



CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

Catholic Scripture Study Notes written by Sister Marie Therese, are provided for the personal use of students during their active participation and must not be loaned or given to others.

SERIES IV

THE PROPHETS AND REVELATION

Lesson 20 Commentary Revelation 1-3

Lesson 21 Questions Revelation 4-5

THE CHURCH IN TIME AND ETERNITY

Revelation 1-3

INTRODUCTION

God has the first word, says St. John in his Gospel. "In the beginning was the word" (John 1:1). In Revelation He has the last word, for it is the last of the Scriptures, the Word of God.

This book was first given "to Jesus Christ so that he might show it to his servants" (Revelation 1:1). Then Jesus sent it by an angel to John, a prisoner on the lonely island of Patmos (because he shared the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ with others). John was told to write what he will see and send it to the Churches.

Jesus is in an eternal presence with His Father and the Holy Spirit. With them are the vast numbers of those of earth who were made for heaven. What is the life there for them? Are they aware of us? How closely does Jesus care for us? As we read and as we listen to the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus in this last inspired writing, we will find a great certainty, a new longing for what we read about in Revelation.

APOCALYPTIC WRITING

This kind of literature began about 200 years before Christ, when Israel's faith was outlawed by

foreign conquerors—Daniel was written in that style. It was meant to strengthen, encourage, and instruct God's persecuted people. This necessitated veiled language as in war times—messages are in code. The symbolic sights and words are described with rich colors, harmonious words, and challenging visions. The symbolic language was clear to the persecuted, but misunderstood by those outside the community of believers.

Nations then had their traditional gods. When Greece and then Rome had conquered all the known countries, their own gods became less important for their empire. Yet that was what had kept unity for each nation. So Nero, the cruel Roman emperor, saw that fact and began to present himself as the chief god of the Empire. Anyone not bowing down at his name or image was persecuted. St. Peter and St. Paul were martyred under Nero in 67 A.D. (C.E. or "Common Era"—used today by historians instead of the Latin, *Ad Dominum* or A.D., which is Christian). Alas for the change!

Around 90 years after Christ, the Emperor Domitian waged a cruel persecution against Christians sending John to Patmos, after being boiled in oil (tradition). Unjust and jealous rulers

at that time were fearful and envious at thoughts of such a rival as Jesus Christ, taught as the Son of God.

Revelation was not intended as prophesy, though it has some prophetic messages; it was intended as a promised future. It teaches us, who are also tempted to compromise with paganism and our own false gods, that power over all creation, over justice for all, lies with God and His son Jesus. The promises of Jesus will inevitably come to permanent reality—the only values. For the description of Christ in this great book is that of a triumphant King, dominating the nations, if necessary, with a rod of iron. He is the Son of Man triumphant over empires; He is the promised Messiah, fulfilling the Old Testament, which is frequently used in Revelation as a transformation of Israel into “a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people” (Peter 2:9), for all nations and races.

APPLICATION

For Christians, the teaching of Jesus and His value system must not be compromised in any way. For us, this means a moral commitment to resist evil in our society, to wipe out evil, not to accept it. To give in, a little bit here and there, saying, “It won’t make much difference” is a deception.

We are easily enticed as we face the materialistic and secularized values of our society, of those who say, “Stay in the sacristy” to the Church, “The state organizes life here on earth!”

We in our times have just seen the utter falsehood, the impossibility, of stamping out the truth and the worship of the one true God. In a few weeks, we saw eastern Europe and Russia miraculously, wonderfully, saved from atheistic Communism... but our country has its own lack of truth.

This may have already caught America in a situation worse than the Jews had or the early

Christian church had, or even those who have been enduring Communism’s atheism and its persecutions. For America may have been conquered by materialism—love of the goods of this world. America may have been conquered by greed and opulence. Do you accept the responsibility to choose different values for yourself and family than the world values and offers to us, insistently and constantly in our news media and entertainment?

Loyal resistance is the cause of death of our martyrs of every age, but the cause also of their eternal happiness and glory among the citizens of heaven. To be counted by God as His own we need to hear “what the Spirit says to the churches. The victor shall not be harmed by the second death” (Revelation 2:11).

