

Called to follow Christ: Christians in the apocalypse

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Following Jesus of Nazareth as presented in the Gospel accounts does not provoke in our minds a "what does it mean" question. Following the One who tells us to follow Him is an order that must be carried out. We see the person that we follow, and His footsteps serve as the raw material of following. The situation changes a great deal when we speak of following whilst seeing no one in front of us and being guided by no one's footsteps. Then following becomes an image, a symbolic reality. Following in reality reassures and opens one to trust, whereas symbolic following arouses anxiety and leaves one perplexed. The source and root cause of this situation is the discrepancy between the clarity of the symbol and the fog of uncertainty surrounding the application of the symbol. What does it mean to follow the Absent One? How do we follow the invisible footsteps?

As moderators of vocations and pastoral work, we must be aware of this situation. Our responsibility does not end in the moment of a person's vocational decision. Even if drawn (some may prefer 'seduced') to the decision to follow Christ, at critical moments in life they will seek verification not only of the decision made, but also of their present situation.

The language of vocations promotion often becomes symbolic. For those who develop this discourse it is almost a spontaneous action to turn to the narratives of the call and the teaching concerning the conditions of following (denying oneself, taking up the cross). Indeed, it is inevitable to make such references. But we cannot forget that we are proposing this discourse to people without a direct relationship to whom they follow and put on a symbolic level. We must then take up the challenge of providing a key to open up the closed world of the symbol. Even if this world seems, or really is, wonderful; if we do not want to be responsible for alienating people, for detaching them from reality, together with the invitation expressed in the symbolic form we must at least present the links with the experience of reality. We cannot delude ourselves that we can offer much more. In religious language (theological, preaching, spiritual direction and formation, vocational formation included) we cannot do without using the symbolic mode of communication. Thus, accompaniment with indications on how to use it is a necessity and a matter of responsibility.

Revelation is a privileged book in this respect, because it leaves no doubt as to its symbolic character. Just look at the first verse of this book:

“The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him,
to make known to his servants the things which must shortly come
to pass: and signified, sending by his angel to his servant John”

(Ap 1: 1)

The verb σημαίνω (simaíno) refers directly to communication through signs (σημεῖον (simeíon)). Although modern translations do not always succeed in rendering the charge of the verb in question, commentaries leave no doubt that this is not ordinary communication, but rather made on many levels by connecting. If, we then take this text as the material of our study, it is not an arbitrary choice but aims at the answer that introduces us into the heart of the problem posed: how to pass from the sign to the semantic valence of communication in reality.

It is worth warning that the reading of the Apocalypse is today hindered by the belief that we know what the nature of this text is. We easily use the verb apocalypse as a synonym for something frightening, for an announcement of a cosmic catastrophe. This is a result of the situation in which Revelation is more often mentioned than read. A distinction must be made between the content of the text on the one hand and our associations and picturesque images developed by the common imagination and iconographic tradition on the other. This book of the New Testament invites us to a careful and integral reading. This is not an invitation particularly related to the Apocalypse, but in the case of this particularly easy work this fundamental rule of all reading is neglected, because we feel exonerated by the interpretative tradition focused on literary motifs and images now ingrained in *mainstream* culture and interpretation history.

Although ‘following’ is widely present in Revelation, it is not often presented as a studied theme. Without great risk of being mistaken we can say that it was developed in a more complex way by Fr Ugo Vanni SI (1929-2018). It was he who emphasised a particular characteristic of following in Revelation as "active following" as opposed to the type of following presented in the Synoptics and the Gospel of John. Vanni defines “active following” as a “full-time” commitment to Christ in his work of salvation, developed in historical and eschatological continuity. In speaking of the contrast, we are not being faithful to the great exegete of the Apocalypse if we do not note that, according to him, "active following" includes the idea of "evangelical" following as the decision to take Jesus as the point of reference for the disciples' whole life. (U. VANNI, *Apocalypse of John*, v. 2, *General introduction. Comment*, by Luca Pedrolì, Assisi: Cittadella Editrice 2018, p. 499-500).

