

The Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ in the Apocalypse - the Start of the Heavenly Liturgy

The death and resurrection of Christ are so essential to the Christian message, or Gospel, that it would be very strange if these events did not have an important place in a book, like the Apocalypse, which is primarily concerned with the salvific plan of God (cf. Rev 10,7). However, at the first reading, it is not at all obvious what place these events may have in the Apocalypse. It is perhaps for this reason that many Christians find it difficult to accept, and love, this sacred book. In the present article, therefore, we would like to show how the death and resurrection of Christ are represented in the Apocalypse, and to examine the significance of these events in the visions described by St. John.

The Lamb that was slain

In the Apocalypse the most obvious reference to the death and resurrection of Christ is to be found in the following passage: “And I saw between the throne and the four living-creatures, in the middle of the twenty-four elders, a Lamb standing as one having been slain, with seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth” (Rev 5,6).

In this vision Jesus Christ is revealed after his ascension to the throne of God in heaven, as a Lamb ‘standing as one having been slain’. Even though the death and resurrection of Christ are historical events which took place at a certain time in the past, they lose nothing of their actuality in this vision. In fact, these events are recalled and represented in heaven as distinctive features of the Lamb, and in this new and extraordinary context they continue to have a central role in the visions of the Apocalypse. In order to understand this role fully, it is necessary to examine the new context.

Following the introductory vision of ‘one similar to a son of man’ walking amongst seven golden lampstands, St. John saw an open door in heaven through which he was invited to pass in order to see what must take place in the future (Rev 4,1-2). After being raised ‘in spirit’, the revelation of the future begins with a vision of the throne of God and of the features which surround it (Rev ch. 4). Since this setting is identified later on in the text as the Sanctuary of God in heaven (cf. Rev 7,9.15), it is not surprising that the activity which St. John sees here is predominantly liturgical. It is in this context that the Lamb is revealed ‘standing as one having been slain’, before taking possession of the sealed scroll and so becoming the centre of the liturgical activity (cf. Rev 5,7-14).

The sacred and liturgical setting in which the Lamb comes to occupy a central position vividly recalls the sacrificial cult that was practised at the former Temple in Jerusalem. In fact, given that the Sanctuary revealed to St. John is the same one that was revealed to Moses as the archetype of the Tabernacle which he was asked to build (Exod 25,8-9), a true typological correspondence exists between the heavenly Sanctuary described in the Apocalypse, the Tabernacle built by Moses, and the former Temple in Jerusalem which was modelled on this. It is a correspondence which embraces the whole of the legislation attributed to Moses, regarding the organization, administration and liturgical activity of the ancient cult. On the basis of this correspondence, references to the divine cult in the Old Testament, and even in the oral tradition of the Jews compiled in the Mishnah, provide information which is fundamental for the interpretation of the liturgical language in the Apocalypse. As we shall see, significant parts of the visions in the Apocalypse are described in this language, including that part in which Christ crucified, risen and ascended into heaven, is revealed as a Lamb ‘standing as one having been slain’.

The ‘continual holocaust’ of the ancient sacrificial cult

According to the norms regarding sacrifices in the former Temple, a lamb could be offered in various situations: a common person could offer a lamb as a sin offering in atonement for his sin (Lev 4,32-35), or as part of a rite of purification (Lev 12,1-8; 14,10-32), or as a communion sacrifice (Lev 3,7-10); the Pascal lamb was, in fact, a special type of communion sacrifice (Exod 12,1-14.21-28). The various authors of the other books in the New Testament associate the crucifixion of Jesus Christ with one or other of these classes of sacrifice.

However, there was another class of sacrifices which frequently involved the offering of a lamb; since the animal in this class of sacrifice was burnt in its entirety, it came to be called a ‘holocaust’, from the Greek word meaning ‘wholly burnt’ (Lev 1,10-13). In fact a sacrifice of this type formed the basis of the daily service in the former Temple (Exod 29,38-42; Num 28,1-8), and the lamb chosen for this purpose was called the ‘continual holocaust’ - ‘holocaust’ because the whole animal was burnt in the fire on the altar, ‘continual’ because the smoke from this sacrifice was said to rise up continually before God. It was therefore asserted that the ‘continual holocaust’ had two essential characteristics: on the one hand its total consecration and return to God, and on the other hand its continual presence before Him.

