

Preface To The Revelation Of Saint John (1)

(1546 and 1530)

There are many kinds of prophecy in the Church. One is prophecy which interprets the writings of the prophets. Paul speaks of it in 1 Corinthians and 14, and in other places. This is the most necessary kind and we must have it every day, because it teaches the Word of God, lays the foundation of the Church, and defends the faith; in a word, it rules, preserves, establishes and administers the preaching-office.

Another kind foretells things to come which are not previously contained in Scripture, and this prophecy is of three sorts. The first does it in express words, without symbols and figures. So Moses, David, and more of the prophets prophesy of Christ, and Christ and the apostles prophesy of Antichrist, false teachers, etc. The second sort does this with symbols, but sets alongside them their interpretation in express words. So Joseph interprets dreams and Daniel both dreams and symbols. The third sort of prophecy does it without either words or interpretations, like this book of Revelation and like the dreams, visions and symbols that many holy people have from the Holy Spirit. So in Acts 2:17, Peter proclaims, out of Joel, “Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your youths shall see visions, and your elders dream dreams.” So long as this kind of prophecy remains without explanation and gets no sure interpretation, it is a concealed and dumb prophecy, and has not yet come to the profit and fruit which it is to give to Christendom.

This is the way it has been with this book heretofore. Many have tried their hands at it, but until this very day they have reached no certainty; and some have brewed into it many stupid things out of their own heads. Because its interpretation is uncertain and its meaning hidden, we, too, have let it alone hitherto, especially since some of the ancient Fathers held the opinion that it was not the work of St. John, the Apostle, as is found in the Ecclesiastical History, Book 3, Chapter 25. This question we, for our part, still leave open, so that no one may be compelled to hold it for the work of St. John, the Apostle, or of whomever else he will. Since, however, we would gladly be certain of its meaning, or interpretation, we will give other, and higher, minds something to think about, and also state our own ideas.

Since it is intended as a revelation of things that are to happen in the future, and especially of tribulations and disasters for the Church, we consider that the first and surest step toward finding its interpretation is to take from history the events and disasters that have come upon the Church before now and hold them up alongside of these pictures and so compare them with the words. If, then, the two were to fit and agree with each other, we could build on that, as a sure, or at least an unobjectionable interpretation.

Accordingly we hold — as, indeed, the text itself says, — that the first three chapters, which speak of the seven congregations in Asia and their angels, have no other purpose than simply to show how these congregations arose at the time, and how they are exhorted to abide and increase, or reform. We learn, besides, that the word “angel” is to be understood later on, in other pictures or visions, to

mean bishops and teachers in the Church, — some good, like the holy Fathers and bishops; some bad, like the heretics and false bishops; and in this book there are more of the latter than of the former.

In chapters 4 and 5, there is a picture of the whole Church that is to suffer these future tribulations and plagues. There' are four and twenty elders before God (that is, all the bishops and teachers in harmony); they are crowned with faith, and praise Christ, the Lamb of God, with harps (i.e. they preach) and worship Him with censers (i.e. practice themselves in prayer). All this is for the comfort of Christians, that they may know that the Church is to abide, in the plagues that are to come.

In Revelation 6:1, the future tribulations begin. First come the bodily tribulations, such as persecution by the temporal, government, which is the rider with the bow, upon the white horse; then war and bloodshed, which is the rider with the sword, on the red horse; then scarcity and famine, which is the rider with the scales, on the black horse; then pestilence and the plague, who is the rider like death, upon the pale horse. For these four tribulations always surely follow the ungrateful and the despisers of God's Word, together with others, such as the overthrow and the changing of governments, all the way down to the Last Day; as is shown in Revelation 6:10; and the souls of the martyrs also work for this, with their crying.

In Revelation 7:2 and 8, begins the revelation of the spiritual tribulations, i.e. all kinds of heresies. This is preceded again by a comforting picture, wherein the angel seals the Christians and keeps off the four bad angels; so that once more it is certain that, even under heretics, the Church will have good angels and the pure Word, as the angel shows with his censer, i.e. with prayer. These good angels are the holy Fathers, like Spiridion, Athanasius, Hilary, the Nicene Council, etc.

