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THE SEVEN GREAT VISIONS OF CHRIST IN THE APOCALYPSE

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In the Apocalypse, there are as it were seven great visions of Christ. The number seven is common in Saint John's writings (some exegetes have drawn attention to that and there is reason to do so), and it periodically marks the Gospel in a remarkable way.[1] The number seven is also present in the Apocalypse. The visions of Christ are not explicitly noted nor are there said to be seven visions. Yet if we look carefully, we can see that there are seven of them and they could formulate an entire treaty on the mystery of Jesus.

The first vision is that of the priesthood of Christ in glory. The Apocalypse is a book that puts the mystery of Christ's priesthood into full light. "Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands One…."[2] Let us notice that he "sees" the voice. The voice John hears is so strong that it unveils a person to him: "One."

The Second vision is the four Living Beings in the great vision of heaven.[3] This is perhaps the most beautiful vision we have been given of heaven. The "four Living Beings" appear in this vision to show us the mystery of the Incarnation. These four Living Beings show us Jesus as *the* Living Being *par excellence*. The four Living Beings, symbolized in tradition and iconography as a lion, a young bull, the face of a man and an eagle, are the Evangelists. If we are attentive to the text, however, we see that we cannot stop with the Evangelists. There is much more to it. We can quite rightly say that they are the Evangelists, but as witnesses of Christ and therefore as reflecting an aspect of the mystery of Christ. We must never forget that what is characteristic about a symbol is that it signifies several realities according to a certain order. Poets and lovers like symbolic language so much for this reason, since it simultaneously says something and hides it (which is characteristic of a symbol). Scientific language has no tact – it says everything directly – as does philosophical language, while poetical language is symbolic. Symbolic language is very connatural to man. Children have a symbolic language as well as mystics and lovers. In symbolic language, love goes before intelligence.

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[1] See M.D. PHILIPPE, *Wherever He Goes*, Retreat on the Gospel of John, 2001.
[2] Rev. 1:12.
[3] 4:6.

The four Living Beings are therefore first of all the Evangelists and secondly the mystery of Jesus. Jesus is "the Lion of the tribe of Judah"[4] – a symbol of royalty. He is the young bull, the victim *par excellence*; he is the "face of a man," and an eagle symbolises contemplation.

The third moment in this vision of Christ is the vision of the "scroll," the book of life, which is held by him who is seated on the throne, that is, the Father.[5] "The Lamb, as though it had been slain," which represents Jesus in his mystery of the Redemption, is the only one who can open the seals. The symbolic language of the Apocalypse therefore explains the mystery of the Incarnate Word – the four Living Beings – and the mystery of Redemption, the Cross. There are two different symbolisms because there are two different functions. Symbolic language considers *functions* and not the *person*, while theological language (in scientific theology) and philosophical language consider the person.

The fourth moment is the "son of man" in his function of harvesting with a sharp sickle.[6] The harvester who, with a sharp sickle, is going to bring in the harvest for the Father is Jesus in his function as high priest. He has supreme authority to discern and decide between good and evil – sheep and goats, as the Gospel says.[7]

The fifth vision of Christ is especially beautiful: "Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself. He is clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, followed him on white horses. From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, King of kings and Lord of lords."[8] Here is the great vision of Jesus' glory: the white horse, and the rider who is called Faithful and True. All this indicates to us that it is Jesus in his great victory.

