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THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Chapter 2

Opening Prayer

Let us pray.

Direct, O Lord, we beseech you,
all our actions by your holy inspirations,
and carry them on by your gracious assistance,
that every prayer and work of ours
may begin always from you,
and by you be happily ended.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Source Material

- *Revelation*, Peter S. Williamson
- *Revelation, Sacra Pagina*, Wilfrid J. Harrington, OP
- *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Joseph Ratzinger
- *The Antichrist*, Vincent P. Miceli, SJ
- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*
- *New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE)*
- *Douay-Rheims Bible*

Introduction to chapters 2-3

What follows in chapters 2-3 are the specific messages of the Lord to the seven churches. These are written in fairly straightforward language and are the “easiest” chapters to understand.

- These chapters relate to what is happening “now” in those communities and the larger world. The rest of the book (chapters 4-22) is about what will happen in the future.
- We can imagine these messages as a type of “gut check” or a “two-minute warning” before the end, giving each community a chance to change what they need to change before it’s too late
- Thoughts, words and deeds are all evaluated by the all-seeing judgment of Christ, who mercifully makes his judgment known
- Through specific to each one, all the churches are called to hear the messages – this includes us!
- The modern reader will do well to discern in honesty which attributes of the cities most match his own, and to hear the Lord’s admonition and exhortation to faith

Introduction to chapters 2-3

Each message will follow a similar pattern:

- Address: “To the angel of the church of ...”
- Self-identification of Jesus, using one or more of the images John described in chapter 1
- Evaluation of each church in terms of their faith and works
- Exhortation (or warning) based on the above evaluation
- Promise of salvation “to the victor,” meaning the one who heeds these words and remains faithful to Christ
 - *We will see this phrase often*
 - *Christ is the true victor, having already conquered death and sin. Those who are baptized into his Body and remain faithful to him will share in that victory unto eternal life. They themselves become “victors” in the eyes of Jesus.*

To the Church in Ephesus (2:1-7)

The City of Ephesus

- The fourth largest city in the Roman Empire and a major metropolitan area in the first century
- A regional center of commerce, culture, government and religion, located right on the coast of the Mediterranean/Aegean Seas and right in between the eastern and western provinces of the Empire
- The Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, was located there
- It was a major center of evangelization and was the site of St. Paul's most successful missionary effort. The city became a regional hub for further evangelization – likely to the other cities we'll see.
- Paul's letter to the Ephesians was to this church
- Home of the Apostle John and perhaps the Virgin Mary

To the Church in Ephesus (2:1-7)

Evaluation

- Jesus praises their works and their labors, referring to their efforts in building up the Church, aiding her evangelization work and caring for the poor.
- He also praises their endurance, a major theme in Revelation, indicating that they have had to suffer to some extent
 - *They were likely the target of persecution for their “strange” and counter-cultural Christian faith in the midst of a huge pagan city.*
 - *We might think of endurance in this sense as trusting and patient steadfastness in one’s faith in difficult times. A fruit of hope.*
- Jesus praises their intolerance of the wicked
 - *Important!!! Tolerance is not a virtue when it comes to false teachings in the faith!*
 - *The Ephesians knew their faith so well that they could easily recognize false teachers and reject their messages.*

To the Church in Ephesus (2:1-7)

Evaluation

- They hate the works of the Nicolaitans, as does the Lord. (NB – he hates the works, not the people.) This sect basically argued that the pagan worship and sexual immorality of Ephesus was acceptable and could be incorporated into the Christian faith.
- But – the Ephesians have lost the love they had at first.
 - *A huge criticism*
 - *There is much that is praiseworthy about their conduct, but they are on a downward trajectory, losing their initial attention to Christ and the needs of their neighbors*
 - *In the great prophetic tradition of the OT, Jesus here is telling them where they will end up if they continue down this path*
 - *We could say that they remain faithful to the doctrinal beliefs of the Church, but they have begun to lose their fervor and love.*

To the Church in Ephesus (2:1-7)

Exhortation and warning:

- “Realize how far you have fallen” and “Repent”
 - *In other words, remember how you were when you first embraced the faith and the works you did then, and return to them.*
- If they do not, Jesus will “remove their lampstand”
 - *A devastating threat*
 - *Like salt that has lost its flavor (Mt 5:13), their faith is no good anymore. Like the fig tree that bears no fruit (Mk 13:28), it is not fulfilling its purpose.*
 - *To remove the lampstand means to disperse the congregation. Jesus said that the Church will endure forever, but he made no promises about individual communities, and over the centuries, many have lost their fervor and petered out to nothing.*
- “Whoever has ears...” – a common exhortation of the Lord (Mt 11, Mt 25, Mk 4, etc.) meaning to listen carefully, understand and follow the message, allowing it to change you.

