. If they wish to live, they must surrender their freedom and their conscience to another lord, namely, political power.

First generation Christians lived in the Roman empire that, after two centuries of conquests and organized action, managed to bring under one ruler many different people. People were marveling at the "Roman peace" and the prosperity that followed. They did not know the dangers of a totalitarian society: when John was writing, the emperor Domitian had just imposed on all his subjects the obligation to honor him as a god.

Under these circumstances, Christians had to make painful choices. By confessing Christ, the Lord of life, they would face persecution. John points to their responsibility: to remain faithful to Christ and refuse to worship Caesar. A handful of Christians would victoriously face the totalitarian state: the Church would conquer by the blood of its martyrs.

This is the point of the present vision. The two animals represent the two powers that join

forces in service of the dragon, namely, the devil against the Church.

The first beast *looked like a leopard* (v. 2). It represents the persecuting power of the Roman empire, through images taken from Daniel 7:3-7. It comes from the sea, or the West, from Rome. The vitality and power of the Roman empire are like a caricature of the resurrection.

Then I saw another beast rise out of the earth, with two horns like the Lamb (v. 11). This beast comes from the continent, from the East, from Asia. It represents the religions that were competing with Christianity. They pretended to offer a heavenly salvation, but they did not condemn the sins of the Roman world, especially the corruption of society.

Speaking like the dragon (v. 11). These Asian religions were used, as are many religious groups in the world today. It is a fact that the agents of political pressure in the prosperous countries spend a great deal in the religious domain, and very often in the Third World; it is to paralyze the Church.

Persuading them to make a statue of the beast (v. 14). There was a religious movement behind the divinization of Rome and emperor worship. The cult of personality was not special only to the Roman Empire: it is deeply rooted in humans. Whatever its form it is threatening to the purity of faith.

The devil's tactic consists in joining strong power with an ideology that Christians cannot

saints and to conquer them. It was given authority over people, of every tribe, language and nation; ⁸this is why all the inhabitants of the earth will worship before it, those, whose names have not been written in the book of life of the slain Lamb, since the foundation of the world.

⁹Let anyone who has ears to hear, listen: ¹⁰*If your lot is the prison, to prison you will go; if your lot is to be killed by the sword, by the sword will you be slain.* This is, for the holy ones, the time of endurance and faith.

¹¹Then, I saw another beast rise out of the earth, with two horns like the Lamb but speaking like the dragon. ¹²This second beast is totally at the service of the first one, and enjoys its authority. So, it makes the world, and its inhabitants, worship the first beast, whose mortal wound has been healed.

¹³It works great wonders, even making fire descend from heaven to earth, in the sight of all.

¹⁴Through these great wonders, which it is able to do on behalf of the beast, it deceives the inhabitants of

the earth, persuading them to make a statue of the beast which, although wounded by the sword, is still alive. ¹⁵It has been allowed, to give a spirit to this statue; the statue of the beast speaks, and those who refuse to worship it are killed. ¹⁶So, this second beast makes everyone—great and small, rich and poor, free and enslaved—be branded on the right hand, or on the forehead, ¹⁷and no one can buy or sell, unless he has been branded with the name of the beast, or with the number of its name.

¹⁸Let us see who is wise! If you are clever, you can interpret the number of the Beast; it is 666 and it is the name of a certain person.

144,000 on Mount Zion

14 ¹I was given another vision: The Lamb was standing on Mount Zion, surrounded by one hundred and forty-four thousand people, who had his name, and his Father's name, written on their foreheads. ²A sound reverberated in heaven, like the sound of the roaring of waves, or

accept: this is what happens now in all the countries that have no respect for the most basic requirements of conscience. Harassed both by leaders and public opinion manipulated by modern techniques of propaganda, believers must face open or disguised persecution. Economic problems give new means of pressure to power groups that can condemn people to lose their bread-earning work: they can no longer buy or sell, obtain work or study (v. 17).

Six hundred sixty-six (v. 18): In books of that time, it was a common device to assign a numerical value to every letter of the alphabet and to get the "number" of an individual. Six hundred sixty-six can be figured out many ways, but it may correspond to "Emperor Nero." We know that six means something imperfect: the one who tried to be seven (representing perfection) and did not make it.

We know that in the past some anti-Catholic polemicists wanted to make this number apply to the pope. These fantasies have nothing to do with the content of this paragraph. Besides, those who know how to play with the numerical value of names can easily apply the number

666 to any of the people they know, with just a little patience. Thus, this number 666, even written by John, should be seen as a game. It was also a way of not openly attacking the Roman emperor.

• **14.1** Facing the forces that Satan gathers in the Roman empire are the forces of Christ. The Beast must take advantage of the time granted to it, because Christ already rules and the judgment that will put an end to the persecuting power is being prepared.

The Lamb was standing on Mount Zion. Zion represents the Church, both the earthly and the heavenly Church. Christ rules in the Church in the very midst of those who are persecuted. Repression, chains and death do not reach the secret temple of every person, where Christ communicates his life and his presence.

The 144,000 point to the Christians in the Roman empire who remain firm in their faith. They are "the first redeemed" and they represent the believers of future centuries.

Some people who take everything literally state that the saved will number 144,000. Why

3:5

Dn 12:1

Jer 15:2;
Rev
14:12

Mt 7:15

Mt
24:24;
2Thes
2:9

Dn 3:5

14:9;
16:2

17:9

Ps 2:6;
Jl 3:5;
Ezk 9:4

deafening thunder; it was like a chorus of singers, accompanied by their harps.

