

THE LINE

Newsletter of the Convocation Of The West
OF THE MISSIONARY DIOCESE OF ALL SAINTS



Analysis of the Seven Churches in Revelation: Ephesus

By Fr. Michael Penfield

The Preaching of Saint Paul at Ephesus by Eustache Le Sueur
Public Domain

During our period of discernment, the message from God to each of us may be generally the same, but specifically different. This should not trouble us. For if there is truly only one Spirit, but diversity in gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4-11), then the individual messages necessarily must be different but consistent. For as Saint Paul wrote:

"But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills. For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ." [1 Corinthians 12:11-12]

This being said, additionally, to help us in our discernment, I shall republish an analysis of the Seven Churches in Revelation that I wrote when my own church went through a discernment period. However, I must caution you that we will be exploring one of the most difficult texts in the Bible: the Book of Revelation.

Now, let me be clear, the Book of Revelation has thwarted analysis for centuries. Many of the references in this book by Saint John the

Divine made perfect sense at the time it was written. (Some date the text around 68 A.D. during Nero's reign, while others date it around 95 A.D. during Domitian's reign.) But, many of these references are now lost to us. And many of the things predicted have already transpired.

A Jesuit friend of mine once told me that he dismissed the whole book as too vague for analysis, and also, as probably already transpired. I do not agree with my friend's interpretation, but I do believe that some of which he spoke is true. Some parts we may never fully understand, some parts have already been fulfilled, but some parts still speak volumes. And the excerpts we will be exploring have all three aspects.

And so, I caution you again that the letters to these seven churches are, first, specific to these churches for this specific time, but that they also reveal something universal in all churches, in part, because human nature and the nature of sin are also universal.

However, my fear is that someone will look at this and say, "If only we can get rid of those

Our Core Value is:

"The Convocation of the West is Missionary, bringing people to Christ and meaningfully engaging in the transformation of the culture around us."



The Vision of the Convocation is:

*"To STRENGTHEN existing churches;
To PLANT new churches; and
To RAISE UP missional leaders."*

people' we will be a holy church." Do NOT do this; for a church without sinners is an empty church. And the message from the Holy Spirit is equally clear. We need to figure out what the message was to these seven churches. We need to figure out what the text means for us, both as a church and as individuals so that we can be better Christians. After all, a church is NOT the building. A church is the people who make it up. So, we shall start this analysis with the first of the Seven Churches – Ephesus. And let us start with the text:

Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted. Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent. But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.

[Revelation 2:1-7]

The first line reads, *Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus....* Even this phrase is disputed. Did Saint John literally mean the angel guarding the church or the person in charge – the priest, the presbyter or the elder? It is unclear, but for the limited purposes of our analysis it is rather unimportant.

These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks. The "person" who holds the Seven Stars is none other than Jesus Christ. And what are the seven stars and the seven candlesticks? We believe the seven stars are the seven churches of Asia Minor, one of which is Ephesus. Walking midst the seven golden candlesticks may also reference the seven churches, or more specifically, the Spirit of each of the seven churches. If you look at a map, it is clear that these seven churches formed a circle. So having the churches in Christ's

hand, and walking midst their seven Spirits makes sense.

We have seen the seven Spirits of God referenced as candles. The menorah has seven candles symbolizing these seven Spirits. And the Holy Spirit has seven gifts. With this in mind, I believe Christ walking among the seven candlesticks is an image of Christ surrounded by the Spirit, which inhabits each of the seven churches. This would also explain Christ's warning that *He will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place* if Ephesus does not repent.

After this introduction, Saint John writes seven words of commendation. Seven Spirits, seven churches, seven stars, seven golden candlesticks, and now we have seven words of commendation. Seven is an important number in this revelation, and seven is the number used in the Bible to show completeness.

The first four commendations are these: *I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil.* What is interesting is the use of both works and labor. Why both? Aren't they synonymous? In this case, they are not. Christ is saying, first, that they are doing good works. Someone once said, "The Christian ought to be like a good watch – all gold, open-faced, well-regulated, dependable, and filled with good works." Christ is noting that Ephesus is filled with good works. But labor is

different. Some analysis has equated "labor" with weariness. If this is true, not only is Jesus Christ noting the church in Ephesus' good works, but also their weariness. They are tired, working hard for Christ. They are not weary OF Christ, but they are weary from the hard work they have done. I agree with this analysis, because it supports what will come after the words of commendation.

The last three words of commendation continue to praise Ephesus: *And thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted.* These people were very wise. They took to heart Jesus' warning that many would come, wolves in sheep's clothing. And the people in Ephesus must have been as wise as serpents and as gentle as doves. They were able to ferret out the liars who came to fool them.

Additionally, Ephesus must have been full of Christians



who were willing to bear all the persecution they may have felt. Remember, Ephesus was the home of one of the Seven Wonders of the World. It had the temple to Diana that was legendary. Therefore, those who eschew the pagan faith were probably, at best, discriminated against, and at worst, persecuted. Therefore, these Christians were bearing the Cross of Christ. And with this, they had not become weary; they had “not fainted,” even though with their other works they had become tired.