To the Church in Ephesus (2:1-7)

Promises

- These promises are made to those who hear the message, repent and return to their former faithfulness and fervor
- “To the victor...”
 - *An image of comfort, reflecting the truth that the Christian in the world is engaged in battle against the world, the flesh and the devil, all of which try to lead us astray.*
 - *It is possible to win or lose this battle*
 - *Steadfastness in faith means victory, just as Jesus was victorious through his own steadfastness. Those who remain faithful, even if they die, will be victorious, just like Jesus (Jn 11:25)*
- “Tree of Life”
 - *A reference to Genesis and the tree at the center (Gen 2:9)*
 - *A symbol of immortality and everlasting life in heaven given to those who persevere.*

To the Church in Ephesus (2:1-7)

Reflection:

- We do well to reflect on these words
- Would that we all might receive praise from Christ for our works, labor and endurance in faith, our intolerance towards false teachings and idolatry.
 - *It seems the Ephesians were doing pretty well, yet the truthful judgment of Christ showed that they were lacking.*
- If, as St. Paul said, “the love of Christ impels us...” (2 Cor 5:14), this local church had forgotten that love, and their works were no longer fully motivated by the love of Christ and neighbor as they were before
 - *They had the truth of faith but not love (cf 1 Cor 13:1-3) and this can become rigid and sterile, producing no fruit and actually turning people away*
 - *We too can remember our earlier love of the Lord, “realize how far we have fallen” and repent, returning to the Lord with love and devoted service*

To the Church in Smyrna (2:8-11)

The City of Smyrna:

- Modern day Izmir, it is located about 35 miles north of Ephesus
- It was a wealthy city, having strong trading ties with Rome
- Known for its cult of emperor worship, which was a growing phenomenon in the first century. Smyrna built the first temple in honor of the Emperor Tiberius Caesar (14-37AD)
- The home of the great Saint and martyr Polycarp (69-155AD), disciple of the Apostle John. Polycarp conceivably heard Revelation at its original reading as a young man. He later became bishop of this city.
- One of the two cities that Jesus doesn't have anything bad to say about. He is mindful of their faith and praises their steadfastness, exhorting them to continue in it.

To the Church in Smyrna (2:8-11)

“The first and the last,” “who once died but came to life”

- Jesus refers to himself using phrases from the description earlier given in chapter 1

“Tribulation and poverty”

- They were clearly suffering persecution for their faith
- Despite the wealth of this city, the Christians were poor.
 - *Due to their refusal to engage in the numerous pagan rituals that were common in day-to-day life in the city, they were surely seen as oddities and even counter-cultural, and they were likely excluded and shunned.*
- What beautiful words from the Lord to hear that “he knows” what they suffer. He knows that they were suffering because of their faith in him!
- In his eyes, despite their earthly poverty, they are rich!

To the Church in Smyrna (2:8-11)

“Who claim to be Jews”

- In the early years after the Resurrection, the Christians were seen as an offshoot of Judaism, which afforded them some legal protections even in Rome
- But there were increasing tensions in the synagogues between those who accepted Jesus as the Messiah and those that did not, leading to eventual separation
- It appears that some synagogue leaders ‘slandered’ against the Christians, testifying against them to the Romans, leading to persecution
 - *Jesus suggests to us that these slanderers are not real Jews but are in alliance with the assembly of Satan, the true enemy of God’s people.*

To the Church in Smyrna (2:8-11)

“Do not be afraid”

- One of the most common phrases used by Christ in the NT
- Fear is a human emotion somewhat beyond our control, but what we can control is our behavior when we are afraid – courage or cowardice
- Remember that the Christian basis for courage (fortitude) is the knowledge that God is in control, that he will not forget us and that he will reward those who remain faithful despite fear or earthly loss.