^{5:9; Is 42:10} ³They sing a new song before the throne, in the presence of the four living creatures and the elders, a song, which no one can learn, except the hundred and forty-four thousand, who have been taken from the earth. ⁴They are those who were not defiled with women, but were chaste; these are given, to follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They are the first taken from humankind, who are already of God and the Lamb. ⁵No deceit has been found in them; they are faultless.

⁶Then, I saw another angel, flying high in the sky, sent to proclaim the definitive good news to the inhabitants of the earth, to every nation, race, language and people. ⁷He cried out with a loud voice, "Give God glory and honor, for the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him, who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and all the waters."

⁸Another angel followed him, crying out, "Fallen is Babylon the great, fallen, the prostitute, who has made all

the nations drunk with her unleashed prostitution!"

⁹A third angel, then, followed, shouting aloud, "If anyone worships the beast, or its image, or has his forehead or hand branded, ¹⁰he will also drink the wine of God's anger, which has been prepared, undiluted, in the cup of his fury: he will be tortured by fire and brimstone, in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb." Mt 10:28

¹¹The smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever; for there is no rest, day or night, for those who worshiped the beast and its image, and for those who were branded with the mark of its name. Is 34:10

¹²This is the time for patient endurance among the holy ones, for those who keep the commandments of God and faith in Jesus. ¹³I heard someone from heaven say, "Write this: Happy, from now on are the dead who have died in the Lord. The Spirit says: Let them rest from their labors; their good deeds go with them." Is 57:1; Heb 4:10

¹⁴Then, I had this vision. I saw a white cloud, and the one sitting on it, like a *son of man*, wearing a golden Dn 7:13

do they not read 7:4-9 where 144,000 represents the elect "of the Jewish people," without mentioning a great crowd, impossible to count, from among all the other peoples?

They *were chaste*. In 7:9 the Christians were represented by martyrs; here John says *virgins*, and the word has two meanings, the same as the word adultery elsewhere: on one hand, they did not worship the Beast; and on the other hand, they were freed from the tyranny of sex.

They sing a new song (v. 3). When the Lord saved Israel at the Red Sea, the people sang the *Canticle of Moses* (Ex 15:1). Now, believers and martyrs sing the New Song to celebrate their liberation from hatred, from their own weakness and from the fear of death, through Christ.

- 6. Evangelization eventually prepares the fall of the city and its idols (v. 8), foretold as lasting good news, but, for the time being, repression is unleashed against the witnesses of Jesus (v. 9).

The persecuting empire is called *Babylon*: in

Scripture, this name symbolizes a power hostile to God. Its ruin will show how God judges unjust structures.

When major crises and the most atrocious wars occur, many people say, "This is the end of the world." So, when the Roman empire collapsed three hundred years after John, many people thought it was the end of civilization. With time, however, people saw that a larger field was opening up to the proclamation of the Gospel.

If anyone worships the beast... (v. 9). Here are stressed the strongest words in the Gospel on the necessity of proclaiming one's faith (Mt 10:28-33).

Happy from now on are the dead who have died in the Lord (v. 13). John sees the victorious martyrs and other witnesses of Christ, and he encourages them by saying that, from the moment of their death, they already enjoy a share in the promised happiness. Their happiness will be complete at the resurrection: Philipians 1:23 and 2 Corinthians 5:8.

Mt 13:39 crown on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. ¹⁵An angel came out of the Sanctuary, calling loudly, to the one sitting on the cloud, "Put in your sickle and reap, for harvest time has come, and the harvest of the earth is ripe." ¹⁶He, who was sitting on the cloud, swung his sickle at the earth and reaped the harvest.

¹⁷Then, another angel, who also had a sharp sickle, came out of the heavenly Sanctuary. ¹⁸Still, another angel, the one who has charge of the altar fire, emerged, and shouted to the first, who held the sharp sickle, "Swing your sharp sickle, and reap the bunches of the vine of the earth, for they are fully ripe." ¹⁹So, the angel swung his sickle and gathered in the vintage, throwing all the grapes into the great wine press of the anger of God. ²⁰The grapes were trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, to the height of the horses' bridles, and over an area of sixteen hundred furlongs.

15 ¹Then, I saw another great and marvelous sign in the heavens: seven angels brought seven plagues, which are the last, for with these, the wrath of God will end. ²There was a sea of crystal, mingled with fire, and the conquerors of the beast, of its name and the mark of its name stood by it.

They had been given the celestial harps, ³and they sang the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb:

Great and marvelous are your works,

*O Lord,
God and Master of the universe,
Justice and truth guide your steps,
O King of the nations.*

⁴*Lord, who will not give honor and glory to your name?*

*For you alone are holy.
All the nations will come and bow before you,
for they have now seen your judgments.*

The seven cups

• ⁵Then, the Sanctuary of the Tent of Divine Declarations was opened, ⁶and the seven angels, bringing the seven plagues, came out of the Sanctuary, clothed in pure and bright linen, with their waists girded with golden belts. ⁷One of the four living creatures gave the seven angels seven golden cups, full of the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. ⁸Then, the Sanctuary was filled with smoke that wraps God's glory and power, so that no one could enter, until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.

16 ¹I heard a loud voice calling from the Sanctuary to the seven angels, "Go, and empty on the earth, the seven cups of the wrath of God."

²The first angel went to empty his cup on the earth, and malignant and painful sores appeared on the people who bore the mark of the beast, and had bowed before its image. ³The second angel emptied his cup into the sea, which turned into blood, like that of the dead, and every living thing in the sea died.

• **15.5** Here we return to the awaited fall of Rome to see its religious meaning in a more developed form. The seven bowls combine images from the plagues of Egypt and various prophetic texts.

