

really have an emotional reaction or receive any illumination from it. It did, however, encourage me to pay attention to this little group.

Strange Teachings

Fr. Mike was also my senior year religion teacher. We were slotted for three areas of study: church history, death and dying, marriage and family. No matter the subject though, Father had a way of interjecting interests of his own. He frequently spoke of “the Chastisement” and the dawning of a new interval in history. He gleaned these ideas from a number of alleged apparitions of the Lord Jesus and the Blessed Mother occurring around the world – apparitions not fully investigated nor approved by the Catholic Church.

One of the “revelations” he passed along to us, with the disclaimer that it was a matter of private revelation, was that AIDS was a plague sent by God. I took opposition to this on the simple grounds that I could never imagine my Father conceiving such a ravaging disease. God had told us throughout salvation history that fornication and adultery were not in His plan for our lives. Why not? He knew what would happen if we abused the gift - syphilis, gonorrhea, herpes, AIDS. These diseases are not just contracted by people who commit sexual sin; as with all sin, the innocent suffer the effects as well - like the child who contracts HIV through blood transfusion. Even though Father had given a disclaimer, this did not seem appropriate for classroom discussion.

While that was troublesome, I had the most difficulty accepting Father’s remarks on “the Chastisement.” Because of its sins the world would be plunged into three days of darkness. The only light during that time would be that given off by blessed candles. Demons would be let loose upon the earth to torment unbelievers. A few of the school prayer group members later told me that the only safe-haven during that period would be church buildings. The teens closest to Father seemed to focus on these catastrophes more than a personal relationship with Jesus or the desire to evangelize.

This differed from other people I knew of who had visited Medjugorje. While believing that the world could very well be on the brink of a chastisement, they did not bring in strange side revelations like seeing only by the light of blessed candles or demons being let loose on the earth. Instead,

the chastisement was spoken of more in terms of war and environmental upheaval - God's disciplining of a wayward world, reminding it that there are consequences to selfishness, pride, and the devaluing of human life. They also believed that such a chastisement was to a large degree *conditional*; if the world repented then it could be mitigated. A biblical correlation may be the repentance of the city of Nineveh at the preaching of Jonah; when the Lord said that there would be a reckoning for their sinfulness, "they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them, . . . [The king ordered the people to] 'Cry mightily to God; yea, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence which is in his hands.' . . . When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it" (Jonah 3:5,8,10; information within brackets added).

Father Mike peppered his version of the chastisement with references to the *Book of Revelation*. After the three days of darkness the earth would be cleansed and history continue, with Jesus ruling from Jerusalem for a thousand years. Only after the thousand years had elapsed would history come to a close and the world be transformed.

For me, the most authoritative information about the end times came not from private revelations, but the Bible. If something didn't jive with it then I was on my guard. This talk of three days of darkness and demons let loose to torment people was way out there. I knew there were a number of Christians who believed Jesus would establish a thousand year reign, ruling politically from Jerusalem, before a final rebellion and the Day of Judgment. They based their belief on the twentieth chapter of the *Book of Revelation*. But that was the only piece of what Fr. Mike said with which I was familiar.

Besides the strange teaching, Fr. Mike claimed a variety of spiritual phenomena. I was shocked to walk into class one afternoon only to find Father and a group of students at the back of the room with an 8x10" image of the Virgin Mary. One by one the students were invited to run their hands over the photo as Father asked, "Can you feel the heat coming off of that?" He would also speak of seeing auras around people.

The final straw came with the outbreak of the Gulf War, when he identified Saddam Hussein as the antichrist. That was when I knew I had to be-

gin studying the *Book of Revelation* and offer my classmates a more balanced, more authoritative vision, of Christianity's belief about the end times.