In our approach we would also like to develop another thought of the same scholar: the concept of the mystery defined as "the image that becomes an enigma to be solved in terms of concrete application; and it is the same concrete reality that requires application to be understood and evaluated" (U. VANNI, *Apocalypse: hermeneutics, exegesis, theology*, Bologna: Dehoniane Edition ²1991, p. 66).

Starting from these two ideas we can describe our aim as an attempt to develop through the study of the text of Revelation the question of how to move from the symbol of the following to its application in the vocational context.

Apocalypse: Revelation of Christ

By now we have told ourselves that by seeing in the Apocalypse an announcement of the catastrophe, or the catastrophe itself, we are on the wrong track. But this is a negative statement. We have to turn it into the positive formula: what is the Apocalypse? The Apocalypse is a revelation, and the Christian Apocalypse is a revelation of Christ. By replacing this fundamental object of the New Testament work, we lose the possibility of understanding its meaning. The Christological reading of the last book of the biblical canon must be a necessary prerequisite for us. We must go back to the first verse of the book to see a strong tension between its primary and secondary object. The first words "The Revelation of Jesus Christ" (Ap 1: 1) can be meant in one of two ways: subjective (revelation given by Jesus and proclaimed by him) or objective (revelation given about Jesus). Christ is certainly one of the links in the chain of revelation: God - Jesus - angel/messenger - seer John - servants of God. As all these links in the chain have a subjective character, this fact favours subjective interpretation of the genitive Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (Jesus Christos). But we must turn our attention to the reverse order of these links. God being the giver of revelation, He is mentioned as the second. If we do not accept as an explanation of this fact a disinterested predilection of the author for disorder, we must accept that his intention was to present two functions of this genitive, not only subjective, but also objective. Thus, Christ the Revealer and Christ revealed are two aspects of the Christology of Revelation. Self-revelation - as we well know - is an important theme in the theology of the Johannine school. Christ presents himself not because of the lack of other witnesses, but because he alone knows the mystery of salvation understood in his own person.

Christ - from the perspective outlined above not surprisingly - is an object of the first vision (Ap 1: 9-20) and constitutes the material of the self-presentations in the messages to the Churches (Ap 2-3), such as (Franciszek Sieg SI tested it in his studio ΟΜΟΙΟΣ ΥΙΟΣ ΑΝΘΡΩΠΟΥ (OMOIOS YIOS ANTHROPOU) i.e. SON OF MAN) [Ap 1: 13]. Christologia

Syna Człowieczego [Ap 1: 9-13, 21], Warszawa: Bobolanum. Wydział Teologiczny Towarzystwa Jezusowego 1981). These facts are self-evident, and one does not have to make an effort to notice them. More complex, however, is the question of the epistolary part (Ap 1: 4-8) marked by the inclusion consisting of the repetition of the three-times formula (*dreizeiten Formel*). The lack of balance in this part of the text is striking. Most of this passage is dedicated to Jesus Christ. Finally, the repetition of the three-times formula refers to him. In this way Jesus Christ becomes the central object of Rev 1-3. As such it is also presented in the body of the book (Ap 4: 1-22,15). Also Christocentric is the epilogue (Ap22: 16-21).

From this perspective, it does not seem possible to recognise the central object of revelation in the events that are about to happen (Ap 1: 1). The eschatological scenario does not seem to be anything other than the narrative way of revealing Christ. Futurological interpretation of the Apocalypse often harbours many uncertain and obscure points. The Christological interpretation develops the mystery and shows its nuances again and again.

But Jesus not only remains a central figure. He is continuously active. However, His activity is not limited to history, indeed, history becomes only a screen on which eschatological activity is planned. As an example of this, let us take the chapters Rev 1-3 once again. The preface of the great letter (Ap 1: 4-8) presents Christ as the subject of the past action described negatively (cleansing from sins) and positively (establishment of Christians as the royal and priestly people). This action is presented in ahistorical terminology, because neither one nor the other aspect of this work is translated into historical facts. However, the blood shed by Jesus is not a symbolic blood, to be understood as something else. The triumphant and resurrected Christ presents the marks of the Passion (note: an element present only in the passion according to John: Jn 19: 37 with the same reference to Zech 12: 10). Action at the theological level is pre-realised (prefaced) at the narrative level developed in the midrashic form (an anecdote developed around a quotation). This action acts as a vehicle for the transfer of the honorary formula (*dreizeit Formel*, similar to that used in Dodona: Ζεὺς ἦν, Ζεὺς ἐστίν, Ζεὺς ἔσσεται, see PAUSANIA, *Periegesis* 10,12,10) from God to Jesus Christ. By forming the new people, Christ expresses his divine status. The past action then, based on the historical foundation of the death on the cross, is connected on the one hand with its elevation, and on the other, with participation in the community (the royal/priestly people) created by Jesus' sacrifice. It is not an activity of a soloist, but rather is orchestrated in such a way as to attribute to different subjects the different parts to be played: Christ transforms the community and the community with its faithful witness expressed in its existence confirms and makes possible Christ's assumption of His dignity.