The *Tent* of Divine Declarations reminds us of the Tent (called: tent of meeting) that was Israel's Sanctuary in the desert.

Armageddon (or the Hills of Megiddo, 16:16) recalled a famous defeat in Jewish history (2 K 23:29) and it is a symbol to predict the defeat of those who are assembled there. With this, John announces the inevitable judgment of God and the hour for destruction of the anti-Christian civilization ruling the world.

7:19 ⁴The third angel emptied his cup into the rivers and springs, that turned into blood. ⁵And I heard the angel of the waters say, "You, who are and who were, O Holy One, you are just in punishing them in this way; ⁶since they have shed the blood of your holy ones and the prophets, you have made them drink blood; they rightly deserved it." ⁷I heard another cry from the altar, "Yes, Lord and God, Master of the universe, your judgments are true and just."

⁸The fourth angel poured out his cup on the sun, and its heat began to scorch people. ⁹They were severely burned, and began to insult God, who has power over those plagues, instead of acknowledging him.

10:21 ¹⁰The fifth angel emptied his cup on the throne of the beast, and suddenly his kingdom was in darkness, and the people bit their tongues in agony. ¹¹They insulted the Most High God for their pain and wounds, but they did not repent.

¹²The sixth angel poured out his cup on the great river Euphrates; then, its water was dried up, leaving a free passageway for the kings of the east. ¹³I saw coming from the mouths of the monster, the beast and the false prophet, three unclean spirits, which looked like frogs. ¹⁴They are, in fact, spirits of demons, that perform marvelous things, and go to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for battle on the great day of God, the master of the universe.

¹⁵"Beware! I come like a thief; happy is the one who stays awake, and does

not take off his clothes; so he will not have to go naked, and his whole body be exposed for all to see."

¹⁶Then, they assembled them, at the place called Armageddon in Hebrew (or the Hills of Megiddo).

¹⁷The seventh angel emptied his cup into the air. Then, a voice came forth, from the throne, and was heard outside the Sanctuary, saying, "It is done." ¹⁸And there were flashes of lightning, peals of thunder and a violent earthquake. No, never has there been an earthquake so violent, since people existed on earth. ¹⁹The great city was split into three, while the cities of the nations collapsed. For the time had come for Babylon the Great to be remembered before God, and to be given the cup of the foaming wine of his anger.

²⁰Then, the continents withdrew and the mountain ranges hid. ²¹Great hailstones from heaven, as heavy as stones, dropped on the people, and the people insulted God, because of this disastrous hailstorm, for it was truly a terrible plague.

The judgment of Babylon

17 • ¹Then, one of the seven angels of the seven cups came to me, and said, "Now, I will show you the judgment of the sovereign prostitute, who dwells on the great waters. ²She, it is, who let the kings of the earth sin with her; and with the wine of her lewdness, the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk."

³The angel brought me to the desert: it was a new vision. There, a woman

4:5;
Dn 12:1;
Mk 13:19

6:14;
9:22

Jer 51:13

18:3;
Is 23:17;
Jer 51:7

3:3;
3:17;
1Thes 5:2

• **17.1** *I will show you the judgment...* God reveals the true value of the prosperous and powerful persecuting city.

To people living in the empire, Rome personified everything in the empire and its culture. When they came to the capital, they were dazzled by its buildings, its movement, theaters, lights, the life of its countless population. Thus

it was not difficult for them to venerate Rome as a goddess.

The duration of the empire, with its reputation of being invincible and divine, is pure illusion, for the *Beast*, the evil one who supports it, passes away, unlike God who is and will come. Rome is described as a possessed woman. The purple, color of the emperors, and the gold,

was seated on a red beast. The beast, which had seven heads and ten horns, covered itself with titles, and statements that offend God. ⁴The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, with ornaments of gold, precious stones and pearls. She held in her hands a golden cup, full of loathsome idolatry and impure prostitution. ⁵Her name could be read on her forehead, written in a mysterious way: *Babylon the Great, mother of prostitutes and of the loathsome idols of the whole world.* ⁶And I saw, that the woman was drunk with the blood of the holy ones and the martyrs of Jesus.

What I saw greatly surprised me, ⁷but the angel said to me, "Why are you surprised? I will reveal to you the secret of this woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that she mounts. ⁸The beast you saw has been, though, it, is not. It will come up from the abyss, and then go to perdition. What a surprise for the inhabitants of the earth, whose names are not written in the book of life, from the creation of the world! They will marvel, on discovering, that, the beast who has been, is not, and passes away.

⁹Let us see if you guess: the seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits. And they are also seven kings, ¹⁰five of which have already fallen, one is in power, and the seventh has not yet come, but will remain only a short while. ¹¹The beast that has been

but, is not, can be considered as the eighth, though it takes place among the seven; and it goes to perdition.

¹²The ten horns are ten kings, who have not, yet, received power, but will have authority, for an hour, with the beast. ¹³They all have, only one aim, and they place their authority and power, at the service of the beast. ¹⁴They will fight against the Lamb, but the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings; and with him, will be his followers, who have been called, and chosen, and are faithful.

¹⁵The angel went on, "Those waters you saw, on which the prostitute is seated, are peoples, multitudes, and nations of every language. ¹⁶The ten horns, and the beast itself, will plan evil against the prostitute. They will destroy her, and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh, and set her on fire. ¹⁷God makes use of them, to carry out his plan, so he has inspired, them with their common purpose, and they will place their power at the service of the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled. A last word: ¹⁸the woman you saw, is the great city which reigns over the kings of the whole world."