Returning to the Apocalypse a certain analogy can be observed between the ‘continual holocaust’ and the Lamb which was revealed to St. John at the centre of the liturgical activity taking place in the heavenly Sanctuary. In fact the Lamb not only corresponds to a sacrifice of this kind, but seems to fulfil its purpose in a unique way:

a) the Lamb ascended to heaven where he appears in his entirety (Rev 5,6), thus demonstrating the first essential characteristic of the ‘continual holocaust’, namely its total consecration and return to God;

b) the Lamb that was slain, but is alive - ‘standing as one having been slain’ - lives for ever at the throne of God (cf. Rev 21,23; 22,3), thus manifesting the other essential characteristic of the ‘continual holocaust’, namely its continual presence before God.

In no other book of the New Testament has the sacrifice of Jesus Christ been related so directly with the ‘continual holocaust’. In the other books we find this correspondence expressed only indirectly: in the passion narratives it is stated that Jesus died on the cross at the ninth hour, that is to say, at 3 p.m. (Matt 27,46-50 and par.). This was the time of the slaughter of the lamb chosen to be the ‘continual holocaust’ for the daily evening service in those days (cf. Acts 3,1; Mishnah, Pesahim 5:1; Josephus Flavius ‘Antiquities of the Jews’ XIV, IV, 3).

After the slaughtering of the lamb in the daily service, its blood was collected and used for the purpose of making expiation; a part of this blood was sprinkled over the altar on which the members of the sacrifice were later to be burnt, and the rest was poured out at its base. According to the Law, the blood of a holocaust did indeed have expiatory properties (cf. Lev 1,4; 16,24). It is therefore quite consistent that the blood of the Lamb revealed in the Apocalypse as a ‘continual holocaust’, should have the power to expiate the sins of men, reconciling them with God: the blood of the Lamb acquires for God people from every tribe, language, race and nation (Rev 5,9), it frees them from their sins (Rev 1,5), makes them a kingdom and priests for God (Rev 1,6; 5,10), allows them to purify themselves from their imperfections (Rev 7,14; 22,14) and renders them participants in the defeat of the devil (Rev 12,11).

In summary, the Lamb which is revealed in the Apocalypse displays the qualities of a unique and perfect sacrifice, one in which the power to expiate sin (characteristic of the blood of a sin-offering) is united with the continuity and integrity that characterize the ‘continual holocaust’. It is in the context of this unique and eternal sacrifice that the death and resurrection of Christ are recalled and represented in the visions of the Apocalypse.

The daily service in the former Temple

Just as the sacrifice of Jesus Christ forms the central part of our Eucharistic celebration, so also the Lamb that was slain occupies a central place in the liturgical activity represented in the visions of the Apocalypse. There is a tendency, therefore, to interpret the heavenly liturgy described in the Apocalypse on the basis of our Eucharistic celebration; however, this tendency is mistaken because the heavenly liturgy is not based on the Eucharist, but vice versa (cf. Conc. Vat. II, Sacrosanctum Concilium, 8). Instead, the analogy between the Lamb that was slain and the 'continual holocaust' invites us to interpret the heavenly liturgy by means of a comparison with the daily service in the former Temple, during which - as we have just noted - the sacrifice of the 'continual holocaust' formed an essential part.

In the times of Solomon's Temple, the 'continual holocaust' involved the sacrifice of one lamb every day, in the morning (2 Kgs 16,15; Ezek 46,13-15), whilst in the post-exilic period the practice changed to involve the sacrifice of two lambs every day, one at the time of the daily morning service and the other at the time of the daily evening service (Exod 29,38-42; Num 28,1-8). In addition to the 'continual holocaust' of the daily morning and evening services, the Law required that there should also be an oblation of cereal, and a libation of wine (Num 15,1-16). The cereal offering was burnt on the altar along with the members of the holocaust, and the wine was poured out at the base of the altar, in the same place as the blood of the sacrifice was poured out (Sir 50,15; cf. Lev 4,34; 5,9).