In the vision of the resurrected and revealing Christ (Ap 1:9-20), elements taken from the description of the mysterious character in Dan 7: 9, called the 'old man', are easily discovered (aram. *'atijq jōmin*, אֲתִיִּק יְוֹמִיִן, “The Ancient of days”, see J.J. COLLINS, *Daniel*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1993, p. 501) presented as sitting on a throne: long robes, hair like wool. This description is aided by references to Dan 10: 5-6 (a superhuman figure but not identical with God), an *angelus interpretis*, mediator of the revelation: girded robe, eyes of fire). At the same time Christ is introduced with a very particular and easy to identify expression (“one like to the Son of man”, see Ap 1: 13, cfr Dn 7: 13) which facilitates the identification of Christ as a being other than God, invested by Him with divine power. Also, in this passage we see applied a strategy of passing the dignity of God to the Christ, distinct but equal to God.

In this scene the visionary represents the figure of the follower. His role is to react to the revelation of Christ. The most appropriate expression of the response is John's adoration of Jesus (Ap 1: 17). It is worth noting the difference between Ap 1: 17 and 19: 10; 22: 8-9. The last two texts constitute examples of an act of worship addressed to an angel. This is forbidden as improper, because only God is worthy of this kind of respect and as such He is worshipped by, for example, the 24 elders. (Ap 4: 10, cfr. Ap 3: 9; 15: 4). The role of the worshipper does not exhaust the task assigned to the seer. In addition to the correct interpretation of who he is contemplating, he receives the task of a scribe who has to draw up a report on what he has seen and will see.

Returning to the analysis of Rev 1: 1 made above, we can say that this account of Apocalypse is a kind of narrative Christology - the name comes from the reflection of Edward Schillebeeckx, which entered into the magisterium of the II Vatican Council. In terms of this theological model, we can say that the fact that John is the recipient of revelation not only opens up the possibility of bearing witness, but also occurs by the act of bearing witness. Christ does not reveal himself as a content expressed in a cultural code (or rather, he does, but that is not the most important aspect) but as a partner in the interaction aimed at the salvation of humanity and the universe.

Let us now present Christ in the messages to the seven Churches in Asia Minor. Without going into the details of each message we want to focus on the structural elements, because they are composed according to an applied model with the almost absolute consequence. They follow in unchanging order by: 1) the order to write given by Christ, 2) the self-presentation of the sender (Jesus Christ), 3) Christ's appraisal of the conduct of the angel/particular church (in only one case, that of Laodicea, accompanied by advice), 4) the call to conversion/praise

expressed by Christ, 5) the promise to the victor given by Christ, 6) the call for understanding. Only in the case of the last element it is not obvious whether it is the part played by the protagonist - the Christ. The rest are, of course, the words attributed to Christ. This order is only slightly disturbed in two cases (Smyrna and Pergamus): the elements 5) and 6) are in reverse order. It can be seen from the diagram presented that the principal agent is Jesus Christ, but the ecclesiastical communities are not the object of His actions but carry out their own actions, which do not always conform to the will of Christ. This is expressed in the negative evaluation and the call to conversion. At the same time, each church is offered the virtual figure of the victor as a motivation and reminder to make the right choices. Christ then invites the Churches to, on the one hand, act in accordance with His (i.e. Christ's) way of judging, but on the other - to act autonomously, subjectively. Here again we see the relationship between Christ and a human partner (in this case a church community) modelled on the principles of interaction.