18 • ¹After this, I saw another angel, coming down from heaven. So great was his authority, that the whole earth was lit up with his glory. ²In a strong voice he cried out:

sign of their wealth, cover up its impurity and cruelty. At the same time it brings people to serve false gods and to murder martyrs.

To describe the near future of Rome, John uses symbols: some of them are easy to interpret. The seven hills point to Rome without a doubt. The seven kings are a figure symbolic of the emperors.

The *ten horns* are the kings of the barbarian people allied with Rome. These satellites will be God's instruments in destroying it. Nevertheless, they will continue as forces hostile to the Church.

The Lamb and his followers will conquer them (v. 14). From now on, every believer is associated with Christ's victory, as long as she remains constant in her faith.

• **18.1** *Fallen is Babylon the great!* (v. 2). This is what the prophets shouted when they announced the fall of the oppressive city (see Jer 50 and 51). In prophesying the fall of Jerusalem, Jesus said: "Lift up your heads..." (Lk 21:28).

Depart from her, my people! (v. 4) Live in the world without being of the world, do the

2Thes
2:7;
1P 5:13

Ezk
16:36

20:12

13:18

Dn 7:24

Dn 10:17;
Rev 19:
211-21;
1Tm
6:15

Ezk
16:39

11:8

14:8;
Is 21:9;
34:11

“Fallen is Babylon the great! Fallen! She has become a haunt of demons, a lodge for every unclean spirit, a nest for any filthy and disgusting bird.

³She has made all nations drunk with the wine of her lewdness, fornicated with kings of the earth, and glutted the world’s merchants with her wantonness and wealth.”

⁴Then, I heard another voice from heaven:

“Depart from her, my people, lest you share in her evil, and so share in her punishments; ⁵for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God keeps count of her crimes.

⁶Give back to her as she has given, pay her twice, for what she has done. Let her drink a double portion of what she made others do.

⁷Give her as much torment and grief as the wantonness she enjoyed herself.

Is 48:20;
52:11;
Jer 50:8

Gen
18:20

Is 47:8

impossible to convert this society, its aspirations, its culture, but do not alienate your soul. When God’s judgment is made on these diseased structures, be ready to leave all and return to the desert, to poverty, rather than lying down among the dead of history (see Phil 3:20).

MUST WE LOOK FOR A GREAT BABYLON IN THE WORLD TODAY?

John saw the rule of the Beast in the Roman empire and he prophesied its fall. He said very little about what would come after.

In speaking about the empire that he knew, John teaches us how to view the empires of this century, for our world also is the theater of the struggle of the Dragon against the Woman. This Roman Empire created a civilization and a culture that we have inherited. The fact that John condemned it does not mean that everything in it was bad: let us remark, incidentally, that Christ wanted his apostles to establish the center of his Church precisely in Rome.

The great Babylon is of all times and is recognized in every power which pretends to give people a total solution to their problems while enclosing them in their net. We are leaving a century where many have identified it according to their personal point of view, be it international capitalism, or materialist socialism. It would be false to think that only one of these systems served the plans of the devil: the master of this world respects no frontiers and plays equally well on both sides. Atheist governments persecute the Church but very often the Church confronts violent or subtle persecution from the liberal classes or from dictatorships that pretend to be attached to Christian principles. A Church in which the best “good news” is for the poor will necessarily be persecuted by systems that produce millions of marginalized people.

We are used to a liberal style of life where no moral values exist any longer: what remains is the search for maximum pleasure in life with each one a “prostitute” to the gods he has fabricated or chosen. The apparent triumphs of our liberal world these last years may let us forget for a time its “ignorance of God” (Rom 1), as

was the case of Rome. We must be sufficiently alert to foresee and hope for the judgment to come.

SHALL WE RELATE OUR LADY’S APPARITIONS TO APPROACHING JUDGMENT?

We have tried to show that the Revelation is not a description of what must precede the end of the world, but rather that it unveils the sense of history, either at the beginning or the end. Nevertheless, the sudden acceleration of the march of humanity is a fact: more has been achieved in a century than in thousands of former centuries and more in fifty years than in the course of the preceding century.

From another perspective, the density of human beings (more than 6 billion!) and the multiplication of materials they use have made human life increasingly complex and tense. Each day offers more effective means of doing evil and submitting it to Satan. The important apparitions of Mary in the course of the last century are for some people further signs that we are approaching the end: should we agree with them?

With regard to the annunciation (Lk 1:26) we have shown that not only did God give Mary a mission but that he loved her in a special way. Mary and the Church are two expressions of God’s plan of salvation. To both may be applied the sign of the Woman and the Dragon in Chapter 12.

The plan of salvation however is constantly in danger: the greatest obstacles and delays come from the Church herself, so often blind to the demands of the Gospel while she intends to conquer the world. Why these heavy and alienating structures which finally make the Church a benefit mainly for clerics and learned people while closing it to the poor or to the masses?

It is not then surprising that the Virgin Mary uses the grace received from the Lord and intervenes from time to time to visit the poor. She does not bring a new message or revelation that many people expect (that is why many such revelations are forged and do very well). Mary

For she said to herself,
‘I sit as queen, I am not a widow,
never, will I go into mourning!’

⁸And so, suddenly, her plagues will
come—

death, mourning and famine.
She will be consumed by fire,
for mighty is the Lord, the judge,
who has passed sentence on her.”

⁹The kings, who shared her luxury,
and committed adultery with her, will
see the smoke as she burns, and they
will weep and lament. ¹⁰They will, nev-
ertheless, keep their distance, terrified
at her punishment, and exclaim:

“Alas, alas! Great city that you are,
O Babylon, seat of power!