The first bad angel is Tatian, with his Enchrates, who forbade marriage and wanted to become righteous by their works, like the Jews. For the doctrine of work-righteousness had to be the first doctrine against the Gospel, and it also remains the last, except that it is always getting new teachers and new names, such as the Pelagians, etc.

The second is Marcion, with his Cataphrygians, Manichaeans, Montanists, etc., who boast their spirits above all the Scriptures and move, like this burning mountain, between heaven and earth, as do, in our day, Münzer and the fanatics.

The third is Origen, who embittered and corrupted the Scriptures with philosophy and reason, as the universities have hitherto done among us.

The fourth is Novatus, with his Cathari, who denied penance, and wanted to be purer than others. Of this sort, too, were, afterwards, the Donatists. Our clergy, however, are all four at once. The scholars, who know history, will know how to reckon this out; for it would take too long to tell it all and prove it.

In chapters 9 and 10 the real misery begins, for these earlier bodily and spiritual tribulations are

almost a jest compared with the plagues that are to come. At the end of Revelation 8:13, the angel himself announces that three woes are to come, and these woes are to be inflicted by the other three angels — the fifth, sixth, and seventh — and then the world is to end. Here both kinds of persecution, the bodily and the spiritual come together, and there are to be three of them — the first great, the second greater, the third the greatest of all.

Now the first woe, the fifth angel, is Arius, the great heretic, and his companions, who plagued the Church so terribly everywhere that the text here says that righteous people would rather have died than see such things; but they had to see them and not die. Indeed, he says that the angel from hell, called the Destroyer, is their king; as if to say that the devil himself rides them. For they persecuted the true Christians, not only spiritually, but physically, with the sword. Read the history of the Arians, and you will understand this figure and these words.

The second woe is the sixth angel, the shameful Mohammed, with his companions, the Saracens, who inflicted a great plague on the Church, with their doctrines and with the sword. Along with this angel, in order that this woe may be all the greater, comes the strong angel with the rainbow: and the bitter book, that is the holy papacy, with its great spiritual show, the masses. They lay hold upon the temple with their laws, throw out the choir and start a sham church, or outward holy place.

In chapters 11 and 12, two comforting pictures are put between these evil woes and plagues; one the picture of the two preachers and the other of the pregnant woman, who bears a man-child, despite the dragon. They indicate that some pious teachers and Christians are to continue, under the first two woes and under the third, which is yet to come. And now the last two woes run together, and make a last combined attack upon the Church, and so, at last, the devil knocks the bottom out of the cask.

Then comes, in chapter 13 (in answer to the trumpets of the last of the seven angels, who sounds at the beginning of chapter 12), this seventh angel's work, the third woe, viz., the papal empire and the imperial papacy. Here the papacy gets the temporal sword also into its power, and rules not only with the book, in the second woe, but also with the sword, in the third woe; for they boast that the pope has both the spiritual and the temporal sword in his power.

Here, then, are the two beasts; the one is the empire, the other, with the two horns, the papacy, which has now become a temporal kingdom, yet with the reputation and name of Christ. For the pope restored the fallen Roman Empire and conveyed from the Greek to the Germans, and it is an image of the Roman Empire rather than the body of the empire, as it once was. Nevertheless, he puts spirit and life into this image, so that it has its classes and laws and members and offices, and actually operates to some extent. This is the image that was wounded and did live.

The abominations, woes, and injuries which this imperial papacy has wrought, cannot now be told. For, in the first place, by means of his book, the world has been filled with all kinds of idolatry — monasteries, foundations, saints, pilgrimages, purgatory, indulgence, celibacy and innumerable

other creations of human doctrine and works. In the second place, who can tell how much bloodshed, slaughter, war, and misery the popes have wrought, both by fighting themselves and stirring up the emperors, kings and princes against one another.

