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THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Chapter 6

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 4-5

- We left off in chapter 5 with Jesus, the victorious Lamb of God, receiving the scroll with seven seals from the Father's hand. As we said, the scroll represents God's plan for the definitive salvation of the world and the full realization of the Kingdom
 - *The idea of the seals is that they must all be broken before the contents may be read.*
 - *The breaking of each seal corresponds to certain events, some of them calamitous, which must come to pass in God's plan before the Kingdom will be established fully*
- Recall that in this second section of the book, the focus is on the future, the things that 'must happen afterwards.' (1:19, 4:1)
 - *The certainty of God's victory is never in question*
 - *Jesus ushered in the 'time of the Church,' and though the victory is certain, there remains much for the Church to do to make that victory known*
 - *She must spread the Good News of Christ's death and resurrection, and baptize the nations that they might share in that victory*

Summary of chapters 4-5

- *The Church will also face the terrible persecution of the world, which is opposed to God's reign, but she must remain faithful to her mission for the glory of God and the good of souls.*
- As we saw, all of heaven and earth broke into praise of the Lamb upon his receiving the scroll. He is the one who, in the fullness of time, will bring about the victory and the fullness of the Kingdom
 - *In chapter 6, Jesus will open the first six seals, and then narrative will shift direction for a few chapters.*
 - *We won't get to the contents of the scroll until chapter 10*
- Though the events depicted in the coming chapters concern the future, the original (and modern-day) readers seek to understand current events in light of those events to come.

The Four Horsemen (6:1-8)

- The reader familiar with the OT will note similarities between this vision and that of Zechariah 6. Here, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are depicted in frightening ways and given frightening tasks
 - *However, we keep in mind that the Horsemen are called forward by the action of Jesus breaking open the seals*
 - *He remains in complete control of what is happening, and mysteriously, allows these things to occur.*
 - *It is the actions of the Horsemen, commissioned by Jesus, that will bring about God's final plan*
- The white horse
 - *In this context, white is a symbol of victory. The white horse with its rider carrying a bow is a powerful image of armed cavalry. It is a military image of a conquering force*

The Four Horsemen (6:1-8)

■ The white horse

- *This rider goes forth 'victorious to further his victories,' an allusion to martial conquest, the task given him by God*
- *He is given (by God) a crown, another symbol of victory*

■ The red horse

- *Red, signifying bloodshed*
- *The rider is given the power and mandate to 'take peace away from the earth,' leading to war and terrible slaughter among nations*
- *His 'huge sword' is a symbol of the conflict and violence he will unleash*

■ The black horse

- *In this case, a symbol of famine, often a consequence of war*
- *The scale is a symbol of the rising cost of food, which was weighed when purchased.*

The Four Horsemen (6:1-8)

■ The black horse

- *“A ration of wheat costs a day’s pay...” This describes famine prices and the economic hardships that war will cause. The poor will spend all their daily wages simply to eat, with nothing left over for other expenses*
- *“Do not damage the olive oil or the wine” These would be luxury items for the poor, who typically ate grain (bread) for their sustenance. The poorest, as always, suffer the most during war.*

■ The pale green horse

- *The color of decay, pestilence and death*
- *This is the only rider named (Death), together with Hades, the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew ‘Sheol,’ the shadowy realm of the dead. (This is not the Greek god Hades, but a personification of the place.)*
- *“Sword, famine, plague and beasts of the earth” – common biblical means of exacting divine judgment*

The Four Horsemen (6:1-8)

- The pale green horse
 - *Death and Hades are given authority to kill a “quarter of the earth”*
 - *This should be understood symbolically, not as an exact number*
 - *It is a substantial number, but still a minority*
- The four taken together – the result of sin
 - *Let’s look at all the riders and their missions together*
 - *Notice that the calamities mentioned here – war and bloodshed, economic disruptions that lead to famine and disease, together with all the deaths – are typical consequences of human sin and not necessarily from direct divine action*
 - *The horrors of Nazism, Communism and the Cultural Revolution during the 20th century are illustrative examples*
 - *Every era, including the first century and ours, has seen echoes of these prophecies in their own times*

The Four Horsemen (6:1-8)

- The four taken together – the result of sin
 - *Jesus predicted such things: “You will hear of wars...there will be famines and earthquakes...all these are the beginnings of the labor pains.” (Mk 13:7-8)*
- The implication here is that God allowed these evils to occur rather than actively willing them
 - *We must distinguish between God’s positive/active will, and his permissive will*
- Why?
 - *A timeless and not totally answerable question*
 - *At times, God allows us to taste the suffering that our evil deeds cause in order to ‘wake us up’ and so repent and return to him*
 - *Also, God may allow evildoers free reign to demonstrate just how evil they are, so that his final judgment upon them is manifestly just.*

The Four Horsemen (6:1-8)

■ Why?