To the Church in Smyrna (2:8-11)

”Remain faithful until death”

- The preeminent theme of Revelation
- Again, the devil is mentioned as the primary opponent of God and his people
- Some will suffer imprisonment on account of their faith, something that Jesus long ago predicted to his disciples (Mt 24:9, Mk 10:29)
- “Ten days” of ordeal – not a literal number. It likely means a short time, enough for the tempering and strengthening of their faith
- Those who remain faithful Jesus will give the crown of life.
 - *Even if they die, they will live (Jn 11:25)*

To the Church in Smyrna (2:8-11)

“Second death”

- Mentioned towards the end of Revelation as the “lake of fire,” the place of everlasting punishment for the devil, the beast and the false prophet, as well as the wicked
- The first death is our earthly, bodily death, which all experience. Then comes the just judgment of God of each individual, leading either to the ‘second death’ (hell) or to eternal life in heaven.
 - *The Four Last Things*
- We’ll return to this later in the course.

To the Church in Smyrna (2:8-11)

Reflection

- We might note the suffering of the churches in the world today in places like Nigeria, China, the Middle East, Cuba, etc.)
 - *Many of us today could scarcely imagine the danger involved in simply going to Mass, which these brothers and sisters face every day...and yet they remain faithful!!*
 - *What a motivation to continued and greater faith for us, who face far less in terms of difficulties in practicing our faith*
 - *When a rainy day cuts Mass attendance by one-third, we know there's a problem*
- How are we like Smyrna?
 - *We face few similar persecutions, but we do face them. Increasingly, there is pressure (subtle, but growing) to downplay our faith, go along with the surrounding culture and live as if God doesn't matter.*

To the Church in Smyrna (2:8-11)

- How are we like Smyrna?
 - *It can be a challenge to remain faithful, especially with the demands of modern life – school, work, kids, etc. But what a testament to faith when we still make the faith a priority despite those challenges*
 - *We need to be prepared as the people of God to meet the increasing levels of persecution that will come. We need to resolve to be faithful, first in the little things...*
 - *When a senate confirmation hearing asks a candidate about his involvement in the Knights of Columbus (as a radical organization), we can see what's coming.*
- Remember it is the Lord himself (and only him) who gives us strength to remain faithful in these types of trials. He is always in control!
 - *We must always pray for strength to endure and to remember the crown of life that we will inherit!*

Excursus: Eating food sacrificed to idols

- Typically in a first century city like these seven, most of the meat people ate had been ritually slaughtered at a local pagan temple as a sacrifice offered to the gods
 - *The meat was then either prepared and sold right there at the temple, like a restaurant, or it made its way to the markets, where it was sold on the street*
 - *The question arose whether Christians could eat this meat or not. The answer was not uniform*
- On the one hand...
 - *Christians understood that the pagan deities to whom the meat was offered were not gods at all, so it could be acceptable to eat it.*
- On the other hand...
 - *Those pagan deities were in reality demons, and Christians should have no part in anything associated with that*

Excursus: Eating food sacrificed to idols

- St. Paul's answer
 - *He counseled the Corinthians that they should not be seen eating in pagan temples (at the restaurant), as it might give rise to scandal in those who faith is weak (1 Cor 8)*
 - *Buying meat in the marketplace, even if sacrificed to a false god, was acceptable to Paul, unless it might likewise cause scandal*
- It seems that different communities had different rules about this depending on the relative faith of that particular Christian assembly
 - *It also depended on how they perceived that action would be understood by the pagans*
 - *Or the general sensibilities of the local faithful*

To the Church in Pergamum (2:12-17)

The City of Pergamum

- Modern day Bergama, located about 40 miles north of Smyrna
- At the time, it housed a library of some 200,000 books/scrolls, which only the famed ancient library of Alexandria could top.
- It had a huge temple and altar to the Greek god Zeus on a hill towering 1300 feet above the main city, which is likely what Revelation called “Satan’s throne”
- Athena and Dionysius were other major patrons of the city
- Description of Jesus
 - *“Sharp two-edged sword” – again referring to his earlier description in chapter 1, denoting his almighty power and looming judgment*