PROLOGUE TO THE REVELATION OF JOHN

After explaining the sources of the revelation, from God down to John, the first of seven Beatitudes is given. It “blesses” us directly from God, if we (1) read aloud the message, (2) listen to the message, and most importantly, (3) “heed what is written” or read (Luke 11:28, Revelation 1:3).

The twenty-two chapters in Revelation are so arranged that we go with them back and forth from earth and its evils and troubles, to heaven, its angels, the Lamb, and God’s Throne. The disasters on earth because of sin are interspersed with happiness and beauty in heaven, so that we never lose sight of that reality.

Revelation is a powerful statement to the church on earth and to each of us, of a permanent and unbeatable reality—the presence and the power and the protection of the all powerful God—of the Church, which is the Body of Christ. We are part of that, each of us. We are on the winning side. A firm confidence, strengthened in our growing relationship with the Lord Jesus, His Father, and His Holy Spirit is our own resource.

I. LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA MINOR

A. Greeting (Revelation 1:4-8, Psalm 89:36-37). John begins with the usual opening of a letter in those days and adds the source of his visions and his understanding: “from Him who is, who was, and who is to come—the eternal One, and from the “seven spirits before his throne (the Holy Spirit with his seven gifts?) and from Jesus Christ” to whom John ascribes three roles:

1. A faithful witness to His Father and to the Truth (John 7:17, 8:32, 14:6-7).
2. The first born from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:20).
3. The King of Kings, the ruler of the kings of the earth, who loves us and has freed us. Finally, John gives what Jesus has made of us: a “royal nation of priests” a kingly and priestly nation, united to Jesus and sharing His roles in the service of His God and Father (Revelation 1:6, 1 Peter 2:4-5, 9). Lastly, Jesus is one who died for all and who promises his second coming (Matthew 24:30). The greeting ends with a description of God similar to our phrase “from A to Z,” the beginning and the end of all that is, the Alpha and the Omega (the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet).

B. First Vision (Revelation 1:9-20)

1. The Lord’s Day. “On the Lord’s Day I was caught up in an ecstasy” (absorbed in God). Patmos was, for John, an aloneness, separated from the usual sights and sounds and rush and push. It gave to God John’s whole self to listen and to see what God tells and shows. This can be the reason for us also to find an “island” to give time and mind to God. A vision, an insight into God is meant to put us on our knees at His feet. In life we can be awed worshippers, sacrificing sufferers, or devoted offerers. Perhaps He will put us there by circumstances, and in our aloneness we

will see His hand, as an invitation to see Him and hear His word in Holy Scripture.

That is what the Lord’s Day is meant to be for us: freedom from work, rush, hectic life, noisiness, and speed: freedom to experience the spiritual part of us; to nourish it, to let God’s Spirit speak to ours, His mind teach us and send us again into His world to “bear witness to Jesus, who alone can save.” Let your life during the week, after such a Lord’s Day, “shine before all that they may see goodness in you and give honor to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16).

2. The Presiding Spirit. Each of Jesus’ messages to the churches is addressed to such a person. It is sometimes translated as “angel” for the tradition has been that countries, churches, and people have “guardian” angels. Jesus, however, is speaking through John, who can hardly communicate this through an angel; so, many think the “presiding spirit” could be the leader of the community, the bishop (episcopoi), as Paul left Timothy and Titus in charge of the churches at Ephesus and Crete (1 Timothy 1:3, Titus 1:5).

3. Description Of Jesus (Revelation 1:9-17, Daniel 7:13). “The Son of Man, standing among seven gold lampstands.” This description that John uses identifies Jesus as a human being, the only one that He used to refer to Himself while on earth. Would we refer to ourselves by our least honorable title (Matthew 8:20, 9:6, 12:8)?

In the old Testament book of Daniel there is a remarkable vision (Daniel 7:13-14) with this title, “Son of Man.” A late old Testament book, an apocalyptic book, ENOCH, well-known and once reputed as a possible choice of inclusion in the Bible, has passages that remarkably describe Jesus as Son of Man, and gives many truths of His life.