The sixth vision is at the end of the Apocalypse: all light in the heavenly Jerusalem comes from the Lamb.[9] She has no need of sun or lamp: all her light comes to her from the Lamb, who is her Spouse.[10]

Seventh vision: the Root of David, the bright morning Star.[11] These seven visions would call for the development of a great theology of the mystery of Jesus, a theology that does not yet exist because the Apocalypse has never been used seriously in theology. It has been left to artists and writers, although a theological study of the mystery of Jesus by means of these seven great symbolisms would be admirable. We would see that everything is centred on the *priesthood* of Jesus. Everything is ordered by the priestly functions of Christ, which are apostolic, but imply an apostolate of love, a contemplative apostolate. These

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[4] 4:5.
[5] 5:1-10.
[6] 14:14 ff.
[7] Mt 25:32-33.
[8] Rev 19:11-16.
[9] 21:22-23.
[10] Cf. 19:7 and 21:9.
[11] 22:16.

visions are relevant since in our day Jesus' priesthood is left aside and because of this, neither the royal priesthood of the faithful nor the ministerial priesthood is understood anymore.

But let us return to the first vision of Jesus and try to analyse it. What is striking about this vision is that we see Jesus through the seven Churches. In chapter 15 of the Gospel of Saint John, Christ gives a teaching about the Church. The Church is presented as a vine of which Jesus is the trunk and we are the branches. This teaching of Jesus, according to Saint John, is a summit since it is given during the "final week." Just after this great teaching from Christ, one enters into the mystery of the Cross.

Christ's teaching reiterates everything Saint Paul tells us. But let it be clear that Jesus said this before Saint Paul had written his Epistles. For us, however, since the Gospel of John was written last of all, we can say that the grand comparisons made by Saint Paul (the mystical Body, the Temple and Marriage) are reiterated in the symbolism of the vine. Something similar is expressed by both of them – a substantial unity of life between Christ and us. Yet the comparison in the Gospel of John is even more rudimentary: the human body is no longer spoken of but rather the vine, in order to manifest to us the great mystery of the vine's fruitfulness which glorifies the Father – since the vine belongs to the Father. The Father is the vinedresser, and we are shown how the Father's glory is the fruit of his vine: fraternal charity. And the Father prunes his vine so that it can bear more fruit.

Vines are cared for in very different ways in France and in other countries. In Palestine, vines creep along the ground. Corinth's vines are different from Bourgogne, or Bordeaux, or Cognac. They have such richness that the trunk is no longer visible; all we see is the vine's richness. That is food for thought. When the Church is fully alive, the trunk hides itself. We would very much like to see the trunk, but we only see the fruits: Jesus hides behind his Church. We would all like to have a direct contact with Jesus! Yet God asks us to trust the vine which bears fruit and which both manifests Jesus' presence and hides it.

The Apocalypse immediately shows us Jesus' presence through the seven Churches, these seven Churches that Jesus prunes and corrects with the Father's authority. Is the Church in France the Church of Ephesus – the Church of Mary? Is the Church in Poland the Church of Ephesus? And what about the Churches in Romania, Moscow, New York or Mexico? Christ is present in all these Churches. He is present to us through them, and there is something particular about each one. In the right hand of the "son of man" there are seven stars representing the Angels of the seven Churches, the seven messengers sent to the seven Churches. That could be priests, or bishops, since it is the symbolism of one who is sent, and a bishop is sent by Christ for the Church in Paris or for the Church in Lyon, etc.

Amidst the seven lampstands and representing the seven Churches, there is then a "son of man" – the great vision of Daniel.[12] This first vision given in the Apocalypse is symbolic, but with a divine symbolism, thus real. Jesus as *priest* is the son of man, since to be a priest one must be a mediator between God and man.[13] On the one hand he is bound to God, one with him. And on the other hand, he is one with men. Jesus is certainly the mediator *par excellence*, since he is both God and man, perfectly man. Plato's dream –the perfect man – is

[12] Dan 7:9-13; 10:5-6.
[13] 1Tim 2:5.

accomplished! Yet Jesus is much more than the perfect man, since he is the man who culminates in God. Plato did not go that far.

