

The Millennial Problem

It is commonly argued that after his second coming Christ will reign on earth for a thousand years, and then, at the end of this period (called the 'Millennium'), he will come again to hold the final Judgement. According to this view, then, there will be two future appearances of the Lord, separated by an interval of a thousand years. Based principally on the interpretation of a particular passage in the Apocalypse (Rev 20,1-10), this view has been advanced in many and various forms in the history of the Church by those who are called 'millenarians'.

However, despite the persistence and popularity of this proposal, it does not conform to the teaching of the Catholic Church, according to which there will be only one further appearance of the Lord, the so-called second coming, which will be followed immediately by the final Judgement at the end of time. We would therefore like to reexamine the interpretation of the passage in the Apocalypse on which the 'millenialist proposition is based, and identify how and why it is mistaken.

The most safe and direct method to verify the interpretation of a passage in the Apocalypse is to confront it with the rest of the text. Being the work of the Holy Spirit, the text of the Apocalypse is complete and consistent in itself, and does not therefore contain contradictions. On account of this divine unity of the Apocalypse, the interpretation of any one of its parts should be consistent with any other part, and with the rest of the text as a whole.

In this way, without having to turn to information outside the book of the Apocalypse, we discover that the interpretation of the 'Millennium' as an interval of a thousand years between two future appearances of the Lord, is not in fact consistent with other parts of the text itself, which instead agree with the teaching of the Church concerning a single appearance of the Lord at the end of time.

Before the sound of the seventh and last trumpet, St. John describes how the Lord's angel descended from heaven and swore that: "...there will be no more delay, but in the days of the sound of the seventh angel, by the time he is going to blow, also will have been fulfilled the Mystery of God, as he announced to his servants the prophets"(10,6-7).

This passage tells us that the blowing of the seventh trumpet is a sign of the complete, and not just partial, fulfilment of the Mystery of God at the end of time, and so opposes the millenarian view which predicts a partial fulfilment at the second coming of the Lord, followed by the definitive fulfilment after a 'delay' of a thousand years.

In fact, at the sound of the seventh trumpet, the fulfilment of the Mystery of God is proclaimed in the following way by loud voices in heaven: "The kingdom of the world has become our Lord's and his Christ's, and he will reign

for ever and ever" (11,15). After this proclamation, the 24 elders give thanks in a way which tells us precisely what the fulfilment of God's Mystery involves: "We thank you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken up your great power and have come to reign. The nations were angry and your anger has come, also the time for the dead to be judged, and to give the reward to your servants the prophets and to the saints and to them that fear your name, to the small and to the great, and to destroy those who are destroying the earth" (11,17-18).

From the actions mentioned by the 24 elders, it follows that the fulfilment of God's Mystery at the end of time involves:

1. the submission of the whole world to the power of the Lord;
2. the manifestation of his anger;
3. the judgement of the dead;
4. the giving of the reward to the faithful servants of God;
5. the putting a stop to the destruction of the earth.

It is clear from this analysis that there will be no distinct interval between the submission of the whole world to the power of the Lord, at his second coming, and the resurrection of the dead for the final Judgement, as proposed by the millenarians. In fact, all the actions mentioned by the 24 elders refer to different aspects of a unique and definitive appearance of the Lord, which St. John describes in the passage which follows: "And the Sanctuary of God in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen in his Sanctuary" (11,19).

Since, in ancient times, the ark of the covenant was considered to be the inferior part of the throne of God (the footstool for his feet: 1 Chr 28,2; Ps 99,5; 132,7; Lam 2,1; Ezek 43,7), the revelation of the ark indicates the direct vision of the throne on which the Lord Jesus is sitting (Rev 3,21; 7,17). It is therefore by means of the revelation of the throne within the heavenly Sanctuary (11,19; cf. 15,5) that the final appearance, or second coming, of the Lord is primarily represented in the Apocalypse.

After seeing that the text refers to a only one appearance of the Lord at the end of time, the so-called second coming, we can go on to examine the passage in which the thousand-year reign of Christ with his saints and martyrs is described (20,1-10). The fact that this passage is situated between the description of the Lord defeating his enemies at the Battle of the Great Day (19,11-21) and the description of the Lord's presence at the final Judgement (20,11-15), explains why millenarians interpret the millennial reign as a period of a thousand years between the two events, understood as two different appearances or comings of the Lord. This mistaken interpretation is, in fact, based on an over-literal reading of the passage, in the context in which it is situated.

The millenarian interpretation has subsequently found support from an ancient conception of the history of the world which originated as a synthesis between the story of Creation in seven days (Gen 1,1 - 2,4) - understood as a prefiguration of the history of the world - and a short passage from Psalm 90 recalled by St. Peter in the following way: "...for the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Pet 3,8). According to this conception of history, each of the days of Creation are represented by a period of a thousand years. The millennial reign of Christ is said to represent the seventh day, the Sabbath, in which the Lord rested from his work, and is therefore awaited as a period of universal rest, peace and happiness on earth.

The error of the millenarian interpretation does not lie in the fact that Jesus fulfils the millennial expectation as described in the Apocalypse, but in the belief that the fulfilment of this expectation takes place entirely in the future, in a period of a thousand years after the appearance of the Lord at the Battle of the Great Day (Rev 19,11-21), that is to say after his second coming. In fact, if we return to the key passage in Psalm 90, we should note that far from being like a day in the future, a thousand years for the Lord are like a day which has already passed: "In your sight (Lord) a thousand years are like a day that has just passed, like a watch in the night" (Ps 90,4).