But, this information is helpful and necessary in order to understand what comes next: *Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.* No other explanation is given. What was Ephesus’ first love? Was it love of Christ? Was it love for one another? Was it both? Most analysis believes that their first love is their love of Jesus Christ, though some believe that their first love was both love of Christ and love for one another.

As I prayed on this message to Ephesus, it became clearer to me what happened. Here is the crux of this revelation. Here is our message. Here was a good group of believers. They threw themselves into their devotion with both feet. But, what happened is that they started losing sight of what was important. They worked hard; they did what Christians ought to do. And they became weary by all that they did. But eventually they lost sight of why they were doing it. It may have been exhaustion. It may have been that they got so wrapped up in what they were doing that they forgot why they were doing it. Whatever the reason, the result was that they left their first love. They left their love of Christ. With all their works and their exhaustion from their works, their love of God had grown cold.

This is an important message for all churches. We can take on so much that church becomes a chore instead of a joy. We can get so wrapped up in the social causes that we forget why they are important. We need to recapture the joy whenever we start to lose it. We need to recapture the reason behind our actions if we ever forget.

This is an important message for all us Christians. If we spend our time worrying about things instead of feeling God’s love in our worship, we may need to let go of those things that are troubling us. If we find ourselves looking at the church or the altar, noting where people have failed to set things up “right” instead of concentrating on our prayers and the mysteries behind the Holy Eucharist, we need to stop. If we find ourselves resentful of others whom we believe are doing less work for the church than we are, we need to step back and decide why we are doing what we are doing. And we need to recapture our first, great love, Jesus Christ.

Remember Mary and Martha? Mary sat at Jesus’ feet and

heard what He was saying while Martha was running around doing all the work. But, what also happened was that Martha started resenting her sister, and she was losing out on Christ’s great lessons. Ephesus had become Martha. Have we?

It is important to be both Mary and Martha. It must be a delicate balance. But, if we start losing our love for our brothers and sisters in the church, if we start resenting what we perceive as their laziness, it is time for us to re-adopt Mary in our lives. We need to step back from the work, and sit at the Master’s feet, listening and falling in love again.

So the question I have for all of us is, “Are we losing our love for our brothers and sisters?” Are we finding ourselves complaining about their lack of action? Are we so wrapped up in our duties that we are no longer listening to the Word of God? If so, then we need to recapture our “first love.” We need to recommit to reviving our “first love.” We need to commit to rediscovering our love of Christ AND of each other.

But this is not the end of our passage. What comes after this section is a very vague reference: *But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.* Who are the Nicolaitans? There is no reference to them specifically in any of the early writings. Some scholars hold that it is impossible to know who these people are. Other scholars, including some Roman Catholic scholars, believe that these were people who followed a man by the name of Nicolaus of Antioch. Nicolaus was one of the seven deacons ordained in Acts 6:5, and is credited with apostatizing the Christian doctrine. He became a Gnostic and formed a cult that taught that, in order to understand sin, one must indulge in it. In this sense, the “Nicolaitans” are associated with a dangerous casual attitude toward idolatry and sexual immorality, and, as we shall see, their corruptive influence was already causing trouble in the church at Pergamos (Pergamum).

Finally, there are those scholars that just look at the word “Nicolaitans” itself. The Greek word *nikao* means “to conquer,” and the word *laos* from which we get the word “laity” means “the people.” These scholars surmise that the Nicolaitans were people who tried to control the laity. This too can destroy a church, or worse. It can turn it into a cult. However, regardless, unless some documentation is unearthed, I doubt we will ever know for sure who the Nicolaitans were.

But the final statement in this passage is crucial: *He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.* We must ALL hear what God is telling us in this message to the Seven Churches. Not only do we need to hear for the sake of our church, but also for our own soul’s health. So let us all have ears to hear, and eyes to see. And if we do, then we may be able to protect our faith from things that may work to destroy it.

Amen.

Prayer for Discernment during Lent

ALMIGHTY GOD, our heavenly Father, who hast purchased to thyself an universal Church by the precious blood of thy dear Son; Mercifully look upon us, our parishes, our Convocations, and our Diocese, and send thy Holy Spirit to guide and govern the hearts and minds of all its members. Grant us true discernment to know to whom we are to minister and how we should minister to them; wisdom so the leaders of our churches will govern Thy Church in the right way and Thy people will know what to say and how to say it so that no heart may harden; and charity so that all may hear and receive the Holy Gospel of thy Son. Give to all Thy people Thy grace and heavenly benediction that both by their life and doctrine they may show forth thy glory, and set forward the salvation of all men; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.



THE SHINING

(DIVINE VERSION)

By Bishop Winfield Mott

Humans are celebrated, relative to other species, for being more knowledgeable and having superior communication skills.