Your doom has come in a single
hour!”

¹¹The merchants of the world will
mourn over her, for they will lose a
market for their goods—¹²their car-
goes of gold and silver, precious stones
and pearls, fine linen and purple gar-
ments, silk and scarlet cloth, fragrant
wood, ivory pieces and expensive fur-
niture, bronze, iron and marble, ¹³cin-
namon and spices, perfume, myrrh
and frankincense, wine and olive oil,
fine flour and grain, cattle and sheep,
horses and carriages, slaves and
human lives. ¹⁴They will say:

“Gone is the fruit you longed for.
Gone are your luxury and splendor.
Never will you recover them, never!”

¹⁵The merchants who dealt in these
goods, who grew rich from business
with the city, will stand at a safe dis-
tance, for fear of her punishment.
Weeping and mourning, ¹⁶they will
cry out:

“Woe, woe to the great city,
to the linen and purple and scarlet
you wore,
to your gold and pearls, your finery,
¹⁷your great wealth, destroyed in
an hour!”

Every captain and navigator, every
sailor and seafarer, will stand afar,
¹⁸crying out, on seeing the smoke
going up, as the city burns to the
ground. “What city could have com-
pared with this one?” ¹⁹They will pour
dust on their heads and cry out in
mourning:

“Alas, alas, great city,
where all, who had ships at sea,
grew rich, through her trade!
In an hour, she has been devastated.”

²⁰*Rejoice over her, O heavens!
Rejoice, prophets, saints and
apostles!*

God has rendered justice to you.

²¹A powerful angel picked up a ^{Jer}
boulder, the size of a large millstone, ^{51:63}
and threw it into the sea, saying:

“With such violence will Babylon,
the great city, be thrown down, never
again to be seen.

²²Never again, will tunes of harp-
ists, minstrels, trumpeters and flutists
be heard in you. Never again, will an
artisan of any trade, be found in you.
Never again, will the noise of the mill
be heard.

²³Never again, will the light of a
lamp shine in you. The voice of bride-
groom and bride will never, again, be
heard in you.

Because your traders were the
world’s great, and you led the nations
astray by your magic spell. ²⁴In this

Ezk
26:17;
27:28

Ezk
27:27

re-speaks the words of the Gospel and in such a forceful way as to multiply conversions. The apparitions infer a failure of the Church: Mary comes to the help of her forgotten children. It is one of the channels through which the Holy Spirit is heard—the Spirit who has never fin-

ished repeating the Gospel through prophets and wonders.

If these apparitions have become more frequent it is perhaps because the Church is more threatened today; but if Satan is more active, it is probably because the end is near.

16:6; Mt 23:35 city was found blood, of prophets and saints—yes, the blood of all who have been slain on the earth.”

Songs in heaven

19 • ¹ After this, I heard what sounded like the loud singing of a great assembly in heaven:

Alleluia! Salvation, glory and might belong to our God,

² for his judgments are true and just.

He has condemned the great harlot who corrupted the world with her adultery.

He has avenged his servants' blood, shed by her hand, in harlotry.

14:11; Is 34:10 ³ Once more, they sang: *Alleluia! The smoke from her goes up, for ever and ever!*

⁴ The twenty-four elders, and the four living creatures, fell down and worshiped God, seated on the throne. And they cried: *Amen! Alleluia!*

Ps 115:13 ⁵ A voice came from the throne: “Praise our God, all you, his servants, all you, who revere him, both small and great!”

⁶ Then, I heard what sounded like a great crowd, like the roaring of the waves, like peals of thunder, answering:

Alleluia! The Lord now reigns, our Lord, the Master of the universe!

Is 61:10 ⁷ *Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!*

This is the time to celebrate the wedding of the Lamb, his bride has made herself ready. ⁸ Fine linen, bright and clean, is given her to wear.

This linen stands for the good works of the holy ones.

⁹ Then, the angel told me, “Write: Mt 22:1 Happy are those invited to the wedding of the Lamb.” And he went on, “These are true words of God.”

¹⁰ As I fell down at his feet, to worship him, he said to me, “Beware, I am but a servant, like you and your brothers, who utter the testimonies of Jesus (these testimonies of Jesus are proclaimed through the spirit of the prophets). Worship God alone.” 22:8

The triumph of the word of God

• ¹¹ Then, I saw heaven opened, Is 11:4; 1Jn 5:20 and a white horse appeared. Its rider is the *Faithful and True*; he judges, and wages just wars. ¹² His eyes are flames of fire; he wears many crowns, and written on him is his own name, which no one can understand, except himself. ¹³ He is clothed in a cloak, 1:14; Dn 10:6; Is 63:1; Jn 1:1 drenched in blood. His name is the *Word of God*.

¹⁴ The armies of heaven, clothed in pure white linen, follow him on white horses. ¹⁵ A sharp sword comes out of his mouth. With it, he will strike the nations, for he must rule them with 1:16; Ps 2:9; Is 63:3

• 19.1 Triumphant songs in heaven.

The huge multitude rejoices over the prostitute's condemnation and shouts “alleluia,” for the wedding of the Lamb is to take place.

Happy are those invited to the wedding of the Lamb (v. 9). Now John speaks of delight and joy when the noise of Babylon and its pleasures have ended. Its lights shine no more and the deeds of the “saints”—heroic actions or humble service—shine brightly.

At the end of the paragraph John criticizes the excessive interest in angels that was threatening to replace the worship of pagan gods; it is perhaps a new warning against the cult of personality in the Church itself (compare 19:10; 22:8; Acts 10:26).

