

# Session #1: The Book of Revelation: Introduction

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For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word by that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the (person) that I send it.

Isaiah 55:10-11

## Introduction to Bible Study

As we begin this new year I would like to welcome one and all to this exciting journey we are about to begin. While I have been a lifelong student of the Bible, approximately 15 years ago I started facilitating a bible study at what was then St. Theodore in Westland. Over the years I have guided the conversation in that study, from St. Theodore (now, Mary Cause of our Joy) to St. Colette, through three gospels and Acts, many of the New Testament letters including most of St. Paul's writing, Genesis, Exodus, Ester as well as an overview of the entire Bible by studying Salvation History from Genesis to Acts. And through it all the one book of the Bible that intrigued me the most but I felt least qualified to explore, and the one that was most requested the most, was the book we are about to study, the book of Revelation. To be honest I knew that the fantastic symbolism and wild images would be a great challenge to understand and interpret. Yet, in my desire to digest all of God's Word I knew it must be a mission I undertake. But, through the promptings of the Holy Spirit (and the repeated requests of some gathered here), today we launch our conversation where few Bible studies go.



Before we can get into the text there are some important foundations I must lay so that you will understand where I am coming from in the interpretations I offer, and so everyone here will be somewhat on the same page. First, what we will be discussing, the understandings and interpretations that will be brought into this conversation will be from a Roman Catholic view. If what you are expecting is a walk through an "end time play book", which if understood correctly gives us the exact details of what is going to happen, act by act, plague by plague as the world end. This is the interpretation and understanding of the Book of Revelation that some of our Protestant brothers and sisters offer. If this is what you expect here then you will be sorely disappointed. While the book of Revelation does offer some end time direction, there is so much more in this book.

In my research and preparation, I looked to the Catholic Theologians. Six Catholic scripture scholars and their written commentaries and two video series: all of which are included in the bibliography found at the end of my notes. All of them agree that this book, as in any book of the bible needs to be approach not simply through 21<sup>st</sup> century eyes and what we want the sacred scripture to say, but to see the words written through the eyes of God as understood through Catholic scholarship. To explain what that means we need to look to the Catechism of the Catholic Church which gives us guidelines and direction.

As Catholics in our study and interpretation of Sacred Scripture we are to take the following principles as our guiding principles or directives:

1. **CCC 105 – God is the author of Sacred Scripture:** The bible is not like any other book we have, read or held. Actually, it is not a book at all but a library. The word bible comes from the Latin, *biblia* which means *books* or loosely translated *library*. As such this library is unique in that word, concept, image, story, lesson does not originate in the mind of humanity but in the heart of God. God communicates with us out of love *in order to reveal himself...God speaks in human words* (CCC 101).
2. **CCC 106 – God inspired human authors:** God choose men in a specific time and place to write down His Holy Word using *their own faculties and powers*. In other words God inspires but man wrote from their experiences, their understand, their history, their language. This is important to comprehend if we are to understand what we are reading. Think of it this way. When my daughter was first learning to read and write, what she read and wrote was on the most basic level. As a 4 year old I did not give her *War and Peace* by Tolstoy nor did I expect her to write as such. God works within our understanding and ability when inspiring us to greatness. Therefore, to interpret scripture correctly the reader must: **CCC 110:** *to discover the sacred authors' intention: the reader must take into account:*
  - a. *the conditions of their time and culture,*
  - b. *the literary genres in use at that time, and*
  - c. *the modes of feeling, speaking and narrating then current.*

What this means is that we must become part archeologist, part etymologist and part social anthropologist. To correctly interpret God's Word we must dig much deeper than just the obvious or top layer and

- Look at the historical time and the culture of the people of the time the document was written.
- We must ask ourselves and explore what genres these words are written in. For example, it is important to understand the Bible as a library. Go to any local community library and you will find many different kinds of writing. Like the local library the Bible includes poetry which is often free with it's figurative

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language so as to draw on our imaginations (Psalms, Proverbs). The bible includes history, editorial comments, stories which we call parables.