- *This is to say that God will delay judgment and condemnation until evildoers are thoroughly exposed and convicted*
- *There is also the praiseworthy patience of God, who 'waits' for the sinner to change. More on this shortly*

■ The Four Horsemen can be seen together to represent the evil that men do, allowed to run its course, in order to expose its true nature and call all of humanity to deeper conversion

- *The faithful will not be immune to these calamities brought on by the sin of the wicked*
- *Christ himself was the focus of so much of man's evil – lies, betrayal, abandonment, violence and murder*
- *These things lead us (hopefully) to deeper faith, to recall that our hope is not ultimately in this world but in God, to help those who are suffering from evil's effects, and to bear witness to the world of our faithfulness despite the evils surrounding us.*

The Four Horsemen (6:1-8)

- The Four Horsemen can be seen together to represent the evil that men do, allowed to run its course, in order to expose its true nature and call all of humanity to deeper conversion
 - *As Jesus indicated, these things will escalate as the end approaches. Yet God remains in control. No evil that man can commit is able to derail the salvific plan he intends to carry out.*

The Fifth Seal (6:9-11)

- The fifth seals represents an obvious break from the previous four. Instead of another calamity, we see the multitude of martyrs from the persecution of the Church through the ages
 - *“those who had been slaughtered” – the same word used to describe the death of the Lamb, who was “slaughtered.” (5:6)*
 - *They were put to death because they “bore witness to the word of God,” that is, they suffered martyrdom because of their faith, which they refused to deny even in the face of death*
 - *The souls of the martyrs were “underneath the altar,” safely in the presence of God, signifying that he regards their deaths as sacrifices worthy to be placed at his altar in heaven.*
 - *Their sacrifice is like that of Jesus’ own supreme sacrifice of the Cross and is pleasing to the Father: “Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones.” (Ps 116:15)*
 - *Much like the martyr Antipas, from the city of Pergamum (2:12-17), who Jesus called his “faithful witness,” these souls under the altar gave testimony to Christ in the fullest possible way through their death.*

The Fifth Seal (6:9-11)

- *The reader is reminded that, from the moment of the martyrs' death, they are at rest in the presence of God.*
- *The constant reassurance we will see in Revelation is that the martyrs (and all the faithful) are true victors, that evil will not succeed, and that God will vindicate them in the end.*
- *Note our tradition of celebrating Mass over the remains of the martyrs and saints. Like in Revelation, they are placed under our altars!*

■ “They cried out...”

- *The martyred faithful call upon God to bring the evildoers who killed them to justice, to avenge their blood*
- *This recalls the blood of Abel. (Gen 4:10) After Cain killed Abel, God told Cain that “your brother’s blood cries out to me...”*
- *It is a common refrain in Scripture to call out to God for justice, to ask “how long” until the wicked receive their just deserts (Ps 6:4, 13:2, 35:17, 74:9, 79:5, 89:46, 94:3, Is 6:11, Jer 47:6, Hab 1:2)*

The Fifth Seal (6:9-11)

■ God's response to their cry

- *His first response is to give them a white robe, a symbol of victory, holiness and glorification. This assures them (and the reader) that God is faithful to his words in chapters 2-3, that they are truly "victors" through their faithfulness*
- *"Be patient a little while longer" – their vindication will come according to God's good time, once the fullness of his plan is revealed and realized.*
- *"until the number is filled" – there will be more faithful witnesses like them, similarly bearing witness to God unto death. Mysteriously, God uses the death of the martyrs to bring about his plan of salvation.*
- *It seems that God is speaking not only to the martyrs in heaven but also to the faithful on earth, who are wondering "when will this persecution end, when will evil be destroyed, when will the Kingdom come in its fullness?"*

The Fifth Seal (6:9-11)

- *God's response to them (and all) is patience. Your victory is assured through your faithfulness. Remain faithful and wait for God's Kingdom to come. (NB – this full consummation of the Kingdom is what we are praying for in the Our Father!)*
- *It is God's desire that "all men be saved." (1 Tim 2:4) The calamities God allows to happen can be seen as a 'wake-up' call to the wicked (we'll see more of this in future chapters)*
- *God's seeming "delay" in rendering justice for the martyrs can be seen as his own patience, waiting for the wicked to turn from evil and seek the Lord.*
- *Remember that God has already taken the action that ensures the total defeat of evil – he died on the Cross!*