Jesus is the man who is God and therefore the Mediator *par excellence* as son of man and beloved Son of the Father. His mediation is the most perfect mediation there is since it is a mediation of love, of life and of salvation. Never forget that Jesus' mediation is a mediation of love. He is the One Sent by the Father, sent to save us (expressed even in the very name of Jesus[14]), but to save us so as to have us enter the wellspring of all love which is the Father. We are introduced into this mystery of divine sonship present in the most intimate depths of Jesus' heart: this priest is a son, and he is the Beloved Son of the Father. He is united to God as Beloved Son and therefore he touches what is most vulnerable and loving in God: his fatherly heart. And he wanted to be the beloved son of Mary in order to touch what is most vulnerable in man's heart: the motherly heart of Mary. He is the mediator of the Father's heart for Mary's heart, and through her, for all men.

It is this priestly mediation of Christ that the Apocalypse shows to us—if we know how to decipher symbolic language a little. The Apocalypse's great secret is to reveal a royal priesthood of love to us. The "son of man" wears a long robe, a priestly robe, and a golden girdle to show us that this priesthood is no longer the Levitical priesthood but a royal priesthood, a priesthood of love. There you have the symbolism of the "golden girdle": gold is love. Gold can express many things, but in the end, in the language of the Apocalypse, it expresses love. Jesus is therefore set forth as the high priest *par excellence*. Understand well however: we are so used to saying "high priest" that we stop there, without knowing what "mediator of love" means.

Christ is the source of *all* priesthood: *all* mediation comes from Christ, and it is the Father who sends us his Son as a mediator so that he himself might be totally given to us through his Son, and given in such a way that we might be able to receive him. The Father sends his Son *for this reason*; this is *why* there is a mediator: so that our poor human heart might be enlarged to the size of God's light. Here we have what is characteristic of Christ's mediation: it has us grow divinely from within. He is "son of man" in order to be entirely ours. We clearly see this in the mystery of Advent and Christmas: Mary's tiny small child, mankind's tiny small child.

The Apocalypse then describes the quality of the "son of man": his hair is white like white wool, like snow. When a Christian sees snow falling, he should immediately think of the presence of the one who has white hair… In the Apocalypse, white is the symbol of the victory of love. For us, white automatically means purity, but that is not exactly correct. One must go further, because purity is a fruit, a consequence. To be pure, one must love; otherwise one is only legally pure – which does not mean much – one is outwardly pure. Purity comes from the heart – "Blessed the pure in heart." Purity is the fruit of love. When we love, we do not want to tarnish our love. We do not want it to be intermingled and mixed with anything else. We do not want it to become damaged. Love that intermingles with something else – money for example ("I love you because you have a lot of money") – is completely damaged and is not longer love. Hearing a remark like that, you would be right in thinking: "So you don't love me much!" But we could also hear: "I love you because you are

[14] Mt 1:21.

very intelligent," or, "I love you because you are a great artist," "I love you because you are a celebrity." Love is so flawed in our world today! That is why people like novels about little shepherd-girls who have nothing, who are nobodies and remain hidden.

White hair, which stands for age and great experience, symbolizes Christ's loving wisdom. I repeat "great experience," the kind of experience that does not do any harm– because there are some experiences that do. Sometimes a young person will say to you, "I wanted to do that for the experience." But there are experiences that do cause harm. That which Canon Law calls *ad experimentum* is not always good because love does not require experience. Love is love. Demanding experience means demanding a sign because we do not love enough. Love takes us much farther than experience. Our heart has an interior experience when it gives itself, but the gift is *more* than the experience. We damage ourselves with experiences because we no longer know what love is. We do not want to go to the end of love's demands. Love is a personal gift – a personal gift that is nothing but love.

But let us come back to the "white hair." The head symbolizes intelligence. When one's intelligence is completely at the service of love, when it is entirely changed by love and becomes an intelligence of the heart, a keen intelligence that reaches the heart, then it is the "white hair" of Jesus – his wisdom. It is the head that is entirely taken hold of by love's victory. In fact, the great victory of love is when love completely integrates the intelligence. Love is then perfectly victorious. More that dominating one's imagination and more than going beyond one's sensitivity, the victory of love is to completely raise the intelligence up so that it be taken hold of totally – and that is wisdom. Christ's priesthood is a priesthood of wisdom.