The only complete account of the procedure for the daily service is to be found in the Mishnah, in the tractate entitled 'Tamid' - a Hebrew word which means the 'continual (holocaust)'. For the purpose of making the comparison with the liturgy described in the Apocalypse, we present a summary of the essential stages of the daily morning service (the daily evening service was almost the same), as it was performed in the post-exilic Temple and described in the above-mentioned tractate of the Mishnah:

1. At dawn, after the necessary preparations (Tamid 1; 2), the lamb chosen to be the 'continual holocaust' was slaughtered at the sound of the opening of the door at entrance of the Sanctuary (Tamid 3:1-5, 7). The blood of the lamb was collected in a bowl: a part was sprinkled over the altar of holocausts and the rest was poured out at its base (Tamid 4:1).

The analogous actions - the slaughter of the Lamb and the outpouring of his blood - are not recounted in the Apocalypse. Nevertheless, they are recalled in such a way as to indicate that they had already taken place when St. John received the revelation: the dawn had broken because the bright morning star had appeared (Rev 22,16); the door of the Sanctuary had been opened because St. John saw it open (Rev 4,1); the Lamb had been slain because he appeared in heaven with the signs of his slaughter (Rev 5,6); his blood had been poured out because it had acquired for God people from every part of the world (Rev 5,9). Given that the slaughter of the Lamb refers to the death of Christ on the cross, these allusions confirm that the Easter events form the historical background for the visions of the Apocalypse. Furthermore, the fact that the slaughter of the lamb is the starting-point for the daily morning service in the former Temple indicates, by analogy, that the death of Christ on the cross marks the start of the heavenly liturgy described in the Apocalypse.

2. Inside the Sanctuary of the former Temple, the altar of incense was prepared and the seven-branched lampstand (the menorah) was trimmed and refilled (Tamid 3:6,9).

These actions are represented in the introductory vision of the Apocalypse, in which 'one like a son of man' is revealed amongst the seven golden lampstands that symbolize seven local churches (Rev 1,9-20). The messages that follow (Rev chs. 2-3) have a purifying effect which is

analogous to that of the trimming and refilling of the seven-branched lampstand inside the Sanctuary of the former Temple.

3. The body of the lamb that had been sacrificed was dismembered, and its members were carried to the base of the altar of holocausts, to the lowest part of the ramp of access (Tamid 4:2-3).

In the heavenly liturgy described in the Apocalypse, these actions are recalled in the vision of the souls of the martyrs under the altar in heaven (Rev 6,9-10). Just as the members of the 'continual holocaust' were severed from its body and carried to the base of the altar, so also some members have been taken from the pilgrim Church on earth and, by means of their martyrdom, have been placed under the altar which is in heaven. The identification of the Church with the body of the Lamb is implied in this comparison, in a way which recalls the apostolic doctrine describing the Church as the body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12,27; Rom 12,5; Eph 4,11-16).

4. All the priests gathered to recite the ten commandments (Deut 5,6-22), the 'Shema' (Deut 6,4-9) and other passages of the Law. Then they drew lots to decide who should perform the incense offering (Tamid 5:1-2).

In the Apocalypse the recital of the ten commandments and of other parts of the Law is represented by the breaking of the first four seals of the scroll taken by the Lamb, and by the subsequent missions of the first four horses and their riders (Rev 6,1-8). In the same way as the reading of the ten commandments affirmed the sovereignty of God amongst the people of Israel, so also the mission of the white horse (Rev 6,1-2) represents the victorious force of the Kingdom of God, communicated to mankind by means of the preaching of the Gospel. In a complementary way, the negative effects of the horses which follow (Rev 6,3-8) recall the prophetic warnings, often quoted in the Old Testament, concerning what would happen to the people of Israel if they rebelled against God and disobeyed his commandments (Lev 26,14-46; Deut 28,15-69; Jer 29,17-19; Ezek 5,1-17).

5. The great sound which was emitted from an instrument called the 'magrefah' announced to the neighbouring region that the incense offering was about to begin. It was a time of prayer for all the people (Tamid 5:6). Burning coals were then taken from the altar of holocausts to the altar of incense which was inside the Sanctuary; the offering of the incense immediately took place and the priests entered the Sanctuary to prostrate themselves (Tamid 5:4-5; 6:1-3; 7:1).