For this reason, the vision of the millennial reign of Christ (Rev 20,1-10) should not be interpreted as the vision of a future which will be realized after the second coming of the Lord, but as the vision of a past which will be revealed fully in the light of his coming. Before the second coming of Christ, his millennial reign is recognized only by Faith, while after this event his reign will be revealed as a fact of the past.

In other words not everyone is able to recognize or accept the reality of the millennial reign of Christ in the present age, before the second coming, and those who can not recognize it are awaiting it in the future. They are unable to recognize the millennial reign of Christ because, although it is *in* the world, it is not *of the* world (Jn 18,36), and its humble character makes it very different from the kingdoms of this world (Mk 10,42-45). Just as the Lordship of Jesus was not well recognized until he was seen after his Resurrection from the dead, so also his reign will not be evident to everyone until he returns in Glory, to reign for eternity.

The placing of the vision of the millennial reign of Christ (Rev 20,1-10) after the description of the second coming (19,11-21), is another way of saying that many will not have entered into his reign before his second coming at the end of time, when this reign will be revealed to them as a period which has already passed. The Catechism of the Catholic Church expresses the same truth in the following words: "The Kingdom will not therefore reach its fulfilment through the historical triumph of the Church, at the end of an ascending process, but through the victory of God over the final unleashing of evil..." (C.C.C. 677).

It appears, then, that the teaching of the Church is perfectly in accordance

with the prophecy of the Apocalypse. According to this teaching, in fact, the millennial reign of Christ is nothing but the Church itself during the period of time between the Pentecost and the second coming of the Lord, whatever the total number of years this may be (cf. St. Augustine, *The City of God*, XX, chs. 6-9).

Confirmation of this identity lies in the fact that we can recognize features of the Church as it is in the present age, in the description of the millennial reign of Christ: "And I saw thrones, and power to judge was given to those who sat on them; and I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the Witness of Jesus and because of the Word of God; also were there those who did not worship the beast or his image and did not receive the mark on their forehead and on their hand, and they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who takes part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and will reign with him for a thousand years" (Rev 20,4-6).

Those who take part in the first resurrection and become priests who reign with Christ for the thousand years can be identified with those who have been redeemed by Christ, and are described in other parts of the text as "a kingdom, priests to his God and Father" (1,6) and "a kingdom and priests who will reign on the earth" (5,10). The thrones can be identified with the 'cathedrae' of the bishops, and those who sit on them are the bishops in communion with the souls of the saints and martyrs. The vision includes the souls of those who are killed during the brief reign of the 'beast', in order to indicate that the millennial reign of Christ continues during that time, despite the outbreak of the greatest persecution ever inflicted on Christians, called 'the great tribulation' in the text (7,14).

Understood in this way, as a retrospective vision of the Church, it is the end of the millennial reign and not its beginning which follows the coming of the Lord to defeat his enemies at the Battle of the Great Day (19,11-21). At this point Satan is released from his millennial restriction, inspires the rebellion of the people referred to as 'Gog and Magog', and the conflict which ensues (20,7-10) presents itself as the last phase of the Battle of the Great Day. The final Judgement follows immediately (20,11-15) and then the eternal Reign of God and of his Christ is established in the renewed Creation (chs. 21-22). Since the current millennial reign of Christ does not finish before the eternal Reign of God and of his Christ is about to begin, we can affirm that Christ reigns now and that "his reign will have no end" (cf. the Nicene Creed).

In conclusion, we are not by any means awaiting the start of the millennial reign of Christ (the Millennium), because the teaching of the Church, in accordance with the prophecy of the Apocalypse, tells us that this reign is

already a reality in our Church. To expect the millennial reign in the future is wrong, therefore, mainly because it implies the denial of this kingdom in our Church.

Furthermore, the more materialistic forms of the millenarian expectation for a messianic reign on earth, in a new era of history (a 'new age'), are dangerous because they predispose its adherents to accept the pseudo-messianic reign prophesied in the Apocalypse and the false claims of its protagonists (the two beasts described in chapter 13). The more spiritual forms of the millenarian expectation are no less deceptive because, by arousing the desire to remain alive in order to reign with Christ after his second coming, they encourage an attitude of resistance towards the martyrdom which will precede it, in the great tribulation.

Therefore, in conformity with the teaching of the Church, and according to the signs of the times, we are approaching not only the second coming of the Lord, but also the final Judgement and the 'end of this world'. Without staling precisely what 'the end of the world' means, may it be enough to say that it does not involve the end of life on the earth, nor the total destruction of the planet, as so many presume, but rather the end *of the kingdom* of this world, announced as follows at the sound of the last trumpet: "The kingdom of the world has become our Lord's and his Christ's, and he shall reign for ever and ever" (11,15).

Interpreted in this way, the 'end of the world' is nothing but the total fulfilment of the Kingdom of God on this earth, when the power of this world (I Jn 5,19) will be annulled, God will be all in all (I Cor 15,28) and the new Jerusalem will be realized on earth (Rev 21,1-8). It is, in fact, the blessed hope for which we pray, whenever we say 'your Kingdom come' (Matt 6,10).