"His eyes like a flame of fire": again we see the connection between knowledge and love. "His eyes" are Christ looking at us – it is intuitive knowledge (intuition is defined as a "simple glance"). And a flame of fire is love. The way Jesus looks at us is like a flame of fire. Saint John of the Cross speaks a lot about a flame, fire, the "living flame of love" which is the Holy Spirit. The flame of fire is the Holy Spirit's presence in Jesus' heart and in his gaze.

This passage from the Apocalypse helps us understand how Saint John received the gaze of Jesus at the foot of the Cross. When Jesus was on the Cross, the only gesture he could still make was to look and to cry out – the cry of thirst. Saint John sought only one thing at the foot of the Cross: the gaze of Jesus. And Jesus' gaze could only find rest when it met the gaze of Mary and the gaze of John. In this vision of the Apocalypse, what strikes John the most is the gaze of Jesus "like a flame of fire."

"His feet like burnished bronze." Bronze symbolizes strength and stability, while, in Scripture, feet express an apostle's ardour: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news."[15] Here we see apostolic generosity, an apostle's total gift in which he keeps nothing back for himself since he is entirely given. "His feet like burnished bronze" therefore convey Jesus' strength and stability. Think of Jesus' feet on the Cross… Here, it is in glory.

"His voice like the sound of many waters." We must remember that John is at Patmos. Those who have gone to Patmos and visited the Cyclades know how the sea there can roar and have a deep voice (think also of Brittany's wild coast where the ocean also roars). Christ's voice is "the voice of many waters" – deep and powerful.

[15] Rom 10:15, citing Is 52:7.

"In his right hand he held seven stars." A hand symbolically represents authority. When we want to give someone a categorical order to leave or go away, we use our hand to show him which door to use! A hand gesture can convey authority and sometimes power, but a hand is also what holds. We hold a treasure in our hand. We can also shake someone's hand as a sign of union – (usually, at least! Because it is not always true). Jesus' hand holding seven stars expresses the presence of Jesus in those he sends – in the Bishop of each Church. Christ shakes hands with every messenger he sends as a sign of a lasting union.

A hand also gives blessings. We bless with our hands, and there is also the laying on of hands. Christ's priestly hand is present in the Church in order to bless. In Genesis, we see Melchizedek blessing Abraham, father of the Israelite people. Melchizedek prefigures Christ's priesthood.[16] This priestly king who offers bread and wine blesses Abraham[17] and in blessing him, he blesses all Abraham's descendants. Christ's priesthood reveals the beloved Son carrying his people and blessing them, even though he himself is above and beyond the Israelite people.

"From his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword." Jesus' mouth, from which come forth spoken words, holds a sword. His mouth, like his hands, expresses communication. A hand expresses it tenderly (the gesture of a hand which blesses evokes affection and tenderness), since priestly authority is a paternal authority. And from Jesus' mouth come forth his words of truth and love.

"His face like the sun shining in full strength." Everything is said to help us understand this *presence* of Jesus. This could all be applied to the mystery of Christmas, since the mystery of Christmas is eternal – let us not forget that. Christmas should not be celebrated like a historical fact. It could be lived like that, but realistically it is much greater. Jesus lives every stage of his life eternally. We do not understand this, but we should maintain it because, as is proper to glory, everything that has been lived in love is lived eternally. The mystery of Christmas really helps us understand the presence of Jesus who gives himself in littleness.

The vision of the Apocalypse and the mystery of Christmas therefore make us enter a wonderful contemplation of "the son of man," Mary's first-born: as we can see with Mary's liturgical gestures, the long robe, the golden girdle (Mary wrapped him in swaddling cloths), the white hair (the little child Jesus has his wisdom), his eyes, his feet, his voice, his hand, his *little* hand, his mouth, his face… There we have a wonderful realism that turns our gaze to Jesus in the manger, Jesus on the Cross, Jesus in glory. The Holy Spirit, the great artist of Love, gives us this unique icon which we should treasure in our heart and which is a priestly icon of Christ.