• 11. Here we have the continuation of Chapters 13, 14, 15 and 16, after the parenthesis of Chapters 17 and 18. The seven angels poured out the bowls of punishment for the Beast and the decisive encounter was expected. Then Christ appears.

His name is the Word of God (v. 13). He is the *male child* born of the woman, and he is to rule all the nations with an iron scepter (12:5). Christ comes triumphantly. His true name is Word, Word of God; this is his divine reality that only he understands. See John 1:1-14 in that respect.

The heavenly armies follow him: as Jesus announced several times (Mt 16:27).

The Word of God, powerful to conquer, at

an iron rod. He treads the wine press of the burning wrath of God, the Master of the universe. ¹⁶This is why, this title is written on his cloak and on his thigh: King of kings and Lord of lords.

¹⁷I also saw an angel, standing in the sun. He cried out with a loud voice, to all the birds of the air, "Come here, to the great feast of God. ¹⁸Come, and eat the flesh of kings, of generals and of the mighty; come, and devour the soldier and his horse, flesh of all, both free and slaves, both small and great."

¹⁹Then, I saw the beast, with the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together, to fight against him, who rides on the horse, and his army.

²⁰But the beast was captured, with the false prophet who served it, and performed signs, by which he deceived those, who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped its statue. The two were thrown, alive, into the fiery lake of burning sulfur, and all ²¹the rest were killed by the sword, which comes from the mouth of the

rider who mounts the horse. And all the birds were fed with their flesh.

The thousand years

20 • ¹Then, an angel came down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the Abyss, and a huge chain. ²He seized the monster, the ancient serpent, namely Satan or the devil, and chained him for a thousand years. ³He threw him into the abyss, and closed its gate with the key, then secured it with locks, that he might not deceive the nations in the future, until the thousand years have passed. Then, he will be released for a little while.

⁴There were thrones, and seated on them were those with the power to judge. I, then, saw the spirits of those who had been beheaded, for having held the teachings of Jesus, and on account of the word of God. I saw all those, who had refused to worship the beast, or its image, or receive its mark on the forehead, or on the hand. They

work to save, *faithful* to fulfill God's promises, *truthful* in what he says, the one who *wages just wars*. The just wars are the wars waged against the devil and his allies: the persecuting power (the Beast) and the doctrines providing opium instead of salvation (the false prophets).

This page is John's prophecy concerning the destruction of the persecuting Roman empire. It was fulfilled and that empire disappeared. In reading this page we are reminded of the defeats of the invincible Roman armies, and the breakdown of this huge body, whose soul was faith in the divinity of Rome and its Caesar-Emperor. Christ did not come to do battle against the Roman armies: a certain number of soldiers were already converted to the Christian faith. (Many young Christians enlisted in the army were the missionaries of Christ wherever they went and even had martyrs among them!)

Instead, the victory announced by the Apocalypse was the victory of Christ and the martyrs who, through their sacrifice, destroyed the cruelty, injustice and immorality of the pagan world. A believer's daily struggle was the victory of Christ. The day came, however, when the Lord brought justice before the sight of everyone: *Come and eat the flesh of the kings, of generals and of the mighty* (v. 18).

• **20.1** This text is still used for many contradictory and confusing commentaries. Some think of an earthly paradise of a thousand years before heaven. This, however, would be going against all the clear teaching of the New Testament, affirming there is no intermediary period between this life and eternal life.

This vision may be another way of presenting our history, by stressing its positive aspects and successful evangelization. These thousand years stand for the time during which the Church, liberated from Jewish and Roman persecutions, evangelizes the world.

The growth of the Church marks the weakening of the devil's power: *he is chained* (v. 2). A wave of thought and Christian action will renew the world. Let us think of the struggle against various forms of slavery, the restoration of manual work, a new appreciation of the dignity of women and of marriage, and respect for the human person and children.

I then saw the spirits of those who had been beheaded (v. 4). They are already sharing in the life and happiness of Christ, and in some way they share in his reign over history and, along with him, they are present in the life of the earthly Church. Let us think of the growing influence that people who committed

Dt
10:17;
1Tim
6:15

Ezk
39:17

Ezk
39:20

12:9

2Thes
2:9

Dn 7:9;
Mt 19:28;
1Cor 6:2

returned to life, and reigned with the Messiah for a thousand years. This is the first resurrection. ⁵The rest of the dead will not return to life before the end of the thousand years.

⁶Happy and holy is the one, who shares in the first resurrection, for the second death has no power over them; they will be priests of God, and of his Messiah, and reign with him a thousand years.

⁷At the end of these thousand years, Satan will be released from his prison; ⁸then, he will set out to deceive the nations of the four corners of the world, namely Gog and Magog, and gather them for war. What an army, so numerous, like the sand of the seashore! ⁹They invaded the land, and surrounded the camp of the holy ones, the most beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and devoured them.

¹⁰Then, the devil, the seducer, was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet already were. Their torment will last day and night, for ever and ever.

The last judgment

• ¹¹After that, I saw a great and splendid throne, and the one seated upon it. At once, heaven and earth disappeared, leaving no trace. ¹²I saw the dead, both great and small, standing before the throne, while books were opened. Another book, the book of life, was also opened. Then, the dead were judged, according to the records of these books, that is, each one according to his works.

¹³The sea gave up the dead it had kept, as did death and the netherworld, so that all might be judged, according to their works. ¹⁴Then, death and the netherworld, were thrown into the lake of fire. This lake of fire is the second death. ¹⁵All who were not recorded in the book of life were thrown into the lake of fire.