- And finally, we must look deeper into the meanings of words. Not just the twenty-first century meaning but more importantly the original words used in the language they were used within the context they were used. One of my favorite examples comes from the gospel of Mark (10:25) when Jesus challenges those listening by saying: *“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven.”* Sounds impossible, right? Until you do your homework, dig deeper and find that the “eye of the needle” was a gate into Jerusalem. It was meant for foot traffic only so was small, low and compact. Merchants found out that they could lead their camels through that gate but, only if they completely unpacked their animals and the camel went down on its knees. When I heard this, it opened up a completely different understanding of what Jesus meant.
3. **CCC 112 – *Be especially attentive “to the content and unity of the whole scripture:*** The bible as a whole is telling a story. I like to think of it as a love letter from God telling me all that has gone before, what God wants for my life and what is to come. But as a woman in my 60’s to truly understand me you must hear my entire story. My childhood, my challenges, my disappoints, my hopes and dreams. In the same way in understanding fully God’s Word we approach any of the documents in Scripture in light of the whole story. Many don’t like or read the Old Testament because it seems that it is one bloody battle after another. But from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21, Scripture is the story of salvation history. It is the telling of God reaching out to humanity in love and mercy, calling us to our best selves, humanity responding with a “yes” and failing time and time again. So, God comes down to become one with us, to walk with us through Jesus Christ, to teach the truth about God’s ways and love, once again calling us to be our best selves. St Mark, Luke, John, Paul and Peter as well as other authors, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit offer further teachings into the Word of God and Jesus Christ. But to fully appreciate the richness of what is being offered we cannot study Genesis without consideration to the Gospels and we cannot look into the book of Revelation without all that had already been written before impacting our understanding.
  4. **CCC 113 – *Read the Scripture within “the living Tradition of the whole Church.”*** God’s voice did not go silent after the first century. Jesus promised to the Church *the Advocate* (John 14:15-31), the Holy Spirit to lead us and guide us in faith. To quote further in this catechism: *for the Church carries in her Tradition the living memorial of God’s Word, and it is the Holy Spirit who gives her the spiritual interpretation of the Scripture.* In other words: God is guiding the Catholic Church as it has matured over time its understanding and interpretation of God’s Word. The books of the bible, and

for our conversation this year, the book of Revelation was written by the Church for the Church so it must be read and understood in light of the Church. A music person will tell you a song can be sung or played in different keys. We must read and seek an understanding of the bible knowing as it was inspired by God, written through the voice of humans in time and culture, in the key of the Catholic Church.

5. **CCC 114 – *Be attentive to the analogy of faith:*** Over 2000 years God has lead the Catholic Church to certain truths which we identify as our sacred Tradition. For instance, the Catholic Church has come to understand and believe that God is love and mercy itself. We cannot interpret scripture that would be counter to that truth that God has lead the Church to accent to as a truth of faith.

A second important consideration as we study the bible, as is stated in Catechism 115: *According to an ancient tradition, one can distinguish between two senses of Scripture, the literal and the spiritual.* Catechism 116 tell us: *The literal sense is the meaning conveyed by the words of scripture and discovered by exegesis, following the rules of sound interpretation.* The example I gave above regarding the *eye of the needle* is a perfect example of the literal sense of scripture. As we study the book of Revelation there is a profound sense of St. John speaking to the historical moment. We will speak more of this but in the visions, we will read and study, God was not just offering a view of the future but more importantly seeking to give hope and support to a Church that was struggling with persecution by the Jewish Temple leadership and Rome. This first century Church was struggling with disillusionment and discouragement as they figure out how to live the message of Christ and finding road blocks and misunderstandings. They were disheartened that living the message of Jesus Christ was a lot of hard unappreciated work. But, don't we feel that way today. As Christians today we are persecuted, disheartened by the contemporary culture, and we are disillusioned and discouraged at times because it isn't easy being Christians in the world today. And, all too often the human side of the Church shows itself. That is why Scripture remains very much relevant to us today and every age to come. Because there is more than just the literal sense of the words but also a spiritual side to what we read and study.