And Jesus, in his glory, introduces himself to John in this way: "I am the first and the last, and the Living One." Let us not forget the great statements in the Gospel of John when Jesus introduces himself: "I am the bread of life," "I am the light," "I am," "I am the door," "I am the good shepherd," "I am the Son of God," "I am the Resurrection."[18] Here again we find these seven statements: "I am the first and the last." His presence is an all-enveloping presence, seizing everything, because it is a presence of love – a presence of mediating love.

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[16] Cf. Heb 5:6, 10 (Ps 110:4); 6:20; 7:1-19.
[17] Gen 14:18.
[18] See *Wherever He Goes*, p. 301.

“I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (a key designates authority). Jesus introduces himself at the beginning of the Apocalypse, and this presence remains throughout the Apocalypse during the course of which we are shown the Church’s progression. Jesus always remains present in this way, hidden by the fecundity and fruits of his Church.

Let us look more closely at Jesus correcting the seven Churches. People today seek out new examinations of conscience so as to not always repeat the same faults and ramble on. The Apocalypse offers us a wonderful model that comes from the New Covenant. Examinations of conscience from before the Council used the commandments of God – in other words, the Old Covenant – and “the decent folks” prepared for Confession in this way. Such a preparation is unheard of nowadays, except in backwoods of certain counties when we hear confession for elderly grandmothers: “First commandment: I have nothing to say! Second commandment…” and so on. So, confession used to be made in the light of the commandments of God. That is all well and good, but it was the Old Testament. The evangelical beatitudes were a bit forgotten. “How are you doing on the spirit of poverty, my dear grandmother? How are you doing on the spirit of the pure in heart, or the beatitude of the peacemakers? When you come home, does everything become peaceful? Or on the contrary, does everything become hectic/(do you make a fuss over everything) when you arrive? Are you a grandmother of commotion?” The Apocalypse gives us a marvellous, divine outline of the little paths we can take to help us understand what wounds the heart of Christ. When you make a deep, true examination of conscience, do not make a psychological examination. Ask yourself what, in your life, could have wounded Jesus’ heart. That is what is important. What could have hurt the heart of Jesus? We do that with our friend. When we love someone and we feel that something is no longer exactly the same/(and we feel that he is acting a little different than usual), we ask him: “Did I hurt you? Tell me if I’ve hurt you. What it something I said? I never wanted to hurt you, but I see how sad you are. What could I have said or done to hurt you so much?” And he answers, “Yes, you said this or that. It was hard. You had no idea how much that hurt me.” At this moment, we ask forgiveness for something that we had completely forgotten, and we say, “Yes, you’re right… please forgive me.”

Do you often ask yourself what wounds the heart of Christ in your life? A true examination of conscience is an anticipation of the particular judgment. That is good to know because when we shall see Jesus, we will not at all feel like being reprimanded! We will not at all want Jesus to begin by saying, “What have you done here? And there, what have you done?” We will only want one thing and that is to throw ourselves into his arms and embrace him, and remain eternally with him in this bond of love – far beyond just shaking his hand! If we want to be in unison with the heart of Christ immediately, these divine examinations of conscience are necessary. We must anticipate the particular judgment and can do so by asking Jesus what has hurt him.

