In a 1993 article in this journal, Daniel J. Harrington declared: “Most Catholics are afraid of the book of Revelation” (Harrington, 53). Not much has changed! Weeks before the outbreak of the Iraq war in 2003, Paul Boyer penned three ominous questions: “Does the Bible foretell regime change in Iraq? Did God establish Israel’s boundaries millennia ago? Is the United Nations a forerunner of a satanic world order?” He suggests: “For millions of Americans, the answer to all those questions is a resounding yes” (Boyer). The best-selling Left Behind series of apocalyptic novels has made matters worse (LaHaye and Jenkins). If this is where the Apocalypse takes us, then Catholics aren’t the only ones who should be afraid! Those who read the Apocalypse literally, as LaHaye and Jenkins do, run the risk of confusing the world behind the text with the world in front of the text, confusing the first century with the twenty-first (Rossing). History teaches us that such misreadings are dangerous: more blood than ink has been spilled by those claiming to be lined up with the Children of Light in the struggle against the Children of Darkness.

Reading with the Sacramental Imagination

When worshipers enter the medieval cathedral of Notre Dame in Chartres, they look up to behold the magnificent sculptures above the central portal: the Christ of the Apocalypse seated in judgment, surrounded by the four living creatures of Revelation 4 (the lion, the calf, the human being, and the eagle), the twelve apostles, and the twenty-four elders. Entering the cathedral’s soaring nave, they know viscerally that they are in a place ordered by what Andrew Greeley dubbed the “sacramental imagination,” suggesting that “Catholics are more likely to imagine God as present in the world and the world as revelatory instead of bleak” (Greeley, 4). Towering vaults, stained glass, and the stirring chords of organ and choir all speak of the imagination to which Gerard Manley Hopkins was attuned when he wrote, “The world is charged with the grandeur of

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This grammar of grace orders the rhythms of the liturgy that the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Liturgy identifies as “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed,” and “the font from which all her power flows” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 10). The sacramental imagination offers us a way of approaching the Apocalypse without fear.

In the world behind the Apocalypse, the Roman province of Asia (in present-day Turkey) during the reign of the Emperor Domitian (81–96 C.E.), worship was a matter of no small importance. Asia’s cities boasted temples erected in honor of the emperor—deified even during life—unmistakable testimony to the power of the mortal who was acclaimed as “lord and god.” Religion and politics were not discretely divided into separate spheres: worship was a political act that acknowledged the powers-that-be for exactly what they were. Not long after John’s Apocalypse was written, Pliny the Younger, governor of the province of Pontus / Bithynia (111–113 C.E.), wrote to the Emperor Hadrian: “In the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians . . . I interrogated . . . as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed” (Pliny). These Christians admitted that “they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god” (Pliny). They worshiped in each other’s homes, not in magnificent settings like the Temple of Domitian at Ephesus. This was the environment in which Revelation was first proclaimed in the liturgical assembly: “Blessed is the one who reads aloud and blessed are those who listen to this prophetic message and heed what is written in it” (Rev 1:3). Even in such private settings, hidden from the public eye, singing “a hymn to Christ as to a god” was a political act, challenging the Roman emperor’s claim to reverence, honor, and obedience.

Revelation is filled with liturgical symbolism, borrowed both from the rich traditions of Israel’s worship and from Roman imperial ritual. Its echoes of Jewish worship took on special poignancy in the light of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by Roman forces in 70 C.E.—a horrific act that earned Rome its designation as the new Babylon, heir to the empire that destroyed the first Temple in 587 B.C.E. Its echoes of Roman imperial ritual helped first century Christians to recognize that despite all appearances to the contrary, the emperor’s sovereignty was mere pretense. As Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza notes, John’s use of cultic vocabulary is “not for the sake of persuading his audience to participate in the daily or weekly liturgy,” but “for the sake of moving the audience to political resistance. He seeks to motivate them to give obeisance to the power and empire of God and the Lamb or the dominion of Babylon/Rome” (Schüssler Fiorenza, 103).

Although their avoidance of the rituals of emperor worship threatened their participation in most spheres of public life, Revelation’s earliest audiences received reassurance that they were not “left behind” as bystanders in history’s great drama. Their exercise of the sacramental imagination as they listened to the Apocalypse made it possible for them to tap into the true power that creates and sustains the cosmos, the only power capable of challenging Rome’s domination. This is the paradoxical power of Christ the Lamb, crucified under Pontius Pilate and raised to life by the power of God whose throne he now shares.

In the world in which we now find ourselves pondering the Apocalypse, the Second Vatican Council warns that “the sacred liturgy does not exhaust the entire activity of the Church” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10).
Worshipers who enter the cathedral of Chartres cross its threshold again to return to their daily lives, attuned ever more acutely by the grammar of the liturgy to “read” their daily lives as “charged with the grandeur of God.” Justo González points out a peculiar paradox: “[F]aced by an empire that he could only describe only in terms of an apocalyptic beast, John gave us a book whose culminating vision is the liturgy that takes place in heaven. In that respect, the book of Revelation is very strange indeed. In no book of the New Testament are there more references to singing and to worship. Yet the book of Revelation does not give even one directive for worship” (González, 108). None of the magnificent hymns that we find in the Apocalypse (hymns that are familiar because they are used during evening prayer in the Liturgy of the Hours) is pronounced by anyone on earth. All are sung by heaven’s choruses! In Revelation 4:8, the Sanctus borrowed from Isaiah 6:3 is sung by the four living creatures who surround God’s throne, and the twenty-four elders prostrate themselves before God’s throne as they sing “Worthy are you, Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things; because of your will they came to be and were created” (Rev 5:11).

If we ask why the Apocalypse “does not even give one directive” for earthly worship, we learn the answer by recalling that John frames Revelation as words of prophecy (Rev 1:3; 22:18). Justo González reminds us, “Worship is much more than an act whereby we recharge our spiritual batteries. If it is true that our chief end is to glorify God forever, then worship is first of all an act of justice. . . . And, as the prophets of Israel repeatedly said, to pretend to worship God without doing justice in society is to worship a god who does not require justice, which is to worship a false god—to practice idolatry” (González, 109). For Christians in the first century and in the twenty-first, the sacramental imagination invites us to hear anew the words of Amos: “Away with your noisy songs! I will not listen to the melodies of your harps. But if you would offer me holocausts, then let justice surge like water, and goodness like an unfailing stream” (Amos 5:23-24).

For those who buy into Left Behind, Revelation provides the gruesome script for a cosmic endgame in which readers are bit players at best. Yet, for readers who read Revelation informed by the grammar of the sacramental imagination, escape from the world into the ethereal realm of the heavenly liturgy is not an option. Revelation’s own words challenge us to embrace the call to justice as the way in which earthbound believers can join in the hymns of the heavenly choirs. While LaHaye and Jenkins leave their readers behind as terrified spectators who watch the endtime scenario unfold before them, what I have proposed as a distinctively Catholic approach invites those who read the Apocalypse from every nation, tribe, tongue, and people to be “a kingdom and priests for our God,” committed to the reign of God’s justice on earth (Rev 5:10), not in some distant future but here and now.

References


