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THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Chapters 4-5

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*

Summary of chapters 1-3

- In chapter 1, we were introduced to our author, John, who was granted an extraordinary vision from God near the end of the first century, and a message to be communicated to the seven churches of Asia, and through them to all Christians of all times
- His vision began with the awe-filled sight of the risen and glorified Jesus, described in a powerfully symbolic way to signify his absolute sovereignty over all things
 - *God's sovereignty is a major theme of Revelation, which we will encounter many times*
 - *Jesus "won" his sovereignty through his complete faithfulness to the Father's will, leading up to his crucifixion*
 - *His obedience canceled the sin of Adam (which was disobedience) and won salvation for the human race*
 - *Jesus will call the seven churches (and us) to imitate that same obedience and faithfulness, another major theme.*

Summary of chapters 1-3

- In chapters 2-3, we saw the specific messages to each individual church community, in which each was praised or admonished according to their faith and actions
- These opening chapters represent the first part of the book and are focused on what was happening at that moment in the church and larger world.
 - *The remaining section (chapters 4-22) will focus on the future, what will happen “soon.”*
- Chapters 4-5 belong together.
 - *John is swept up into heaven and given a vision of the heavenly court and the worship of God seated upon his throne.*
 - *He will also see another vision of Jesus, this time as the “lamb that was slain” who brought about the salvation of the world through his saving death.*
 - *These chapters depicting the worship of God in heaven have greatly influenced the liturgy, artwork and music of the Church*

Vision of heavenly worship (4:1-6a)

Putting ourselves in John's shoes, we recognize that this vision would have been the greatest thing he had ever seen or could possibly imagine, far surpassing the most infinitely glorious sight he could conceive. (Thus will that vision be for us!!)

"Throne"

- The first mention of God's throne. It will be mentioned some 40 times in Revelation
- It is a symbol of God's sovereignty, a major theme of the book, and it will be seen through the coming chapters as a reminder of that sovereignty

God's appearance

- Note that John reverently does not name or try to describe God himself, as in what he looked like, but rather compares the glory of his appearance to precious stones and light

Vision of heavenly worship (4:1-6a)

God's appearance

- Jasper and carnelian are gemstones of reddish color, while emeralds are typically green.
 - *There is no consensus about any specific meaning in these particular gems or colors*
 - *Rather it is a common biblical way of describing the grandeur, beauty and majesty of God, who "dwells in unapproachable light." (1 Tim 6:16)*

The twenty-four thrones and elders

- These represent the entire people of God from both the Old and New Testaments – 12 tribes of Israel and 12 Apostles
- The elders will be mentioned 12 times in Revelation
- Their white garments are a symbol of holiness
- Their crowns and thrones symbolize their participation in the sovereignty of God, as is their placement around God's throne, a dignity to be extended to all the faithful

Vision of heavenly worship (4:1-6a)

- Lightning, rumblings and thunder
 - *A very common symbol in Scripture indicating the presence or impending action of God*
 - *We will see increasing examples of these symbols in the chapters to come*

- Seven flaming torches and seven spirits
 - *A burning candle or torch is a common symbol denoting God's presence. (The tabernacle lamp is a good example)*
 - *This description calls to mind the menorah, the seven-branched candlestick used at Hannukah, denoting God's presence.*
 - *Seven is a symbol of completeness, so this image is meant to convey the absolute fullness of God's presence at the throne*
 - *The seven spirits likewise denote the omnipresent Spirit of God.*

Vision of heavenly worship (4:1-6a)

- Sea of glass like crystal
 - *The ancient peoples believed there was a hard dome-like structure, called the 'firmament,' above which were the 'waters above the heavens' (Gen 1:6)*
 - *The sea of glass like crystal would be the view of those waters from above, where God dwells*
- John beholds the very throne of the Most High God
 - *It would be impossible to overstate the glory of what he was seeing.*
 - *What comes next is a description of heavenly worship around the throne.*

Heavenly worship (4:6b-11)

- Four living creatures
 - *No explicit explanation of exactly what they are is given*
 - *Four, representing the four corners of the world. Many scholars believe the creatures represent the entirety of animate life on earth, and thus all of God's creatures are worshipping him*
 - *Beginning in the second century, these four living creatures were associated with the four evangelists:*
 - Matthew (man)
 - Mark (lion)
 - Luke (calf/ox)
 - John (eagle)
 - *They are covered in eyes, denoting their vigilance and awareness of everything taking place everywhere.*

Heavenly worship (4:6b-11)

■ Holy, Holy, Holy

- *The four living creatures ceaselessly worship God with these words, similar to our own song of praise in the Mass*
- *To say that God is holy means that he is completely “other,” totally transcendent and set apart from all the rest of creation.*
- *He is not simply one part of creation among many other parts; he is the Creator, utterly unequal and supremely superior to his works*
- *To repeat an adjective three times in this way is to express that quality to a superlative degree*