Catechism 117 tell us: *Thanks to the unity of God's plan, not only the text of Scripture but also the realities and events about which it speaks can be signs.* Signs that point us to a larger truth in God's message. This spiritual sense is meant to comfort us in our affliction and afflict us when we get too comfortable. The Catechism offers us three spiritual senses that should drive our appreciation and interpretation of Sacred Scripture:

1. ***The allegorical sense.*** (CCC 117, 1) All of scripture points to and should be understood in light of Jesus Christ. The historical crossing of the Red Sea should and can be understood as a type of victory in Christ. Death to new life, which is also should help us

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appreciate the Sacrament of Baptism. The cross of Christ expresses not only the truth of our salvation but should comfort us in our own pain and suffering helping us to understand that what we experience has redemptive powers for ourselves and for the world.

2. **The moral sense.** (CCC 117, 2) The Bible is a book of instructions. B.I.B.L.E.= Basic Instruction Before Leaving Earth. What we read and study is meant to change our lives. There are lessons to be learn, challenges to be accepted and comfort offered. One of my most favorite passages in scripture comes from the prophet Micah (6:8) and summarized for me what the moral sense of scripture is all about. Through His Holy Word God is teaching us to *“act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with God”*. The study of Scripture is NOT just an intellectual accent. It is a call to become. To become more than you were yesterday.
3. **The anagogical sense** (CCC 117, 3) Anagogical comes from the Greek *anagoge*, which means leading toward or the future. In whatever we read we should be asking ourselves how does this text relate to the future. Not just our personal future, but the future of the Church, the future of the world. If you want to have an extremely interesting study, ready the prophets in light of today’s world. These men, the prophets, were not just speaking to a historical people and time but their messages are very pertinent to today and the future of the Church and the world.

So, this should give us a common ground by which to approach our study of the Book of revelation and any bible study undertaken in the future. There is more to consider than just what we want the Sacred Scriptures to say to us. Think of it this way, when you love somebody, you work hard to keep that relationship alive. A part of that work is to continually seek to understand the meaning of their words and actions. If you take them at face value or assume you know what they want without truly listening trouble will be right around the corner. My daughter told me once that I was “the bomb”. I had never heard the word before but was I offended? No. Because I took into consideration, the source, the culture and the circumstances of the statement. As a pre-teen she was paying me a compliment. If what we seek is to truly understand God in God’s Word then we must do the work.

One final comment before we start digging into this study. If you are new to the study of the bible, this is your first bible study then the question will come up, What Bible do I use? My first response to this question whenever asked is: “Which ever Bible you have and will use?” My second response is to recommend two different editions: The RSV—Revised Standard Version which is the bible used in the Catechism of the Catholic Church; or the NAB or NARB—New American Bible or New American Revised Bible which is the one we hear at Mass when we hear the readings. We have bibles here for your use. I do not suggest that you run out and buy a new bible, (unless you really want to). What is important is that you find a bible you can live

with, grow with and pray with. I strongly suggest you read the next chapter before coming to class. What you are reading may not make sense to you but like seeds being planted God's word has now entered into your life. If you don't get the chance not to worry, we read the Word of God as we go.

Please be aware that most bibles have a lot of good resource materials in them. My Bible, the Catholic Study Bible has some wonderful articles at the very beginning written by major Catholic Scripture scholars such as Fr. Donald Senior on the Biblical Texts and their background, The Bible in Catholic Life by Daniel Harrington. There are histories and chronologies, overviews of each of the books of the bible and in the back a concordance, glossary and dictionary. Most bibles will have maps and some have special sections like "Praying this Passage" or "Living this Message". Just make sure you look to see the wealth that is contained within the bible you hold and use it. The more you understand the greater the adventure.

Finally, please, please, PLEASE ask your questions. It is in the dialogue that we all learn. You may be shy or uncertain. You may think to yourself, "Everybody probably knows the answer already and I don't want to appear senseless." The questions and comments offered keep this study firmly footed in the needs and directions of THIS bible study, not simply in what Theresa wants you to know. And I have learned that those seemingly senseless questions are the ones that often make the best discussion. My favorite and most effective classes are those that I never get to my notes but teach through the questions asked. And please know, if I don't know the answer I will find out. So, enough with the preliminary comments. Let's get to it.