Maybe. I note many other creatures seem to know everything they need to conduct their lives, and often can communicate quite well. But the problem with humans is the gap between our amazing potential and the actualization of these attributes. While knowledge abounds among us today, much of it is false or misleading. Likewise, much accurate knowledge is ignored, regarded as unimportant for the conduct of life, “ignorant and proud of it,” as the saying goes.

As for communication, thousands of mediators, counsellors, marriage therapists, speech coaches and others have successful careers trying to fix our poor attempts at communication. Both knowledge and communication are also not infrequently manipulated by those who obfuscate and deliberately confuse. Listen, for example, to a politician answering a question he doesn't really want to answer, a long discourse saying not quite anything.

None of this is new. It has been with us since the discussion between the serpent (an excellent, if unreliable, communicator) and Eve in Genesis 3 and the subsequent manipulation of communication attempting to deflect blame. The acquiring of the knowledge of good and evil has turned out to have awful and long-lasting consequences, from which God in his love tried to spare us. The proto-humans in the Garden, however, refused to listen to the loving Father, preferring the enticing fake news of the serpent. Nothing in that regard has changed since. Today, though, seems a particularly acute era of false

information and manipulated communication.

It is the remarkable quality of God that he continues to love, even when we fail him. The Law and the prophets were given, mostly without success, to call the people back to repentance. Finally, he sent his Son, to communicate directly with us, as one of us, and ultimately to act in redeeming us despite our failures. That act is successful and permanent whether we know it or not. Yet to know of it and communicate it to others makes a radical difference in the life of each of us and in the life of the world. We are still mandated to care for the earth according to God's will, which we can't do unless we know what that will is. We are still mandated to go into all the earth to disseminate the accurate knowledge of his love, so all mankind might respond accordingly.

As part of the Incarnation process, therefore, God makes known to us what is going on, and communicates it. We celebrate this particularly on the festival of the Epiphany and the season which follows. It is an ancient feast, predating the development of the Christmas festival, but with a message integral to the Incarnation story.

Epiphany in Greek means to “shine a light upon” something. It is a universal analogy to making something known. We describe it as “enlightenment” when we discern superior knowledge, and cartoonists represent a character having a bright idea by drawing a light bulb above her or his head. It is not accidental that Christmas was established on the calendar to absorb the old festival of lights celebrations, such as Hanukkah and the winter solstice. Nor is it accidental that the

Gentile representatives, the Three Kings, follow the light of the Star to encounter the Messiah, a particular theme of Epiphany.

To want to know something and not be able to find it out is frustrating. Even worse is to be unaware of something about to seriously impact your life (when the highway bridge washes out, that is important to know before driving onto the bridge, for instance). Likewise, to want to communicate but be unable is a very frustrating experience. If you have ever known a stroke victim whose speech was affected, you have witnessed the struggle of someone who is clear on what they want to say, but cannot make the words come out correctly.

communication can't seem to get past the barriers between me and the listener.

Much of this is because the listener has a pre-existing condition, a head stuffed full with misinformation about the Christian Faith. The listener may also regard the discussion as not important for daily life. Or their Christianity may be all tangled up with a national religion, a tribal god who blesses only us and our "way of life." And we have all been to multiple funerals where we are told that the departed was a "good person," and therefore righteously worthy to enter the heavenly gates. We have rarely been told that the deceased

was a chronic sinner in desperate need of the grace of God. Reading about the 18th Century Russian missionaries to Alaska, I envy them because their audience had no preconceived misconceptions about Christianity. They were able to start with a clean slate. Our problem is not only lack of knowledge but also an overabundance of wrong but dearly held information.

Americans have never been noted for remembering history. It is precisely here that we are mandated to speak up. We Anglo-Catholics, among others, are children of the Tradition, the "paradosis," that which has been delivered to us by our ancestors in the Faith, to be passed on to those around us. It includes the accurate Gospel message, as well as the cumulative witness of grace throughout the centuries, right down to the saints and martyrs of our own time. It contains the ecumenical creeds as ideal summaries of our knowledge. All this is held in little regard by so many of our fellow citizens. The views of some see it as all nonsense, replaced by modern and therefore superior knowledge, an unjustified arrogance of how much more we now supposedly know. Others only care about feelings, experiential religions where the Tradition doesn't

matter. Still others clutter their religion with all kinds of rules and sidetracks, losing the precious message of God's love in the extraneous accumulation.

Every Epiphany season is a time for us to redouble our efforts to speak clearly from the Tradition, despite the frustrations of communication. The only legitimate message from the Church to the unchurched, underchurched and badly churched world around us is that God is love, an Epiphany meant for each of them. And, let's not forget, for each of us.



Adoration of the Magi by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo
Public Domain

In our society, we undervalue knowledge and communication about Christianity. We are told that religion is a private affair, best left uncommunicated and relegated to a small pigeon hole in the desk of life. The extent of knowledge about Christianity, including among many churchgoers who label various beliefs and issues as being about Christianity, is pathetic and often egregiously misinformed. When I try to communicate the facts about Jesus and the consequential Christian life and belief, I often feel a frustration similar to the stroke victim. I am clear on what I will say, but the