In the Apocalypse the offering of the incense is directly represented as part of the heavenly liturgy (Rev 8,3-4), but instead of being announced by a great sound, it begins with the breaking of the seventh seal and with a great silence in heaven (Rev 8,1). Conforming to the ancient tradition (cf. Ps 141,1-2; Jdt 9,1; Luke 1,10), the offering of incense in the heavenly liturgy is also a time of prayer for the faithful (Rev 8,3-4).

6. Whilst the smoke of the incense was rising from the altar, the priests gathered on the steps in front of the Sanctuary in order to recite the priestly blessing (Num 6,24-26). During the recital, the Name of the Lord was pronounced as it is written (Tamid 7:2), thus fulfilling the divine purpose of the blessing: "...in this way they will place my Name on the Israelites and I will bless them" (Num 6,27).

In the Apocalypse the act of placing the Name of God on the Israelites is represented, in a particular way, by the impression of the seal of the Living God upon the 144,000 men chosen from the twelve tribes of Israel (Rev 7,1-8), leaving the Name of God and of the Lamb imprinted

on their foreheads (Rev 14,1).

7. The members of the lamb that had been sacrificed were then lifted up, thrown into the fire on the altar of holocausts and burned, and at the same time trumpets were blown (Tamid 7,3).

In the liturgy of the heavenly Sanctuary this action is similar but inverted, since fire is kept alight on the golden altar of incense, and not on the altar of holocausts as in the former Temple (Lev 6,2.5.6). For this reason, the fire is thrown on to the offerings (Rev 8,5), instead of throwing the offerings on to the fire. Since the fire that is thrown down from the altar in heaven represents the Holy Spirit of God, this action could be referred to as a 'new Pentecost'. As in the liturgy of the former Temple, trumpets are blown at this point: seven trumpets are given to the seven angels that stand before God (Rev 8,2), and every time one of these angels blows his trumpet a different kind of disaster becomes apparent on earth (Rev 8,6 - 9,20).

8. The oblation of cereal was then added to the members of the 'continual holocaust' on the altar (Tamid 3,1; 4,3). The consumption of these offerings in the fire of the altar represented the culmination of the entire liturgy and was referred to as the 'presentation' of the offerings before God.

In the heavenly liturgy, this final part of the daily morning service is represented in the vision of the martyrs standing on the crystal sea mixed with fire, like offerings presented before God on the altar (Rev 15,2). Understood as the bulk of the grain harvest (Rev 14,14-16), this multitude of martyrs can be identified in a particular way with the oblation of cereal.

9. Finally, the libation of wine was poured out at the base of the altar of holocausts, whilst the Levites played their musical instruments and sang psalms. At every interruption in the singing, the trumpets were blown and the people gathered in the Temple prostrated themselves (Tamid 7,3-4).

Analogously in the Apocalypse, the seven bowls full of the wine of the anger of God are poured out on the earth (Rev ch. 16), whilst the saints and the martyrs in heaven celebrate with music and song (Rev 15,2-4; cf. 7,9-17; 14,2-3; 19,1-8) just as the Levites used to do at the end of the liturgy in the former Temple.

The liturgy described in the Apocalypse, which begins with the sacrifice of the Lamb and unfolds around him in the heavenly Sanctuary, corresponds quite precisely to the form of the divine service which took place every day in the former Temple. On a closer look, however, it can be seen that particular features of the heavenly liturgy evoke certain elements of the liturgy which was performed on the most solemn day of the Hebrew calendar - the Day of Atonement. We will go on to compare these features of the heavenly liturgy with descriptions of the liturgy for the Day of Atonement taken from two sources in particular: the Old Testament (Lev ch. 16; 23,26-32; Num 29,7-11) and a tractate of the Mishnah entitled 'Yoma', which means 'the Day'.

The Day of Atonement in the former Temple

On the Day of Atonement a large number of animals were sacrificed with the intention of making expiation (Num 29,7-11). Some (2 rams and 7 lambs) were offered at the time of the morning service, the others (1 goat and 1 bullock) at the time of the evening service (Yoma 7:3). Furthermore, between the morning and evening services, a specific rite of expiation was performed which involved the offering of another three animals: a bullock and a goat which were sacrificed to the Lord, and another goat (the so-called 'scapegoat') which was sent out alive into the desert, to Azazel, leader of the fallen angels (cf. 1 Enoch 8,1-8).