Here, now, the devil's final wrath gets to work; there, in the East, the second woe, Mohammed and the Saracens; here, in the West, papacy and empire, with the third woe. To these is added, for good measure, the Turk, Gog and Magog, as will follow in chapter 20. Thus the Church is plagued most terribly and miserably, everywhere and on all sides, with false doctrines and with wars, with book and sword. That is the dregs, the final plague; after it come almost nothing else than pictures of comfort, telling of the end of all these woes and abominations.

In chapter 14, Christ first begins to slay His Antichrist with the breath of His mouth, as Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 2:8, and the angel with the Gospel comes against the bitter book of the strong angel. The saints and virgins stand again about the Lamb, and preach the truth. Upon this Gospel follows the second angel's voice, saying that the city of Babylon shall fall and the spiritual papacy be destroyed.

It follows, farther, that the harvest shall come, and those who cleave to the papacy against the Gospel shall be cast outside the city of Christ, into the wine-press of God's wrath; i.e., by the Gospel they are separated from the Church and condemned to God's wrath. They are many, and the winepress yields much blood. Or, perhaps, this may be a just punishment and judgment upon our sins, which are beyond measure and overripe.

After this, in chapters 15 and 16, come the seven angels with the seven bowls. The Gospel increases, and attacks the papacy on all sides by means of many learned and pious preachers, and the throne of the beast, the pope's power, becomes dark and wretched and despised. But they grow wroth and confidently defend themselves; for three frogs, three unclean spirits go forth from the mouth of the beast and stir up kings and princes against the Gospel. But it does not help; the battle takes place at Armageddon. The frogs are the sophists, like Faber and Eck and Emser. They croak much against the Gospel, but accomplish nothing, and continue to be frogs.

In chapter 17, the imperial papacy and papal empire is included, from beginning to end, in a single picture, and it is shown, as in a summing up, how it is nothing, — for the ancient Roman Empire is long since gone; and yet exists, — for some of its lands, and the city of Rome besides, are still here. This picture is presented here as one presents a malefactor publicly before a court, so that he may be condemned. It is to be known that this beast, too, is shortly to be damned, and “brought to naught by the manifestation of the Lord's coming,” as St. Paul says, in 2 Thessalonians 2:8.

In chapter 18, this destruction begins and the glorious great splendor comes to naught, and the courtesans, who rob the endowments and steal the livings, cease to be; for even Rome must be plundered and stormed by its own protector at the beginning of the final destruction. Yet they do not leave off; they seek around, they encourage and arm and defend themselves. As he says here, in

chapter 19, when they can do nothing more with the Scriptures and with books, and the frogs have croaked their last, they take hold in earnest, try to win by force, and gather kings and princes for battle. But they are disappointed; the one on the white horse wins, until both beast and prophet are seized and cast into hell.

While all this is happening, there comes, in Revelation 20:7, the stirrup cup Gog and Magog, the Turks, the red Jews, whom Satan, who has been bound for a thousand years and, after the thousand years, is loose again, brings up; but they are soon to go with him into the lake of fire. For it is our opinion that this picture, which is separate from the preceding, has been put in because of the Turks, and that the thousand years are to begin at the time when this book was written, and that at that time the devil was bound; though the reckoning need not hold out to the very minute. After the Turks, the Last Judgment follows quickly, at the end of this chapter, as Daniel 7:7 also shows.

At last, in chapter 21, the final comfort is depicted. The holy city is completely ready and is led as a bride to the eternal marriage; Christ alone is Lord and all the godless are damned and go, with the devil, into hell.

With this interpretation we can profit by this book and make good use of it. First, for our comfort! We can know that neither force nor lies, neither wisdom nor holiness, neither tribulation nor suffering shall suppress the Church, but it will gain the victory and overcome at last.