My dad supplied me with a couple of books he had used to study *Revelation*. The first thing I noticed was that most modern scholars interpreted it within the context of first-century Christianity, the original recipients of John's revelation, and the world in which they lived. That was what Mr. Burns had taught me to do; that was the method endorsed by the Catholic Church. Besides, in its very first verse *Revelation* says it concerns "what soon must take place." It was addressed to "the seven churches in the province of Asia" (1:4). So whatever additional meanings we glean from this book, we first have to identify the literal sense – the meaning its author intended for his original readers!

I found the research fascinating. I got the chance to sort through not just the scenarios offered by Fr. Mike, but to look at other popular beliefs such as the "rapture." As you will shortly see, my experience with Fr. Mike brought me not just to a deep appreciation and fondness for the most misunderstood book of the Bible, but a growing appreciation of both tradition and the papacy! Before I get to that though, I should tell you how things worked out with Fr. Mike.

Once I felt prepared, I spoke up in class. Father Mike and I carried on a discussion/debate that left most classmates looking on in silence. Father told me that I was too black and white, especially in my outlook on the Bible; and I told him that he had departed from the Catholic Church in his teaching about the end times. Things quieted down for a bit after that, but Father gradually began slipping in more "private revelations." In desperation I went to my school's administrator, who listened patiently. He promised that the matter would be addressed, but quietly and in his own way. I, for my part, was to continue going to class and to try to avoid confrontation as best I could. Three weeks later Fr. Mike announced that he would not be returning to our school, that he was being transferred to a parish in a neighboring town.

The Book of Revelation

When we look at Revelation from the perspective of the early Church, instead of reading it with a newspaper in the other hand, I think that the message becomes very plain: in the midst of the horrible persecutions suf-

ferred by the Church, Jesus *is* Lord; and in the end His Kingdom will be manifest to all of creation. In the fourth chapter of the book, the author John heard a trumpet like voice calling him to, “Come up [here],” (4:1) and begin viewing the scene through God’s eyes.

The book belongs to a whole genre of literature that flourished among the Jews, and then the Christians, from roughly 200 B.C. to 200 A.D., known as *apocalyptic*. Much of its imagery is taken from the Old Testament. In *Revelation’s* 404 verses, scholars can identify at least 278 allusions to the O.T. It borrows imagery already familiar to the people of God - the pictures painted in *Exodus*, *Daniel*, *Ezekiel*, *Isaiah*, and the *Psalms*. Jesus made use of this same imagery, using the language of cosmic and environmental upheaval to prophesy of the destruction of Jerusalem (see Matthew 24:1-35, with parallels in Mark and Luke).

Revelation was written in code, written to give strength to a persecuted Church - being ostracized by the Jewish community on one side and put to death by the Romans on the other. When you are a group hunted by the authorities you can not say things straight out, you have to veil it in symbols, much like the resistance in World War II did in their radio messages. Thus we find Roman Empire referred to as a Beast “with ten horns and seven heads...the seven heads are seven hills” upon which the city of Rome was built (Revelation 17:3, 9).

So much speculation about the end times is wrapped up in the idea of “antichrist” - who is he and when he will make his appearance. In World War II people naturally pointed to Hitler. Others in the 1930’s, opposed to the New Deal, held up Franklin Delano Roosevelt. As I said, Fr. Mike pointed to Saddam Hussein. While Saddam and Hitler may be called antichrists, in the sense that they oppose our Lord’s will, neither one of them were that diabolical personage, or “man of lawlessness” (2 Thessalonians 2:3), prophesied to immediately precede our Lord’s return.

Many commentators on the *Book of Revelation* identify the “First Beast” of chapter thirteen with this “man of lawlessness” spoken of by St. Paul. We are told that this first beast will have received a mortal wound to one of its seven heads. The healing of this wound would entice the whole world to follow after it out of wonderment (13:3). The beast waged war against God’s people and conquered them. “Authority was given it over every tribe and people and tongue and nation” (13:7). The “Second Beast” is said to

have “had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon” (13:11). It led the whole world in worshipping the first beast, making an idol in its honor. Further, the second beast did not allow anyone to “buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name” (13:17).