To perform this rite the high priest entered the Holy of Holies - the most sacred place in the former Temple - and sprinkled it with the blood of the animals sacrificed to the Lord, in order to purify it. With the same intention he sprinkled the altar of incense and the altar of holocausts with the rest of the blood. He then came up to the third animal, the live goat, and placing his hands on its head he confessed the iniquity of his people. After this, the animal was led away into the desert to return their sin to Azazel (Lev ch.16).

Returning to the Apocalypse, we note first of all that there has been a great simplification: the blood of a single Lamb has made expiation, once and for all, for sins which could never have been successfully expiated by the blood of all the sacrifices prescribed for the Day of Atonement (cf. Heb 10,1-18). The heavenly liturgy is based on only one sacrifice, that of the Lamb, and - as we have seen - this corresponds to the first sacrifice of the day, the 'continual holocaust' of the morning service.

On the Day of Atonement, the main ritual actions of the morning service were performed by the high priest himself, including the slaying of the lamb and the trimming and refilling of the seven-branched lampstand (Yoma 1:2; 3:4). In fact, the one who carries out the analogous task in the visions of the Apocalypse, the 'one like a son of man', corresponds precisely with the figure of the high priest: he is dressed in a long tunic, has bare feet and is girt around the chest like a priest on duty (Rev 1,13.15; cf. 15,6), but his authority is higher than that of an ordinary priest, being equal to that of the Lord himself (Rev 1,17-18; cf. 1,8; 22,13). Given that the 'one like a son of man' is "the Living one, who was put to death but is now alive for ever" (Rev 1,18), he can also be identified with the Lamb that was slain and now lives at the throne of God in heaven (Rev 5,6); both the Lamb and the 'one like a son of man' represent Jesus Christ, dead and risen - on the one hand as the victim of a ritual sacrifice, and on the other hand as the high priest who offers it.

The Lamb's double role as the sacrificial victim and as the high priest, explains his appearance before the throne of God in the heavenly Sanctuary: this corresponds to the execution of the specific rite of expiation for the Sanctuary on the day of Atonement, when the high priest entered the Holy of Holies with the blood of the victims. In the Apocalypse the expiation of the heavenly Sanctuary is represented by the defeat of Satan and his angels, and by their expulsion from heaven, in such a way that "there was no longer a place for them in heaven" (cf. Rev 12,7-12)

On the Day of Atonement, a great quantity of incense was given to the high priest in order to burn inside the Holy of Holies, much more than was usually given to the priest to offer in the Sanctuary during the daily services (Yoma 4,4). Similarly, in the liturgy described in the Apocalypse, the angel was given "*much* incense so that he might offer it... on the golden altar before the throne" (Rev 8,3).

At the conclusion of the annual rite of expiation, the high priest took the scroll of the Law and read from it to the crowd which had gathered in the courts of the former Temple. He read passages which concerned the Day of Atonement and finished with the recital of some benedictions (Yoma 7:1). During the liturgy of the heavenly Sanctuary the Lamb takes the sealed scroll in an analogous way, when he appears before the throne of God (Rev 5,7). The fact that the Lamb takes it at this point, well before the end of the heavenly liturgy, indicates that the act of expiation has been completely fulfilled and that there shall not be another sacrifice for the expiation of sins and the reconciliation of mankind with God.

Further on in the text, the scroll taken by the Lamb as his own possession is identified as the scroll of Life (Rev 13,8; 21,27), which will be opened and read at the final Judgement (Rev 20,12). In contrast to the reading of the Law at the end of the ancient rite of expiation, there is a long period of time between the giving of the scroll of Life to the Lamb and the reading of its

contents at the final Judgement. It is therefore implied that the breaking of its seals occupies almost all this time, which represents the time given to men to reconcile themselves with God and be converted to His Will revealed in Jesus Christ.

Precisely at the same time as the high priest was reading from the scroll of the Law, the carcasses of the two animals sacrificed to the Lord were burning outside the city of Jerusalem (Yoma 6:7; 7:2). The goat which was sent out into the desert as a live offering to Azazel, was led to the top of a cliff a few miles outside the city and then pushed backwards into the ravine below (Yoma 6:3-6,8). An analogous situation is presented in the Apocalypse: at the same time as the scrolls are opened for the final Judgement, including the scroll of Life (Rev 20,11-12), the beast, the false prophet and Satan are burning in the lake of fire (Rev 20,10) which is also 'outside the city' (Rev 22,14-15; cf. 21,8).