### **Introduction to the Book of Revelation**

As I have said, I am so excited about this year's study. Did you know that we only hear a total of 38 verses from the book of Revelation in our three-year lectionary cycle of the Mass, (Readings at Mass). That is little over 9% of the total book of Revelation. Compared to any other of the New Testament letters where we hear, on the average of half of the document. Well, do not be disheartened. By the end of this year, if you stick with this study, you will have read, heard and studied 100% of what St. John wrote.

The book of Revelation has another name – The book of the Apocalypse. In truth the Book of the Apocalypse is the original title. The word revelation comes from the Greek word *apokalypsis* from which we get the word apocalypse. The literal translation of apokalypsis is: "an uncovering", "a disclosure of knowledge", "a revelation". In this case the title comes from the content of the book. As we study we will see that God inspired St. John to reveal to all peoples a message of hope and endurance under hardship. Through the visions John receives God will *pull back* the veil that separates heaven from earth revealing what is waiting for those who are faithful in Christ.

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The book of Revelation belongs to a type of writing called Apocalyptic literature, which is a category or style of writing that focuses on prophetic statements and visions of the end time. Primarily Jewish in origin and nature, there were many writings in this style from about 200 BC to 100 AD. St. John's Book of Revelation is unique of this period in that it alone was inspired by God. That is not to say that God did not inspire others to apocalyptic writing. There are a few found in the Old Testament and we will be looking at and referring to many of them. Daniel 7-12 is an example.

The meaning of words changes over time. This we all know. For a while to say something was "bad" meant it was good. For us today the word apocalypse means what? I looked it up and here is the online definition I got: *the complete final destruction of the world, especially as described in the biblical book of Revelation.* This definition itself leads most of our understanding of the book and our expectations. But, remember when I said that to understand the bible we must look with, in this case, first century eyes. In the first century the word apocalypse did not refer to the end of time but to a wedding. (Now, if I was a comedian there are a lot of jokes I could insert here.) I bring this up because as we explore the Book of Revelation the first century meaning of it's title will come out time and time again. As way of a tease of coming attractions: some of what St. John is seeing is the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. Who is the "Lamb"? Jesus, the Son of God. And who is the bride? The Church. We are not necessarily going to study the end of the world. We are going to a wedding!

In the time of Christ, a wedding did not last a few hours. It lasted an entire week and would conclude with the bridegroom carrying his bride to the wedding tent. Once in the tent the bridegroom would *lift the veil* of the bride. The action of *lifting the veil* was the understanding of the word apocalypse for those living in the first century— an unveiling, lifting of the veil, which therefore also had a strong association with the concept of a wedding. The book of Revelation, which we are about to explore is not a focused description of the rapture, of the end-time torments of those left behind. In truth this book is a beautiful, tender and life affirming story of the relationship of God towards those who love and follow Him, the Church. A simple but incomplete synopsis of the Book of Revelation could be to say that in the twenty-two chapters the first half is the revealing of the groom, the Lamb of God, and the second half is the unveiling of the bride, the Church.

Let's end today's conversation with a quote given by Pope Benedict in 2013. He told an audience that the Book of Revelation "*is a difficult book, but one of great richness*" which presents the reader "*with the living breathing prayer of the Christian assembly, gathered together 'on the Lord's day. In it a reader presents the assembly with a message entrusted by*

*God to John the Evangelist,” the Pope noted. “From the dialogue between them a symphony of prayer arises which is then developed in many different forms up until the conclusion.”*

**Reflection Questions:**

1. Coming into this study what did you understand the Book of Revelation was all about? How did you come to this understanding?
2. After Theresa’s introduction, what are your thoughts, questions, concerns...?
3. What are some of your hopes or expectations in coming to this Bible Study?

**Catechism of the Catholic Church**

SEE content of presentation

**Bibliography:**

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