Heavenly worship (4:6b-11)

■ Fall down and worship

- *The twenty-four elders representing the entirety of God's people respond to the chorus of praise by the four living creatures by falling down prostrate upon the ground to worship God*
- *It is a full bodily expression of humility and worship due to God alone*
- *Though the twenty-four are themselves exalted with crowns and thrones of their own, they cast them aside as they fall to the ground before the "King of kings," whose sovereignty is infinitely above all other powers*
- *♪♪♪ "Holy, holy, holy, all the Saints adore thee; casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea..." ♪♪*
♪

Heavenly worship (4:6b-11)

- “Worthy are you...”
 - *We understand how we can render to God glory and honor, but how can he receive power from us? He’s already all-powerful...*
 - *This is understood to mean that he deserves to receive our acknowledgement of his supreme power*
 - *Their prayer of praise recognizes God as the Source of all that is, that existence itself comes from him*
 - *This is yet another example of one of our big themes – that God is in complete control of history and has absolute power over everything that is happening*
 - *This will be especially important to remember in the chapters ahead, when we read of the coming persecution of the Church and the hegemony of evil in the world.*
 - God is aware of it, he mysteriously allows it, but he is all-powerful, and the forces of evil have absolutely no power over him.

Heavenly worship (4:6b-11)

- Thus a brief picture of the continual heavenly worship of God around his throne
 - *As represented by the twenty-four elders, the entire people of God worship him*
 - *As represented by the four living creatures, all of creation worships him*
 - *Our worship on earth – particularly during Mass – is a participation in that heavenly liturgy, a type of “joining in progress” of the ceaseless worship of God in heaven.*

Chapter 5

- Chapter 5 continues the vision of the heavenly throne room, and now John notices a scroll in the Father's right hand, sealed with seven seals
 - *The scroll is understood as a symbol for God's salvific plan for humanity and all of Creation*
 - *It is a plan that can only be carried out by one special Person...*
- The scroll with seven seals (5:1-5)
 - *Typically, scrolls would be closed with a wax seal to ensure that only the recipient would open it*
 - *Seven, a symbol of totality or completeness, in this context reveals the importance of the message*

The scroll with the seven seals (5:1-5)

- “Who is worthy?”
 - *A mighty angel asks rhetorically (or course he already knows) who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll*
 - *In other words, who can carry out God’s plan of salvation for the world?*
 - *No one in heaven or earth, living or dead, was worthy – no created being in history could bring salvation to God’s people*
 - *This seeming loss of hope for salvation brings John to tears, until one of the elders shows him the One who is worthy*
- “Lion of Judah and Root of David”
 - *The worthy One is described with these heavily symbolic phrases from the OT*

The scroll with the seven seals (5:1-5)

- “Lion of Judah”
 - *Judah was one of the 12 sons of Jacob/Israel, and the leader of one of the 12 tribes*
 - *Judah was described as “like a lion” in Gen 49*
 - *The territory of the tribe of Judah included Jerusalem and Bethlehem. King David was of that tribe and was born in Bethlehem (like his descendent)*
- ”Root of David”
 - *The Messiah was prophesied to come from the tribe of Judah, specifically from King David’s line*
 - *The Gospel of Matthew provides a genealogy of Christ, to demonstrate the fulfillment of this prophecy, from Abraham, through Judah, through David, all the way to Joseph, the adoptive father of Jesus.*
- So, it is the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who alone is worthy to open the scroll – that is, he alone can bring about God’s plan of salvation. In fact, he has already triumphed through his death and resurrection, and he can now bring about God’s plan in full.

The Lamb (5:6-10)

- The image of the Lamb is the predominate image used to describe Jesus in Revelation. The image is packed with meaning from the Old and New Testaments
 - *The Passover lamb, whose blood saved the people Israel from slavery in Egypt (Ex 12)*
 - *The lamb sacrificed on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) to forgive the sins of the people (Lev 16)*
 - *The Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, described as a 'lamb led to slaughter for the sins of his people'*
 - *John the Baptist called Jesus the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world" (Jn 1:29)*
 - *Peter tells his readers, "you were ransomed...with the precious blood of Christ as a spotless, unblemished lamb." (1 Pt 1:18)*
- It is not that Jesus is literally a lamb – rather John is describing the totality of these OT and NT references to the Messiah in the person of the risen Christ now standing before him.