The corrections of the seven Churches – and these seven Churches are present within us – show us what wounds Christ’s heart. The first wound, the one most often forgotten, is to

no longer live by the "first love,"[19] like the Church at Ephesus. For France to remain the eldest daughter of the Church, she must live by her first love. We are far from it! But individually, personally, we can have this intense desire in our heart to love God with fervour. First love is fervent. What wounds Jesus' heart the most? A love that becomes lukewarm, as we will see. Jesus loves with fervour – not an artificial fervour, but a willed, profound fervour. As Saint Augustine put it, "He who *wants* to love, loves," spiritually speaking. He who loves is not someone who *feels* like he loves, but rather someone who *wants* to love. If we feel something, very good, but that is not what divine love is. Divine love is above and beyond that: it is the will to love. What wounds the heart of Jesus, the heart of "the one who holds the seven stars and walks *amidst* the Churches" (amidst, which is to say, touching the heart), is a lack of fervour in love.

What wounds Christ's heart in second place? When we are not faithful out of fear. That is the Church of Smyrna. Jesus asks us not to be afraid of martyrdom and to be "faithful unto death."[20] Martyrdom always frightens us a bit. To not be afraid, we must look not at the suffering of martyrdom but at Christ's hand holding us. If one day Jesus should ask martyrdom of us, he will be there and his presence will be stronger than the suffering. And daily martyrdom is accepting the Father's will and being faithful in obedience.

The third aspect that wounds Christ's heart (in the Church at Pergamum) is the Nicolatan's doctrinal eclecticism. What does that mean for us? The predominant concern about adapting. Instead of seeking the truth, we seek to adapt, to fit in with everyone else. Therefore our intelligence becomes dull and is no longer serving love and our eyes are no longer a flame of fire. Our search for truth becomes dreary. We "flow downriver," as Péguy says. When asked why we are doing something, we say, "Because everyone is doing it." And remember that dead bodies go down the river more quickly than others. Whether it has to do with doctrinal eclecticism or with liturgical, practical or moral eclecticism, all of it wounds the heart of Christ because love is lacking.

Fourth wound for Jesus' heart, for Christ present in Thyatira as "He who has eyes like a flame of fire,"[22] is letting the prophetess Jezebel seduce us. Think of all the modern-day prophetesses. People go to seek advice from individuals who read stars or lines on hands. People are more attentive to certain private revelations than to reading the Gospel of Saint John or the Apocalypse. The prophetess Jezebel leads to fornication and fornication is idolatry. The prophets are no longer sent by Christ, no longer saints, no longer theologians. They flatter our pride, our vanity and our sensuality. If we follow them, our look can no longer be filled with love.

Next, what hurts Christ about the Church of Sardis, "He who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars"? What hurts him is a pharisaic and false attitude: being concerned with keeping up appearances and forgetting what is most intimate in the heart. When we are not true in our language, when we are not true in our behaviour, when we are not true in our clothing - all that matters to Christ. The mystery of the Incarnation penetrates everything that is in man, and Christians do not have the right to adapt to whatever fashion comes along. This

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[19] Rev 2:4.
[20] 2:10.
[22] 2:18.

is a type of pharisaism as well: “you have the name of being alive, and you are dead.”[23] You do not keep watch over what has been given to you – Jesus’ presence.

Then we have “I am coming soon,” which calls for the Church of Philadelphia to faithfully await Christ’s return. Jesus’ heart is wounded by the fact that we do not await his return. He who is “the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one shall shut, who shuts and no one opens”[24] is wounded by our lack of fidelity because he alone is the key to the truth.

Finally, for the Church of Laodicea, Christ presents himself as he who can no longer tolerate those who are lukewarm. Christ will spew out of his mouth someone who is neither cold nor hot,[25] who becomes lukewarm and enclosed in a false stability, incapable of giving himself to others. A lukewarm person is someone who is self-satisfied. He does not need anything so he does not reach out to Jesus; he is no longer a beggar of love.

This grand vision of Jesus at the beginning of the Apocalypse reveals to us in a very unique way what wounds his heart. Jesus shows it much less in his apostolic life when he is among us (in the Gospel). He shows what wounds his heart when he appears to John at Patmos, *for us.*

[23] 3:1.
[24] 3:7.
[25] 3:16.