When we interpret these images in the context of first-century Christianity we arrive at a pretty likely candidate for John’s “First Beast,” or Antichrist. Consider the following: The Emperor Nero was the first Roman Emperor to persecute Christians; Peter and Paul were martyred under his reign. Nero died by a self-inflicted wound to the throat (the Beast with a mortal head wound?)¹¹⁸ Nero, as well as the emperors who followed, insisted on being worshipped as gods. The “Second Beast” may correspond to the pagan priests of Rome, leading people throughout the Empire in sacrifice to the false god. It may also refer to “asiarchs,” the Roman officials who enforced emperor worship. When we are told of people who did not accept the mark of the beast on their forehead or in their hand (13:17) it may refer to a dilemma faced by the early Church - they would have been unable to swear oaths invoking the emperor’s divinity during business transactions. They may also have refused to use coinage stamped with the inscription “Caesar is Lord.”¹¹⁹

Allow me to flesh out this identification of the First Beast with the Roman Emperor a bit more. The most telling detail concerns the most picked-over verse in *Revelation*:

This calls for wisdom: let him who has understanding reckon the number of the beast, for it is a human number, its number is six hundred and sixty-six (Revelation 13:18).

One has to wonder how many heavy-metal tunes have pondered this verse. What does John mean by “the man’s number”? As said earlier, the Hebrew alphabet - as well as Greek and Latin - have a number associated with each letter. The Jews had a “science” called gematria - discovering the hidden meanings of words by studying and comparing their numerical values. And whose name, when written in Hebrew, has the numerical value 666? You

¹¹⁸ Tickle, John, *The Book of Revelation: A Catholic Interpretation of the Apocalypse*. (Ligouri, Missouri: Ligouri Publications, 1983), p.94.

¹¹⁹ Perkins, Pheme, *Collegeville Bible Commentary: The Book of Revelation* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1983), p.63.

guessed it - Nero Caesar. What I found to be convincing about this identification was that early Latin manuscripts of *The Book of Revelation* exist in which this verse reads 616 instead of 666. When the name Nero Caesar is written in Latin, 616 is its value. From what I read, scholars postulate that the early Church, believing it understood John's code, made the adjustment when the book was translated into Latin.

Chapter 17 of *Revelation* further narrows the identity of the Beast to the Roman Emperors, personified by Nero at the time of the work's composition.¹²⁰ We are told that the beast's "seven heads are seven hills...they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, *one is*, the other has not yet come, and when he comes he must remain only a little while" (17:9-10). Five emperors had preceded Nero; he was the last of the royal blood-line. With his suicide the empire was plunged into civil war as competitors vied for the throne. Galba succeeded Nero but was assassinated six months later, making him the seventh king, who "must remain only a little while" (17:10). Only Vespasian's ascendancy to the throne returned stability to the empire; the "mortal wound" inflicted by Nero's suicide "was healed, and the whole earth followed the beast with wonder" (13:3).

Reading *Revelation* in the historical context of the early Church made sense to me. It didn't rob the book of its prophetic character either. As I have said before, prophecy is predominantly God giving His people a reality check. In this case He reminds us that even when the Church on earth looks like its being crushed Jesus is still Lord of the situation; He will bring deliverance to His holy ones and rule the Earth as her King. Whenever the Church finds herself persecuted, under the gun, martyred - *Revelation* is God's word addressed to that situation. The Roman Empire did fall; its former capitol is now the center of Christ's Universal (Catholic) Church! Will the Church undergo another great persecution immediately before Christ's Second Coming? Will there be a definitive antichrist? Taking the New Testament as a whole, as well as two thousand years of constant Christian interpretation, I believe we have to say "yes." When that time,

¹²⁰ For this information I am indebted to Kenneth L. Gentry and his works *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* (American Vision, 1998) and *The Beast of Revelation* (American Vision, 2002). These can also be accessed online at http://freebooks.entrewave.com/freebooks/docs/_bksauth.htm.