The figure that John sees wears an ankle-length robe (priesthood) (Exodus 28:4), a gold sash (kingship), has snow-white hair (eternalness), eyes shining like fire (infinite knowledge), feet of

polished brass (everlasting), voice like a trumpet (divine authority), and a two-edged sword in his mouth (judgment, reward and punishment) (Hebrews 4:12-13); His face shone like the sun (Matthew 17:2).

We see here an example of clothing defining roles; the long white robe suggests what is whole and free in a priest who presents us to God and God to us, like a bridge (in Latin, “pontifex” used as Pontiff, title of a pope). A priest brings together the human and the divine. He opens up routes closed by fear, guilt, ignorance, or superstition. He is on God’s side and on man’s side.

In His right hand, Jesus has seven stars, which He explains are the “angels” (bishops, leaders) of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the churches. Here may be the allusion to the authority passed down from each apostle: the episcopoi (bishop in our language, or his delegate, a priest, presbyter).

The normal reaction of one who sees such a vision of a heavenly visitor was what John did: “I fell down at his feet as though dead” (Revelation 1:17, Isaiah 6:5). Then Jesus touched him with His right hand. For John, probably the Apostle who traveled the roads and waterways of Galilee and Judea with Jesus at his side, that touch of His hand was reassuring. It was the Jesus he knew, “one like a son of man.”

The gold standing for the churches reminds us of the high quality of God’s gift of the Church. Many would rather find or look for Christ himself and not be bothered by the Church. Jesus, however, though He is pre-existent with the Father, glorious in the heavens, is received in the assembly of ordinary people who gather to worship and witness to Him.

The white hair stands for the ancient one, His eternity, and His purity like snow. He even bestows this purity to contrite sinners. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they will become white as snow!” (Isaiah 1:18, Psalm 51:7).

Jesus’ voice like a trumpet is a symbol of the power of the words of God. The most distinctive feature of Christian faith is its respect for the Word: God’s word, and our words of prayer, of confession, of witnessing to Christ. These are the gifts we can give to the world, so caught in material, earthly passing glory and pleasures. There is one CSS member who invites workers in her business to arrive thirty minutes early for sharing words of God in Scripture before the day’s work. A new spirit among them, a new courage and purpose comes to the place that day.

4. The First Century Church. First, there was Jesus, who invited twelve men to Himself and taught them to be the foundation of His church; afterward, there was each apostle with his believing community (Matthew 10:1-4, 2 Peter 1:1-2).

John was forcibly separated from his Christians for the love of Christ, so the churches came to John on his island, in the vision of gold candlesticks. Were they lighted? We wonder about the candles... Are we light on our church’s lampstands (Matthew 5:14-16)?

What John wrote there on Patmos and gave to the churches is to be read and heard in each Church in its time—an act by a community that lives by faith. Some believe that the book of Revelation should be read aloud in our churches as it was in those seven churches. All the letters of Paul, of John, of Peter, were shared by being read aloud in other churches (Colossians 4:15-16). The readings in church are to be pondered on as Mary did when Jesus was born (Luke 2:19). Re-reading and pondering makes a difference in our lives.

C. Christ’s Messages to the Churches. When John wrote the Revelation to these churches, they had been “in Christ” for more than fifty years and their first love and loyalty had been damaged by elements from Satan or the world around them without God. Each needs spiritual direction. There are points to be corrected, weak-

nesses to be strengthened. Christ, like any good parent, reproves and promises.

Jesus is aware of our holiness and faithfulness, and of our flaws and failures in following Him. Enthroned in heaven, He walks among the churches, among us! How does He give us spiritual direction?

(1) As he did for the seven churches, Jesus teaches and guides us through the apostles, John, and their successors, with their representatives, the priests. The writings of the New Testament particularly, and the Word of God in the Old Testament also, are for our spiritual direction.

(2) The occasion in the Church of a definite need to clarify what the church believes, requires a church council of all the bishops and their chief bishop, the Pope. This is called an ecumenical council; there have been 21 of these. Our Vatican II council made some important decisions for the church.