Of all three, it is the false prophet who corresponds most closely to the 'scapegoat' -the animal which, in the ancient rite, returned the sins of the people of Israel to the leader of the fallen angels. The false prophet is described as a beast "with two horns like a lamb" (Rev 13,11); in other words he is represented as a goat (lambs do not have horns) that resembles a lamb because he seems to fulfil the purpose of an expiatory offering. Compelling people to worship the beast (Rev 13,12-17) to whom Satan had given his power, throne and great authority (Rev 13,1-2), the false prophet does indeed cause the removal of sin, not in the way brought about by Christ the Lamb, by means of the reconciliation of the sinner with God, but by means of the tragic and eternal condemnation of the unrepentant sinner (Rev 14,9-11; cf. 2 Thess 2,11-12).

At the end of the Day of Atonement, the high priest prepared a feast to celebrate his safe return from the Holy of Holies (Yoma 7:4), within which there was danger of death (cf. Lev 16,2.13). In a similar way, according to the liturgy described in the Apocalypse, the return of Jesus Christ in Glory will be celebrated with a feast: "blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb" (Rev 19,9). Just as the curtain which covered the entrance of the Sanctuary in the former Temple (cf. Exod 26,36; 40,28; 1 Macc 4,51) was opened at the start of the great feasts, to enable the pilgrims to see inside, so also the feast in celebration of the Lamb's wedding begins with an analogous action: "And the Sanctuary of God in heaven was opened..." (Rev 11,19; 15,5).

Summary, Conclusions and Implications

Far from being overlooked or of little importance in the Apocalypse, the death and resurrection of Christ occupy a central place: not only are they recalled eternally in the figure of the Lamb, but they are also the starting-point of the liturgy which takes place in heaven around him. In comparing the characteristics of the heavenly liturgy with liturgical practice in the former Temple, we find that it corresponds closely to the daily morning service; we also find, however, that some important characteristics of the heavenly liturgy correspond to elements of the liturgy that was performed specifically on the Day of Atonement.

These observations can be explained by the fact that the liturgy described in the Apocalypse represents, in a simplified way, the liturgy that used to take place on the Day of Atonement in the Temple of the Jews in Jerusalem. Being the fulfilment of every kind of sacrifice, the Lamb substitutes all the sacrifices that used to be offered on the Day of Atonement, and therefore corresponds to the first sacrifice on that Day: the lamb chosen to be the 'continual holocaust' for the morning service. As a result, the heavenly liturgy described in the Apocalypse closely corresponds to the morning service on the Day of Atonement, but includes features which correspond to the specific rite of expiation that was performed on that Day.

As we have seen, the introductory vision of the seven golden lampstands and the

subsequent messages to the seven churches (Rev 1,9-20; chs. 2-3) represents the trimming and refilling of the seven-branched lampstand at the start of the morning service. The appearance of the Lamb before the throne of God in heaven (Rev 5,6) corresponds to the entrance of the high priest, on the Day of Atonement, into the most sacred part of the former Temple, in order to expiate it with the blood of the victims. The mission of the first four horses and their riders (Rev 6,1-8) represents the recital of the ten commandments and the reading of other parts of the Law during the morning service. The souls of the martyrs who appear under the altar in heaven (Rev 6,9) correspond to the members of the sacrifice, after they had been carried to the base of the altar of holocausts in the former Temple. The 'sealing' of the 144,000 men mentioned in the Apocalypse (Rev 7,1-8) corresponds to the pronouncement of the priestly blessing; the great quantity of incense offered on the golden altar in heaven (Rev 8,3-4) recalls the same action in the morning service of the former Temple, at the moment in which the faithful used to pray. The angel who throws fire from the altar in heaven on to the earth (Rev 8,5) evokes the act of throwing the offerings into the fire which was always kept alight on the altar of holocausts. The blowing of the seven trumpets (Rev chs. 8-11) and the outpouring of the seven bowls (Rev chs. 15-16), together with the singing of the celestial choirs described in the Apocalypse (Rev 7,9-17; 14,2-3; 15,3-4; 19,1-8) are analogous to the use of trumpets and libation bowls at the culmination of the morning service, at the time when the Levitical musicians used to sing psalms and praise God. At the end of the heavenly liturgy, the scroll of Life which had been given to the Lamb a long time in advance (Rev 5,7-14) is opened and read during the final Judgement (Rev 20,11-12), just as the high priest read from the scroll of the Law at the conclusion of the rite of expiation on the Day of Atonement.