The new heaven and the new earth

21 • ¹Then, I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and no longer was there any sea. ²I saw the new Jerusalem, the holy

1Cor
15:26;
15:54

Is 65:17;
66:22;
2P 3:13

Is 52:1;
61:10;
Gal 4:26

themselves to a sacred and noble cause, have after their death.

At the end of these thousand years (v. 7). We do not know how long the world will last, nor how many cultures and empires will confront the Church. Yet John tells us about a last crisis during which the Church will seem submerged by the forces of evil (see 2 Thes 2:3). There is no description of what will happen: enough has already been said about the struggle of the Church against the agents of the devil for us to be able to imagine what it could be.

Fire came down from heaven (v. 9). This final offensive will be overcome just like the first one. Here the battle is described with images borrowed from Ezekiel, Chapter 38.

• 11. *Heaven and earth disappeared* (v.11). At the end of the world, we have the final judgment.

The books were opened (v. 12). Using images from the book of Daniel (7:10), John shows people being judged individually according to their actions. Everything is written in the book: what people did, said and thought.

Death and the netherworld were thrown (v. 14): this is a way of saying that Christ's final victory consists in destroying death, which rules over the world as a consequence of sin (see 1 Cor 15:26).

The previous chapters spoke repeatedly of God's judgment, against Jerusalem, or against the Roman power, or against the nations replacing it. Thus, the Apocalypse does not really stress the final judgment of the world that only recapitulates what has been said before. It prefers to describe the New Jerusalem coming from God: this is what we have in the last two visions that follow.

• 21.1 First vision of the heavenly Jerusalem. "Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it dawned on the mind what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9).

Scripture began with a vision of the first creation in which God was conversing with Adam, his friend, in the garden of Eden. The Apocalypse ends with a more beautiful vision in which there is overflowing delight in God. See, *I make*

city, coming down from God, out of heaven, adorned as a bride prepared for her husband. ³A loud voice came from the throne, "Here is the dwelling of God among mortals: *He will pitch his tent among them, and they will be his people; he will be God-with-them.*

⁴He will *wipe every tear from their eyes.* There shall be no more death or mourning, crying out or pain, for the world that was, has passed away."

⁵The One seated on the throne said, "See, I make all things new."

And, then, he said to me, "Write these words, because they are sure and true."

⁶And he said to me: "It is already done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I, myself, will give the thirsty, to drink without cost, from the fountain of living water.

⁷Thus, the winner will be rewarded: *For him, I shall be God and he will be my son.*

⁸As for cowards, traitors, depraved, murderers, adulterers, sorcerers, and idolaters—all those who live in falsehood, their place is the lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."

The new Jerusalem

⁹Then, one of the seven angels came to me, one of those with the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues. And he said, "Come, I am going to show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." ¹⁰He took me up, in a spiritual vision, to a very high mountain, and he showed me the holy city Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven, from God. It shines with the glory of God, ¹¹like a precious jewel, with the color of crystal-clear jasper.

¹²Its wall, large and high, has twelve gates; stationed at them are twelve angels. Over the gates are written the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel. ¹³Three gates face the east;

all things new (v. 5). The holy and permanent city of people has been built.

A new heaven and a new earth. The risen body of Christ was the principle of the new spiritual and material universe we were hoping for. Now, the power of his resurrection has transformed the whole world. It will not be a paradise for isolated "souls," nor for pure angels, but a city of human beings: humans have fully become God's children: *he will be my son* (v. 7).

He will wipe every tear (v. 4). God dwells among people and he pours his own happiness into them. The sufferings that filled so many lives, the martyrs' tortures, the inner pain of repentant sinners, all this is over. Such joy and peace, as cannot be found in any place on earth, are finally found in the heart of God.

The second death (v. 8). Being forever deprived of God, locked in one's sin and loneliness: a mystery for us. Human freedom is something so great and so real that God himself cannot force us to love him: those who have consciously and definitely left the path to life, will inherit the lake of burning sulfur (v. 8).

The holy city Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven (v. 10). Somehow, people tried to build the human community. At the end of history, they discover that along with them, God was building something much greater: a humanity gathered in the very life of God.

From now on. God, beginning and end, will

never cease to give the water of life (Is 55:1; Jn 4:10). Our eternity in God cannot be immobile: which would soon bore us. God is pure creativity and to live in him is both to possess him and to be carried further into his mystery.

• 9. Second vision of the heavenly Jerusalem: God's temple. There are two images at the heart of the Scriptures: the wedding banquet and the temple. After Jerusalem, the new bride, it is now the holy city, God's temple. People no longer need a temple when God is permanently present among them: reality replaces shadows.

Its length, breadth and height are equal (v. 16). A city built as a perfect square: perfect and lasting. Its wall, a symbol of security: there is no more fear, not even our hidden fear, the fear of feeling life slipping away. The brightness of the city is that of jasper and its primary foundation is of jasper: jasper is the color attributed to God in the fourth chapter.

There are angels at the gates as in the Garden of Eden: all is guarded and enclosed within the divine mystery. The wall of holiness and truth rests upon the apostles: the truth of the New World was already contained in their words, namely, the testimony of Jesus' apostles. The final city is the goal of humankind's long pilgrimage; without knowing it, the just, the poor, the merciful, and those who are sorrowful have been longing for it: *The nations will walk in its light* (v. 24).

three gates face the north; three gates face the south and three face the west. ¹⁴The city wall stands on twelve foundation stones, on which are written the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

Eph 2:20

¹⁵The angel who was speaking to me had a golden measuring rod, to measure the city, its gates and its wall. ¹⁶The city is laid out like a square: its length is the same as its breadth. He measured it with his rod and it was twelve thousand furlongs; its length, breadth and height are equal. ¹⁷Then, he measured the wall: it was a hundred and forty-four cubits high. The angel used an ordinary measure.