So we are guided by Jesus and his representatives clearly; with much more unity in faith and practice than exists in the “protesting” Christian Churches.

(3) Another interesting spiritual direction in the Church comes from the saints, especially those called Doctors and Fathers of the Church. Do you know their teachings?

Another source for our spiritual direction are the visions approved by the church as worthy of belief. There is no requirement of belief in these, but simply that they have not been found unworthy of belief. The most important of these have been of the Blessed Virgin: Guadalupe, Lourdes, and Fatima, the one most amazing, Medjugorje, is still with us. These visionaries continue to be instructed by Our Lady (since 1981), and have not been silenced by the Church, God’s representatives.

1. Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7). Called today the “New York of Asia” by Scripture scholars, Ephesus was a port city with a temple dedicated to the worship of the Roman emperors.

John is believed to have been the bishop of Ephesus. In Acts, Ephesus was first taught Christianity by St. Paul (Acts 19:1-12). Later, Paul called the elders of the church there to meet with him for the last time when he was on his way to trial and martyrdom in Rome (Acts 20:17-18, 27-28). St. Ignatius, bishop of the important port of Antioch, also sent a letter to Ephesus. These letters are still extant (preserved) and may be read to learn of the earliest Christian writings outside of the Bible. In our lessons on Luke’s Gospel (Series I) their Eucharistic teachings are the same as we believe today.

In all of the messages to the churches, Jesus refers to Himself by one of the titles in Revelation 1:5-8, then, with the phrase “I Know,” He praises the good marks of Christians in that church, and follows with a clear reproof for departures from their high calling. Jesus is aware of our parish too.

The Ephesians have “lost the love they had at first.” Jesus misses that, since He has such divine love for those for whom he died; yet Ephesus must have departed from more than that, for Jesus will “remove their lampstand from its place” if there is no repentance. Some scholars interpret that to mean ex-communication, others that Ephesus will lose its place as a church, which, in fact did happen, for the town and church disappeared in history at some early point. What was Ephesus has long been fields.

Perhaps Ephesus was placed first among the seven because their failure was in the one most important Christian virtue: love of God and neighbor. The most important text in New Testament literature about love is St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians 13:1-8. Nothing else can compare to this quality and strength of a Christian: “the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Yet, having been the major city, placed as the first of the seven churches in Revelation, and the receiver of such an important letter from St. Paul, who spent three years there, Ephesus was and is a very special church in the New Testament. St. Clement (190-210) wrote: “the apostle John,” being invited, came back to Ephesus from Patmos, to appoint bishops, ordain to clerical state, and to set whole churches in order in neighboring cities (The seven churches here?). Further, the tradition that St. John the Apostle became bishop there, and that the Mother of Jesus resided there under his care until her death, makes Ephesus a cherished place, at least in the early church for if destroyed we can not visit there! What does exist is the church of St. John the Evangelist, on a hill, even a house “where Mary lived”; in addition, the ruins of the temple of the pagan goddess, Diana.

2. Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11). Smyrna is the second largest city in modern Turkey, a beautiful city with an air of a resurrection, for at one time it was destroyed and lay in ruins for 300 years, then was built anew and thrives today.

Jesus found no fault with Smyrna; He “knows” how they are suffering from the slander of the Jews, “members of Satan’s assembly.” They are also poor, but are rich in virtues. “Have no fear says Jesus, even though the devil will cast some into prison and put them all to the test, but “only for ten days.”

All this will bring about an obedience which will keep them faithful till death... and then “I will give you the crown of Life!” (Revelation 2:10). In a vision later, we will read about Jesus’ followers with crowns of gold, “the crown of life.”

There will be many martyrs in the next 200 years in the empire until Christ and the church win the victory: an emperor, Constantine, becomes a Christian. The story says that his mother, St. Helena, made a pilgrimage to the land where Jesus died, had Calvary’s hill dug, and found the three crosses. One of them healed a cripple; it has,

it is said, been reduced to splinters, too many of them to have even belonged on a cross that size...