Second, for our warning against the great and perilous and manifold offense that is to come upon the Church; for because these mighty and imposing powers are to fight against the Church, and it is to be deprived of outward shape and covered up under so many tribulations and heresies and other faults, it is impossible for the natural reason to recognize the Church. On the contrary, it falls away and takes offense, and calls that the Christian Church which is really the Christian Church's worst enemy. On the other hand it calls them damned heretics who are really the true Christian Church. This has happened before now under the papacy, and Mohammed, and all other heretics. Thus they lose the article of the Creed, "I believe one holy, Christian Church."

Some of the wiseacres are doing just that now; they see heresy and dissension and short-comings of many kinds, they see that there are many false, many ill-living Christians; and so they decide off-hand that there are no Christians. They have heard that Christians are to be a holy, peaceful, united, kindly, virtuous folk. Accordingly, they think that there should be among them no offenses, no heresy, no short-comings, but only peace and virtue.

They ought to read this book and learn to look upon the Church with other eyes than those of reason. For this book, I think, shows enough of terrible and monstrous beasts, horrible and vindictive angels, wild and awful plagues. I shall not speak of the other great faults and weaknesses that have always been in the Church and among the Christians, so that the reason has had to lose the Church among such things. Here we see clearly what cruel offenses and shortcomings there have been before our times, and one might think that the Church was now at its best, and that our time is

a golden age compared with those that have gone before. Do you not think that the heathen also took offense at these things and held the Christians for self-willed, loose, contentious people?

This article, “I believe one holy, Christian Church,” is an article of faith, as well as the rest. The reason, therefore, cannot recognize it, though it puts all its glasses on. The devil can cover it over with offenses and tumults, so that you have to take offense at it. God, too, can hide it with faults and short-comings of all kinds, so that you become a fool and pass such judgment on it. It will not be known by sight, but by faith, and faith concerns the things we do not see; (Hebrews 11:1); and the Church joins with her Lord in the song, “Blessed is he that takes no offense in me.” A Christian, too, is hidden from himself; he does not see his holiness and virtue, but sees in himself only lack of virtue and of holiness; and you, dull wise man, would behold the Church with your blind reason and your unclean eyes!

In a word, our holiness is in heaven, and not in the world, before men’s eyes, like goods in the market. Therefore, let there be offenses and tumults and heresy and faults, and let them do what they can! If only the word of the Gospel remains pure among us, and we love and cherish it, we are not to doubt that Christ is with us, even when things are at their worst; for we see, in this book, that, through and above all plagues and beasts and bad angels, Christ is with His saints, and wins the victory at last.

Preface To The Revelation Of Saint John (2) 1522

About this book of the Revelation of John, I leave everyone free to hold his own ideas, and would bind no man to my opinion or judgment; I say what I feel. I miss more than one thing in this book, and this makes me hold it to be neither apostolic nor prophetic.

First and foremost, the Apostles do not deal with visions, but prophesy in clear, plain words, as do Peter and Paul, and Christ in the Gospel. For it befits the apostolic office to speak of Christ and His deeds without figures and visions; but there is no prophet in the Old Testament, to say nothing of the New, who deals so out and out with visions and figures. And so I think of it almost as I do of the Fourth Book of Esdras, and can nohow detect that the Holy Spirit produced it.

Moreover, he seems to me to be going much too far when he commends his own book so highly, — more than any of the other sacred books do, though they are much more important, — and threatens that if anyone takes away anything from it, God will deal likewise with him. Again, they are to be blessed who keep what is written therein; and yet no one knows what that is, to say nothing of keeping it. It is just the same as if we had it not, and there are many far better books for us to keep.

Many of the fathers, too, rejected this book of old, though St. Jerome, to be sure, praises it highly and says that it is above all praise and that there are as many mysteries in it as words; though he cannot prove this at all, and his praise is, at many points, too mild.

Finally, let everyone think of it as his own spirit gives him to think. My spirit cannot fit itself into this book. There is one sufficient reason for me not to think highly of it,-Christ is not taught or known in it; but to teach Christ is the thing which an apostle is bound, above all else, to do, as He says in Acts 1:8, "Ye shall be my witnesses." Therefore I stick to the books which give me Christ, clearly and purely.