To the Church in Pergamum (2:12-17)

Commendations

- In that setting of a major pagan city, with the great temple of Zeus looking down upon them, the faithful of Pergamum found praise from Christ for remaining faithful to his name
 - *We can imagine how not participating in the civil religious rituals and celebrations would have set the Christians apart from the local populace*
- Jesus praises Antipas (not King Herod Antipas from the Gospels), who was probably their local bishop who had been martyred.
 - *Jesus calls him his “faithful witness,” the same description given to Jesus himself*
 - *NB – that is what we would all hope Jesus would call us. There is no higher praise!*

To the Church in Pergamum (2:12-17)

“A few things...”

- Jesus mentions a few things against them, principally that they associate themselves with known heretics and imposters to the faith, accommodating themselves to their heresy
- OT reference - the teaching of Balaam
 - *Reference to Numbers 25 in the OT, during the Israelites' forty years of wandering in the desert after the Exodus.*
 - *The pagan prophet Balaam and the local pagan king Balak seduced the Israelites with pagan women and introduced them to their pagan gods, encouraging Israel to worship them and eat food sacrificed to them*
 - *Thus Israel, through their immorality and idolatry, committed a great sin in the eyes of the Lord*

To the Church in Pergamum (2:12-17)

■ The teaching of the Nicolaitans

- *Jesus is saying that the Nicolaitans are like a modern-day Balaam, similarly encouraging the Christians to engaged in immorality and idolatry*
- *In that pagan culture, sexual immorality, prostitution, concubinage, homosexual activity and ritual fertility cults, among other things, were all accepted practices*
- *Christians were (and are) taught that such acts were immoral and against God's laws and Christian holiness (1 Cor 6:9, 1 Thes 4:3, 1 Pet 4:3, etc.)*
- *To "play the harlot" means to engage in such things*
- *The Nicolaitans taught, falsely, that one could be a Christian and still participate in these immoral activities. This teaching earned them the stern warning from the Lord which follows next.*

To the Church in Pergamum (2:12-17)

■ Exhortation – “repent”

- *The community was not denying the faith – it was polluting it with other pagan elements and practices, thereby sullyng the name of the Lord*
- *The whole church community is called to account for tolerating the false teachings of a few within them. The community is called to correct them*
- *If the straying brothers don't repent, the Lord will “wage war against them” and with the “sword of his mouth” bring them to judgment, never a happy thought.*

To the Church in Pergamum (2:12-17)

- “To the victor...,” the one who heeds these words and remains faithful, Jesus will give three gifts:
- Hidden manna
 - *A reference to the manna given the Israelites during the Exodus, the bread from heaven (Ex 16)*
 - *a share in the heavenly banquet. It could also refer to the unseen graces given through the worthy reception of the holy Eucharist, the true “bread from heaven”*
- White amulet (or stone)
 - *may refer to the practice of using colored stones as tickets to various events. Thus, the stone is a ‘ticket’ to the banquet of heaven*
- New name
 - *referring to becoming a ‘new creation’ in Christ. (2 Cor 5:17)*
 - *Thus, the practice of receiving a baptismal or confirmation name when receiving those sacraments, or when making religious profession, recognizing one’s new identity in Christ.*

To the Church in Pergamum (2:12-17)

- Reflection
- There is always the temptation to “have our cake and eat it too,” when it comes to the ways of the world and our Catholic faith.
 - *Modern day idolatry and sexual immorality are just as wrong in God’s eyes today as they were at the time of Revelation and are completely incompatible with the faith*
 - *We must resist the temptation to tolerate them or try to live “side by side” with them.*
- There is also the call here to (carefully and prudently) call our straying brothers and sisters back to the faith.
 - *Our love for them would lead us to do this for their own sakes, lest the judgment of God befall them.*
- The widely accepted sexual immorality and idolatry of that time was overcome by the Gospel. It can happen again!

Excursus: Roman persecution

Pliny the Younger, who served as proconsul of the province of Bithynia, in northern Turkey, wrote a letter to the Roman Emperor Trajan around the year 112 AD, in which he sought advice about whether the “trial” and punishments meted out to Christians were correct. The letter gives us insight into how our ancestors in faith suffered as well as their great faith.