From the message to Smyrna, we can see that God is in final control. Jesus doesn’t promise freedom and victory in this life, but when we enter the permanent life, the “forever and ever” one, there will be victory, joy, and fulfillment (Romans 8:18, Revelation 21:1-4). The “second death” that Jesus mentioned in Revelation 2:11 is the final judgment to unrepentant sinners at their death.

3. Pergamum (Revelation 2:12-17). Pergamum had a member they prized and Jesus honors him in His message. Antipas, one of the earliest martyrs, died for the faith there.

Jesus reproved those who adapted themselves to the pagan culture—eating food sacrificed to idols, and falling into sexual sins, probably sacred prostitution. There is nothing sacred about our culture’s sexual sins—a supreme being has no part of their lives. Today freedom is considered the right to do anything that you believe right.

Pergamum’s self-centered permissive society was hard on the Christians who rejected its false religion. Some headway among the Christians had been made by the Nicolaitan heresy whose members merged their Christian faith with paganism.

Pergamum was the “Washington” of Asia, the Roman seat of government, with a temple for the state religion—worship of the emperor. “You live,” said Jesus, “in the very place where Satan’s throne is erected” (Revelation 2:13). Pergamum had a vast library; we still use a product that got its name from Pergamum—parchment.

4. Thyatira (Revelation 2:18-29). Christ praises what He sees of love, faith, service, and patient endurance, and notices new efforts in living their faith. Yet He sees a dangerous weakness: a woman in Thyatira, whom He calls Jezebel after the Old Testament conniving wife of King Ahab, was a self-styled prophet, who influenced others to lewdness and to accepting food offered

to idols. Jesus has given her a chance to repent, but she refused to give up her lewdness, so He “will cast her on a bed of pain; her “companions in sin” will also have intense pain and some will die.

“You tolerate a Jezebel” may be addressed to the “presiding angel,—the bishop or his representative.” Authorities in God’s plan, parents on up, can not show toleration for error and sin, but must strive against it. Perhaps if we look at our lives we will realize that a pattern of sin or fault which occasions efforts to correct us, will be through misfortunes or illness. The love of Jesus is much like a parent’s. To discipline others is hard, but it saves them from evil and its effects. “Hold fast to what you have,” he says to the other members, “until I come.” The wonderful promise is far more than any ordinary citizen in Thyatira (or the city where you live) will have: “To the one who keeps my ways to the end, I will give authority over the nations—authority I received from my Father” (Revelation 2:26).

5. Sardis (Revelation 3:1-6). Sardis receives a severe word: “You have a reputation of much life, but you are dead” (Revelation 3:1). “Wake up, strengthen what you have left before it dies!” Sardis’ Christians believed that feverish activity and external works substitute for real worship, real faith and love. Yet, the parish has members who seek and receive spiritual growth and have true faith. Others seem misguided, all on the surface. “If there is not change, I will come like a thief at a time you don’t know.” Members of churches can be secure, complacent, untroubled by persecution, avoiding hardship, who base life on convenience rather than zeal. Those who grow spiritually “will walk with me clothed in white because they are worthy” (Revelation 3:5).

6. Philadelphia (Revelation 3:7-13). To the last two Churches, Jesus speaks of a door, “which no one can close,” which points to opportunities to share the faith with others. Do you do this with the young under your care? They will receive the faith through you; they know it from

your words and your life, how you react to good and bad. If they learn faith and goodness from you and do the same for their children, these too are added to your victories in Christ.

Even the Jews who oppose Christians so fiercely will “come and fall at your feet,” and will learn of Jesus’ love for the Philadelphians. But there will be a testing time. There will be opposition but also opportunities. The “pseudo-Jews” who claim the prophets’ promises will find them “fulfilled in the Christians” (Revelation 3:9, Matthew 23:13). It is Jesus who has the “Key of David” (Isaiah 22:22). The rewards promised are the temple in the New Jerusalem, and “your own new name.”

7. Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-22). The worst kind of complaint from Christ is to the Laodiceans, for mediocrity: “You are neither hot nor cold,” says Jesus. It’s as though Christ is saying, “You make me sick!” If only you were hot or cold! The Lord would prefer a cold Christianity rather than indifferences and lukewarmness.

Laodicea is much more interested in attending to other things. It was a proud banking town with a professional class of doctors and merchants. It was known for two fine products: a popular black woolen cloth and a special kind of eye ointment. Material prosperity, Jesus declares, has caused a spiritual poverty. Has that happened to you? A love of their security and their riches causes them to be “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” none of which they recognized. What does Jesus offer to them? “Buy from me, gold tried and refined in fire, and you will be truly rich; buy from me white garments to cover your nakedness.” To God our superfluous possessions, ever coveted and craved, ever offered by advertisers to entice you, leaves a soul naked. What have you bought from Jesus to be refined in his fire, the fire he uses (Luke 3:15-16, Acts 2:3-4)? Do you see better, using Jesus’ ointment on your eyes? Do you see truth better, yourself more truly?

As a climax to the words of Jesus to His seven churches (meaning all the churches, ours as well), Jesus tells us that He stands outside our door, knocking and calling. This door must be opened from the inside. If you do recognize His knocking and open your door to Him again and again He will make you “a victor”; you will be given a place beside Him.

APPLICATION

Jesus walked among the candlesticks to show that He was among His followers; they were not alone; His love and His care “shepherds” them, through one chosen by Him or the representative of that authority. In this case, John was given the

message; he was to give it to the “presiding angel”—clearly there is an authority in the churches, who is addressed first.

Jesus is with each church, each community of Christians who gather “on the Lord’s Day” (Hebrews 10:25). From their baptisms, Christians know their lives as miracles of resurrection, Lord’s Days. He is among us, just as real as He was to those first communities. And He “knows” us; the faithful ones, the trouble-makers, those who stray. He does not stop being there, nor is he too busy to join us.

This can build our trust, our care for our group...

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QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 21
Revelation 4-5

Day 1 Read the notes.

- a. Give one fact that impressed you in the introduction.
- b. Choose a message to the churches that fits our parishes and times. Explain.
- c. From page 2, APPLICATION, underline a sentence or two that helps you.
- d. Give a value presented and promoted by our American society, that attacks Christ's values.

Day 2 Read Revelation 4:1-6a and Exodus 19:16, Daniel 2:28, Isaiah 6:1, Genesis 9:12-17 and Zechariah 4:2

- a. In verse 1, is there anything that appeals to you or moves you? What do you think?
- b. Who do you think the "24 elders" are?
- c. In all this description in Revelation 4:2, 5-6 try to explain the reality the symbol presents.

Day 3 Read Revelation 4:6b-11, Exodus 24:9-10, Isaiah 6:1-3.

- a. What would "eyes all over" signify?
- b. Consult the footnote on Revelation 4:7 (in the New American Bible). Try to explain the connection between each animal and its symbol.
- c. When do we today sing the words that the four living creatures "never stopped singing"? What does the phrase "never stopped singing" tell us?

Day 4 Read Revelation 5:1-5, Philippians 2:10, Isaiah 29:11.

- a. Why do you think John wanted so badly to have the scroll read?
- b. Read Romans 15:10-12 . What does it say to you about Jesus?
- c. Over whom has the Root of Jesse triumphed (John 16:33, Isaiah 11:1-10, 1 John. 2:13-14)? What does the Church offer to help everyone overcome the Evil one?

Day 5 Read Revelation 5:6-10, Isaiah 53:7, Leviticus 1:10-11, John 1:29, Romans 3:23-26.

- a. In what way could the Lamb appear to “have been sacrificed”?
- b. What impresses you the most in the hymn that the living creatures and the elders sang to the Lamb?
- c. How does Romans 3:23-24 help you?

Day 6 Read Revelation 5:11-14, Daniel 7:10, Jude 1:14-15.

- a. How did those singing hymns in Revelation 5:9-14 feel about Jesus’ sacrifice?
- b. How do we show this in our “liturgy”?
- c. Did these verses in chapter 5 help you in any way? Explain.