In conclusion, the death and resurrection of Christ constitute the starting-point of the liturgy which is presently being celebrated in heaven; this liturgy continues until the end of time and represents a synthesis of the liturgy which was performed on the Day of Atonement in the former Temple at Jerusalem. Being the principal activity in the heavenly Sanctuary, the liturgy imposes its order on all the events prophesied in the Apocalypse, uniting them in a single and coherent Vision dominated by the theme of Atonement - the love of Christ which reconciles mankind with God. The Apocalypse, in fact, is nothing else but the revelation of the course of this liturgy of reconciliation which is taking place in heaven, and of its consequences for the lives of the peoples on earth.

Representing a synthesis of the liturgy that took place on the most important day of the ancient Hebrew calendar, the liturgy revealed in the Apocalypse presents itself as the fulfilment of the Law regarding the ancient sacrificial cult (cf. Matt 5,17-19). It is in this context that, as in no other book of the New Testament, Jesus Christ reveals himself fulfilling every kind of sacrifice under the form of the 'continual holocaust'. More than any other type of sacrifice, the 'continual holocaust' formed the basis of the ancient sacrificial cult of the Jews, and it was a tragedy for them when this sacrifice was suspended, as happened temporarily after the invasion of Judaea by Antiochus Epiphanes (1 Macc ch. 1), and then definitively in 70 A.D. when the Romans destroyed their Temple. Under the form of the 'continual holocaust', the Lord reveals himself in the most direct way in order to demonstrate that the ancient sacrificial cult of the Jews has been fulfilled and is therefore obsolete. It follows that every intention and effort to re-establish that cult is opposed to the Truth of God revealed in Christ Jesus.

Finally, the clarification of the heavenly liturgy has two important consequences for the interpretation of the Apocalypse: the first concerns the fact that, analogously to the liturgy of the former Temple, the liturgy revealed in the Apocalypse follows a very precise chronological order. Since the events described in the visions of the Apocalypse are determined by this order,

it follows that these events also succeed one another in a definite temporal order.

The second consequence derives from the fact that the culmination of the liturgy in the former Temple occurred at its conclusion, and was indicated by the blowing of trumpets and the pouring of the libation bowl. In an analogous way, the culmination of the heavenly liturgy can be identified with its conclusive part, which takes place at the end of time and is also indicated by the blowing of trumpets and the outpouring of the bowls. The fact that the greater part of the Apocalypse is concerned with this conclusive part of the heavenly liturgy, from chapter 8 onwards, indicates that the greater part of the Apocalypse is a prophecy of what will happen at the end of time - it is an eschatological prophecy and ought to be interpreted as such¹.

“Yes, I am coming soon! Amen, come Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22,20)

¹ These findings agree not only with the interpretation of the Apocalypse that prevailed in the Early Church, but also with the views of the faithful throughout the centuries (the ‘sensus fidei’), on the basis of which the word ‘Apocalypse’ has become virtually synonymous with the ‘end of the world’. More significantly, these findings offer a rational basis for rejecting the ‘preterist’ interpretation of the Apocalypse, according to which the greater part of this book refers primarily to the persecutions suffered by the Early Church under the Roman imperial authorities. Basing itself on the restrictive assumption that St. John was only addressing the situation that prevailed at the time he was writing (the end of the first century A.D.), the ‘preterist’ interpretation fails to explain many features of the sacred text, especially its orientation toward, and attention to, the eschatological period of history. Unfortunately this interpretation has found its way into the commentaries of the Bibles most widely used by Catholics (e.g.: the Jerusalem Bible, the New American Bible, la Biblia Latinoamericana), and continues to be promoted actively by the Ecclesiastical Authorities (cf. Conferenza Episcopale Italiana, Ufficio Catechistico Nazionale, ‘Incontro alla Bibbia’, Ed. Vaticana 1996, page 54).