¹⁸The wall is made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, crystal-clear.

Is 54:11

¹⁹The foundations of the wall are adorned with every kind of precious jewel: the first is jasper, the second sapphire, the third turquoise, the fourth emerald, ²⁰the fifth agate, the sixth ruby, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh hyacinth and the twelfth amethyst. ²¹The twelve gates are twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl, and the square of the city is paved with gold, as pure as transparent crystal.

Jn 2:19

²²I saw no temple in the city, for the Lord God, Master of the universe, and the Lamb, are themselves its temple.

Is 60:19

²³The city has no need of the light

of the sun or the moon, since God's glory is its light and the Lamb is its lamp.

²⁴*The nations will walk in its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their treasures to it.* ²⁵*Its gates will not be closed at sunset, for there will be no night there.* ²⁶It is there, that the wealth, and the most precious things of the nations, will be brought. ²⁷*Nothing unclean will enter it, or anyone who does what is evil and false, but only those, whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.*

Is 60:3

Is 60:11

Is 35:8; Rev 3:5; 13:8

22 ¹Then, he showed me the river of life, clear as crystal, gushing from the throne of God, and of the Lamb. ²In the middle of the city, on both sides of the river, are the trees of life, producing fruit twelve times, once each month, the leaves of which are for healing the nations.

Ezk 47:1; Jn 7:38

2:7; Gen 2:9; Ezk 47:12

• ³No longer will there be a curse; the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and God's servants will live in his presence. ⁴They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵There will be no more night. They will not need the light of lamp, or sun, for God, himself, will be their light, and they will reign forever.

Ps 117:17:5

I am coming soon

• ⁶Then, the angel said to me, "These words are sure and true; the

1Jn 3:2

There was a fountain of life in paradise. Lost through sin, people were always searching for it. Ezekiel had already written that the living water is the Spirit of God and Jesus promised it to the Samaritan woman. Now it flows from the heart of God-Trinity, *from the throne of God and of the Lamb (22:1).*

• **22.3** *And they will reign forever* (v. 5). This is the final word and it is the seventh time it is said in Revelation.

• 6. *I, John, saw and heard all this* (v. 8). Thus Scripture concludes, and we can recall

the parable of the workers hired for the Lord's vineyard (Mt 20). The work in which prophets and writers participated in the course of a day is over. In the first hour the visions with which Genesis begins, and which briefly present the divine vocation of people and the purpose of the world, were written. In the final hour, John, after knowing Christ, the Morning Sun, has just seen humanity preparing to share the glory of God.

It is the final hour, the expected coming of Christ. We know, however, that the final hour may be extended and that the Groom may come late in the night: Christians are watchful,

Lord God, who inspires the prophets, has sent his angel, to show his servants what must happen soon.”

⁷“I am coming soon! Happy are those who keep the prophetic words of this book.”

^{19:10} ⁸I, John, saw and heard all this. When I had seen and heard them, I fell at the feet of the angel who had shown me everything, to worship him. ⁹But he said, “No, I am a fellow servant, like you and your brothers, the prophets, and those who heed the words of this book. It is God you must worship.”

¹⁰He, then, said to me, “Do not keep secret the prophetic words of this book, because the time is near. ¹¹Let the sinner continue to sin, and the defiled, remain in his defilement; let the righteous continue to do what is right, and he who is holy, grow holier.”

¹²“I am coming soon, bringing with me the recompense I will pay to each one, according to his deeds. ¹³I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.”

¹⁴Happy are those who wash their robes, for they will have free access

to the tree of life, and enter the city through the gates. ¹⁵Outside are the dogs, sorcerers, the immoral, murderers, idolaters, and all who take pleasure in falsehood!

¹⁶“I, Jesus, sent my angel, to make known to you these revelations concerning the churches. I am the shoot, and offspring of David, the radiant morning star.”

• ¹⁷The Spirit and the Bride say, ^{21:6} “Come!” Whoever hears, let him say, “Come!” Whoever thirsts, let him approach, and whoever desires, let him freely take the water of life. ¹⁸As for me, I warn everyone who hears the prophetic words of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will pile on him, the plagues described in this book. ¹⁹And if anyone takes away words from this book of prophecy, God will take from him, his share in the tree of life, and the holy city described in this book.

²⁰He who has declared all this says, ^{1Cor 16:22} “Yes, I am coming soon.”

Amen! Come, Lord Jesus.

²¹May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all!

firm in their hope, even as they face the Power of Darkness.

• 17. *Whoever thirsts, let him approach.* We already read in 21:6 these words taken from Isaiah 55. The child becomes an adult when he gives up his unlimited wishes and accepts the limitations of reality. God sends us back to childhood when he stirs up within us infinite desires. “Let it be done to you as you have asked,” that is, what you were able to desire and hope for and believe.

Desire is the way God prepares us for the great things he wants to give. It is our first consciousness of his work within us. Desires that are like the seeds of the parable. Many are sown

that soon vanish, or we ourselves cut off their wings: “This is not for me, it is enough and safer to imitate the good common Christians.”

Yes, it is safer to live with limited desires, because desire can develop into yearning.

Many experience thirst for God but few are those who can bear it. We call it boredom, incapacity to share social life, and the remedy that people of goodwill usually offer to us is to plunge again into activity and to “come back to the onions of Egypt” (Num 11:5) or, in other words, to love the world. Better keep your thirst and let it grow, and reject any satisfaction that is less than the infinite of God. The time is coming when it will be said: *Let him approach.*

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