The Lamb (5:6-10)

- “Seemed to have been slain”
 - *Jesus was killed, atoning for the sin of the world, yet is risen, having conquered sin and death itself*
 - *He is not lying down in the tomb; rather, he is standing triumphant over death*
 - *He does not prostrate himself to worship, as do all others. Rather, he himself receives worship, indicating his divine status*

- Seven horn, seven eyes and seven spirits
 - *Not a literal description*
 - *Again, seven signifies totality or completeness*
 - *A horn is a symbol of power; eyes are a symbol of knowledge (seeing).*
 - *Thus Jesus is described as all-powerful and all-knowing in his glorious divine and human nature*
 - *He also possesses the fullness of the Holy Spirit proper to his trinitarian nature*

The Lamb (5:6-10)

■ He receives the scroll

- *Jesus steps forward as the worthy One to receive the scroll from the Father's hand.*
- *This means that he is to implement the fullness of God's plan of salvation for the human race and definitively bring about the Kingdom of God*
- *He is worthy by virtue of his perfect and sinless humanity, his complete obedience to the Father's will unto death, his absolute holiness as the divine Son of God and his triumph over death and sin through his resurrection*

The Lamb (5:6-10)

Heaven reacts

- The reception of the scroll brings about a renewed burst of worship
- The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fall down to worship again, this time toward the Lamb
- Harps
 - *An instrument mentioned many times in Scripture and used for joyous occasions, especially for praising God*
- Incense
 - *An ancient practice in the worship of God, its aroma symbolizing the sweetness of right worship of God*
 - *Incense also symbolizes the prayers and praises of the faithful rising up to God, just as the smoke of the incense rises*

The Lamb (5:6-10)

Heaven reacts

■ Prayers of the holy ones

- *A beautiful and revealing verse*
- *The prayers of the faithful in heaven and earth rise up to God's throne at the moment when God's salvific plan is being revealed.*
- *This tells us that the prayers of God's faithful have a role in the events that he brings about. Our prayers matter!*

"A new hymn"

- A common phrase in Scripture, especially the Psalms: sing a "new song" to the Lord, etc.
- The idea is to renew the praises of God for his salvation as his plan is made manifest.
 - *The worship of God, both in heaven and earth, typically involves singing (just like at Mass)*

The Lamb (5:6-10)

“A new hymn”

- The content of the new hymn explains why the Lamb is worthy to receive scroll and carry out God’s salvific plan
 - *He was slain – crucified, thereby canceling the sin of Adam and the sin of the world, restoring man’s friendship with God*
 - *He thereby ‘purchases’ for God people ‘from every tribe and tongue’ (no one is excluded from the offer of salvation)*
- Thus saved, the people will be made a Kingdom and priests
 - *They were ransomed for God, to share his life*
 - *They will share in God’s reign, sitting with him on his throne*
 - *They will worship him worthily and directly as a priestly people*

The worship of God expands (5:11-14)

- Now that God's plan will be finally consummated by the Lamb, the worship of God expands from the 'throne room' to encompass all creatures of heaven and earth and the entire universe
- "Countless in number"
 - *Literally 'myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands'*
- The worship is directed not only to the Father (who sits on the throne) but also to the Lamb, signifying his co-divinity and oneness with the Father
 - *Once again, the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fall down and worship, echoing the worship of the entire universe, with 'every knee bending' in worship*

The worship of God expands (5:11-14)

- This is a foreshadowing of what we will see at the end of Revelation
 - *Here is a picture of universal worship of God with no opposition to him anywhere in heaven or earth*
 - *The bulk of Revelation from here to the end recounts the events to come when there will be serious opposition directed at God and the Church*
 - *But the end result is never in doubt – it will look once again like this, after all evil and sin and death itself has been definitively defeated by God, and universal worship will again occur, never to end.*
 - *We will also see periodic glimpses of the ‘heavenly liturgy’ and sovereignty of God throughout Revelation, which serve to remind the faithful about the glory to come despite present persecution*

Excursus: The Mass and Heavenly Worship

- The earthly celebration of the Sacraments, especially the holy Mass, is a mysterious participation in the heavenly liturgy, described in Scripture and in particular in Revelation 4-5
 - *Though incomplete and imperfect, our participation is a foreshadowing of the complete and perfect worship that the blessed in heaven will render to God in heaven forever.*
- The early Church Fathers, in developing the liturgical expression of our worship, drew heavily upon the images of Scripture, including Revelation.
- There are a few elements we can recognize from these chapters:
 - *Our prayers, such as the “Holy, Holy, Holy” sung before the Eucharistic prayer, echoing the praises of the four living creatures (4:8)*
 - *Priests wear special vestments, typically white, as did the twenty-four elders (4:4)*

Excursus: The Mass and Heavenly Worship

- There are a few elements we can recognize from these chapters:
 - *Our physical gestures and postures during Mass (standing, bowing, kneeling, prostrating, etc.)*
 - *The use of incense during Mass and other liturgies (5:8)*
 - *The use of candles and lampstands (4:5)*
 - *Singing and the use of musical instruments (5:8-9)*
 - *Statues and images of Christ, the angels and saints in or near the sanctuary, reflecting their presence around the throne of God in heaven*

End of Chapter 5

- Class next Wednesday, January 13
- Coming up...
 - *The opening of the seven seals*
 - *The 144,000*
 - *The seven trumpets*

- 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.