Excursus: “The Inhabitants of the Earth”

- We will see this phrase ten times in Revelation, and it has a very specific meaning
- It does not refer to all those who are literally alive on earth, but rather has a negative connotation, referring to unrepentant sinners and those who work against God’s Kingdom. In the end, they will suffer God’s judgment
 - *Similarly, we see the phrase “the world” used throughout the Gospels and the NT. It does not mean the physical earth, but rather those forces lined up against God’s reign*
- As we will see, the “inhabitants of the earth” are those who:
 - *Will be subjected to the trial coming to earth (3:10)*
 - *Kill Christians because of their witness (6:9)*
 - *Will suffer the three woes (8:13)*
 - *Rejoice at the death of the two witnesses (11:10)*

Excursus: “The Inhabitants of the Earth”

- As we will see, the “inhabitants of the earth” are those who:
 - *Worship the beast (13:8)*
 - *Are deceived by the false prophet (13:14)*
 - *Drink the wine of Babylon’s immorality (17:2)*
 - *Whose names are not written in the Book of Life (17:8)*
- We can discern in many ways in the world today those people, movements and forces that are “inhabitants of the earth.”
 - *Revelation will tell us of their fate (not good).*
 - *We should learn to recognize them and their goals and avoid being drawn down their path.*

The Sixth Seal (6:12-17)

- The breaking of the sixth seal looks forward in time to just before the end, the “great day of wrath.” So we’ve skipped ahead a bit from the “beginnings of the labor pains” to the moment of the birth of the Kingdom.
 - *This is the moment when the martyrs’ prayer for justice will be answered*
- Textual note: this is the first of several instances of “time traveling,” in which Revelation focuses variously on the time of the Church and its persecutions, the time immediately before the end or the “timelessness” of the heavenly court.
 - *We will flip back and forth among these different “times” as we progress through the text.*
 - *Discerning and bearing in mind the “when” of a particular passage makes interpretation easier.*

The Sixth Seal (6:12-17)

- Geological or astronomical phenomena, together with cosmic disasters, are frequently used in Scripture as symbolic representations of God's potent intervention
 - *An earthquake is a common scriptural sign of God's impending action or presence (Ex 19:18; Nm 16:31; Jd 5:5; 2 Sm 22:8; 1 Kgs 19:11; Ps 77:18; Mt 28:2; Acts 16:26; etc.)*
 - *The sun blackened is reminiscent of the days of darkness in Egypt before the Exodus (Ex 10:21), also Isaiah's prophecy against the foreign enemies of Israel (Isa 13:10)*
 - *The moon becoming like blood (also Isa 13:10)*
- Taken together, the reader will recall Jesus' words from Mark: "Immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken." (Mk 13:24-26)

The Sixth Seal (6:12-17)

- In these symbolic references to all these natural phenomena, we have the sense of God's dramatic intervention at the end.
 - *There will be no doubt that it has arrived.*
- The unrepentant
 - *The text now focuses on seven classes of people, representing all the "inhabitants of the earth," from the lowest to the highest, who remain unrepentant and against God even at the end.*
 - *Kings, nobles, military officers, the rich, the powerful, slaves and free persons*
 - *In their terror at the end, they call out – not to the Lord, but to the mountains (!) to cover and hide them from God's wrath (as if that were possible)*
 - *Even now, they refuse to repent, even as they acknowledge that no one can withstand God's judgment. We will see this unrepentant group several times in coming chapters and their sad end.*

Excursus: God's judgment and wrath

- In Revelation, the word “judgment” is used only in reference to the final judgment, the definitive end of history and the final separation of the “sheep from the goats”
- The temporal calamities depicted in the first four seals (and in the coming trumpets) we might think of as chastisements meant to bring about conversion of the unrepentant
- Similarly, God’s “wrath” or “fury” is mentioned only in reference to the final judgment at the end, when evil and the obdurately wicked will be definitively destroyed
- God’s “wrath” should not be thought of as like our human emotion of vengeful anger. This term is used metaphorically to express the seriousness of evil and the very real consequences of final impenitence.
- The “wrath of God” is not a bloodthirsty, vengeful or mindless fury, which might describe our human emotion. Rather, his wrath reflects his awesome holiness, the compatibility of sin with that holiness, and his just judgment upon those who refuse to repent.