“So far this has been my procedure...I have asked the accused themselves if they were Christians. If they said yes, I asked them a second and third time, warning them of the penalty. If they persisted, I ordered them to be led off to execution.

Later...further varieties came to my notice. An anonymous document was laid before me containing many people’s names. Some of these denied that they were Christians or had ever been so. At my dictation they invoked the gods and did reverence with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose along with the statutes of the gods. They also cursed Christ. As I am informed that people who are really Christians cannot possibly be made to do any of those things, I considered that the people who did them should be discharged.”

The emperor responded that Pliny had acted properly.

To the Church in Thyatira (2:18-29)

The City of Thyatira

- Modern day Akhisar in Turkey
- A smaller city than the others, known for its textiles, leather and metal working
- The Greek god Apollo, the sun god and son of Zeus, was the chief patron
- Description of Jesus
 - *“Son of God” – a title not found in chapter 1 but probably given to counter the role of Apollo*
 - *“eyes like a fiery furnace” – from the original description, revealing Jesus as the Lord who sees and understands all things*
 - *“feet like polished brass” – also from the original description, a symbol of power and strength.*

To the Church in Thyatira (2:18-29)

Commendations

- Jesus has high praise for this church
- They possess the virtues of “love, faith, service and endurance,” all of them at the heart of the Christian vocation
- Endurance is a key theme in Revelation, as the practical manifestation of hope in God, and Thyatira has it.
- Not only do the faithful there possess those great virtues, but also those virtues are increasing: “your last works are greater than your first.”

To the Church in Thyatira (2:18-29)

Jezebel

- The one thing against them is that they tolerate a “Jezebel” in their assembly
 - *This is not her real name but a reference to the Jezebel of 1 Kings, the wife of King Ahab. She poisoned the king’s and the people’s minds with idolatry to her false gods (1 Kgs 16)*
 - *This “Jezebel” in the community is “teaching and misleading” the faithful by inducing them to eat food sacrificed to idols and to “play the harlot,” as we saw in Pergamum.*
 - *Whether she was actually encouraging the activities or, more likely, teaching that they were permissible – the result is the same: Jesus condemns her and her teaching, which he calls the “deep secrets of Satan”*
 - *And he chastises the whole community for tolerating her – such tolerance of false teaching is not a virtue*

To the Church in Thyatira (2:18-29)

Exhortation: “repent”

- God, in his mercy, has patiently waited for her to repent
 - *“As I live, says the Lord, I do not wish the sinner to die but to return to me and live.” (Ezk 33:11)*
 - *“Or do you hold his priceless kindness, forbearance and patience in low esteem, unaware that this kindness of God would lead you to repentance?” (Rom 2:4)*
 - *“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” (2 Pt 3:9)*
- She refuses to repent and will suffer God’s chastisement
 - *As will her “children” (followers) who “commit adultery” with her, in the figurative sense, going along with her false teachings, unless they repent*

To the Church in Thyatira (2:18-29)

“To the victor”

- To those who remain faithful, Christ will give the “morning star,” an astronomical reference to the brightest star in the sky (actually Venus), which Jesus uses to describe himself in 22:16.
 - *It is a symbol of Christ’s light, authority and victory*
- Those who remain faithful and are not drawn in by these false teachings will share in that light, authority and victory.

Reflection:

- Jesus praises the growth in faith and virtues of the church in Thyatira, noting that their “last works are greater than their first.”
 - *This reminds us that our faith should grow, that we should always seek to know, love and serve the Lord better*
 - *And that we should be unsatisfied remaining where we are spiritually, and certainly never to backslide.*

To the Church in Thyatira (2:18-29)

Reflection:

- It is a great temptation by Church members to soften the boundaries between God's word and the prevailing standards of the world
- Trying to keep one foot on the path of the world and one on the path of faith does not work – they're going in different directions! Something has to give...
 - *The Kingdom is incompatible with the world.*
 - *There can be no accommodation with the ways of the world – that is, the evil in the world. Christians must live completely apart from it.*
- Again, we tolerate people, especially those whose faith is new or weak, but we do not tolerate false teaching, and we can never allow it to “creep in” to our faith.

End of Chapter 2

- Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.