Chapter 7 – a pause before the last seal

- We've come to the seventh seal, but before it is broken and the scroll opened, the text turns to two visions of God's people, "taking a break" from the predictions of future trials.
 - *This interlude is meant to foster hope and endurance in God's people and to remind them of what awaits them in heaven*
- The first vision (7:1-8) depicts the 'sealing' of God's faithful ones to protect them from the coming persecutions and upheavals
 - *Thus, here we skip back in time to before the trials begin*
- The second vision (7:9-17) depicts the glory of the faithful in heaven, who have remained steadfast during the tribulations and oppression and even in the face of death.
 - *Here we will skip forward to the 'timeless' life of heavenly glory*
 - *It is like a preview of what awaits the faithful and represents one of the most beautiful pictures of heavenly rest in Scripture, one that has inspired and comforted the Church from the beginning*

The sealing of the 144,000 (7:1-8)

■ The four angels

- *Standing at the four corners of the earth, telling us that what is coming will impact the whole world. Notice the ancient cosmology.*
- *Clearly, a chastisement upon the sin of the world is imminent, as the angels were given power to damage the earth*
- *They are held back in their task of bring God's judgment upon the earth in order to allow a fifth angel to perform his great duty*

■ The seal of the living God

- *The seal might be likened to what we use today to emboss a document or a wax seal on a letter, or perhaps a cattle brand*
- *The idea here is that the faithful of God will be marked as such by the seal of the angel as belonging to God*
- *Reminiscent of the marking of the doorposts and lintels with lamb's blood at the Passover to denote the houses of God's faithful (Ex 12)*
- *God's "servants" refers to his faithful ones*

The sealing of the 144,000 (7:1-8)

- The seal of the living God
 - *The seal is a symbol for faith.*
 - *God does not need to “see” a seal in order to know one’s faith, anymore than he needed to “see” the blood on the doorposts of the Israelites in order to “pass over” them.*
 - *Yet we still make use of “seals” as external gestures of internal faith, and to impart the graces of the sacraments of baptism and confirmation, as well as blessings*
- We will see something similar in Rev 14:2 and 22:4, in which the faithful have the name of God inscribed on their foreheads, indicating their belonging to him, likely a reference to the seal mentioned here
 - *This seal is reminiscent of the seal of the “tau” placed on the foreheads of the faithful in the vision of Ezekiel 9*
 - *We will also see a mark placed on the followers of the beast (Rev 13:16, 14:9, 20:4)*
- Let’s keep in mind that the seals are symbolic, not literal

The sealing of the 144,000 (7:1-8)

■ 144,000

- *The number given of the faithful to be sealed.*
- *It is a symbolic number (12x12x1000)*
- *As we've said, the number 12 is heavy with meaning in the Scriptures and represents the people of God.*
- *There were 12 tribes of Israel, encompassing the whole people of God*
- *Jesus appointed 12 apostles, signaling the foundation of a new people of God – a “spiritual Israel” – to which people belong not by bloodlines but by faith (Mk 3:35)*
- *Squaring the number 12 serves to highlight its importance as symbolic of God's people*
- *1000 is a symbolic number of a multitude or a great many*
- *So, the 144,000 represents the multitude of God's faithful people from all places and ages united under Christ, all sealed through holy baptism as belonging to God.*

The sealing of the 144,000 (7:1-8)

- Perhaps we can again discern God's patience here and his desire that "all men be saved"
 - *God delays the events that bring about the destruction of evil so that more might repent of that evil and return to God and thus be "sealed" with faith and be saved*
- What protection does the seal provide?
 - *Based on the predictions of more martyrs to come (6:11) and the prophecies of the coming persecutions and trials, we can conclude that the protection is spiritual rather than physical*
 - *Jesus gave a similar, if paradoxical, promise in Lk 21:16 – "They will put some of you to death...but not a hair on your head will be destroyed."*
 - *The "seal" of faith saves us unto eternal life, even if we suffer earthly death, and so we need not fear those who can only kill the body but can do no harm to our souls (Mt 10:28, Lk 12:4)*
 - *"He who believes in me, even if he dies, will live." (Jn 11:25)*

Next week...

- Class next Wednesday, January 20
- Coming up...
 - *The vision of heaven and the triumph of the elect*
 - *The breaking of the seventh seal*
 - *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.