Who follows and how do they follow Christ in Revelation? Who does not?

The first text to be revised as the example of the following of Christ would be the self-presentation of the seer in the vision (Ap 1: 9-10), which is different from the epistolary self-presentation (Ap 1. 4a). Unlike the letter to the Churches, where this element is very brief, the self-presentation in the vision is developed and remains in close relation to the mention of the seer in the chain of the transmission of revelation (Ap 1:2). In verses 9-10, John characterises himself first and foremost as sharing in the fate of the community of churches. It is not, however, a social bond (broken by distance and separation), but an eschatological one ("in the Kingdom" awaited with patience) preceded and in some sense heralded by tribulation. In the final analysis, the ecclesial community is realised through the work of Jesus (instrumental or causal semantic value of the expression ἐν Ἰησοῦ (en Iesou) i.e. in Jesus). This interpretation is reinforced by the reasons for the exile: the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus (v. 9). In Rev 1: 2, John was presented as a witness (accumulated forms: verbal and noun) to the Word of God and Jesus. In interpreting vv. 2 and 9 we must remember that Revelation is one of the two books of the New Testament (together with the Gospel of John) where the Word of God has the personal value of referring to Jesus Christ. (cfr. Ap 19: 13). These observations constitute a premise for the conclusion that John, through the revelation he has received and the testimony he has borne, is particularly bound to Christ and in this way participates in the ecclesial relationship. From this fact stems the specific type of brotherhood among Christians, based on a relationship with Christ.

Revelation received by John is not a message, but a personal encounter and the behaviour of the two participants in this encounter. Communication, understood as the exchange of information, is framed in a much more complex experience. Revelation here means the showing of a person: the Risen Jesus. The way of presenting the temporal circumstance of the vision is characteristic. The meaning of the expression "on the Lord's Day" is not certain, because it is only unlikely that this refers to the Christian feast day - the first day after the Sabbath. The eschatological meaning seems much more likely (of *jiōm YHWH*, יוֹם יְהוָה). John, by the work of the Spirit (ἐν πνεύματι (en pnévmati) i.e. in the Spirit), participates in the judicial act of Christ insinuated by the background of Dn 7 in this part of the book. The eschatological character of the text then finds further confirmation.

The visionary participates in the encounter with Christ mainly through his activities aimed at understanding (semantics). In the vision he receives a key to interpretation because the vision itself is filled with micro-quotations and allusions to Old Testament texts. The self-presentations of Christ in the messages to the seven Churches (Ap 2-3) benefit from this collection of references. As exceptions we can mention two elements developed in Rev 1: 12-13 (seven candlesticks) and in Rev 1: 16 (seven stars), but these are to be explained by Christ himself in Rev 1: 20 and taken up again immediately in Rev 2: 1. Jesus helps the seer to understand the vision where his scriptural learning does not support him. These two elements, linked with the number seven to the seven Churches, indicate the power (holding) and presence of Christ ὁ περιπατῶν (o peripatón, i.e. the one who walks) in the midst of churches. It is not the motion of the Parousia (coming), but of dynamic presence. Christ does not visit the Churches but remains always present and active in their midst. The seer receives this revelation from Christ himself and makes it legible to the Church of Ephesus as the first and most esteemed of the Churches in Asia. In this way he in turn becomes the imitator of Christ in explaining the presence of the Lord.

From this element we can move on to the following of Christians, who in turn walk after Christ (Ap 3: 4). The recalled verse belongs to the judgment of Christ on the Church of Sardis, but also linked to the promise given to the victor (Ap 3: 5). The noun element acts as a link between these two verses ("white robes"), but the dynamic, verbal part ("they will walk") remains formally reserved for the (in this case positive) judgement, but logically it is part of the promise, given however not to a virtual figure ('the winner'), but to a real group: 'some names' in this Church who stand out for their conduct. Their walking depends on two factors: preserve the white robes and be bound to Christ. "White robes", according to the chromatic symbolism proposed by Ugo Vanni, are a reference to the resurrection of Christ, but we must remember

that they have their own reference to his passion and sacrifice (Ap 5: 9; 7: 14 etc.). White is the fruit of Christ's outpouring of blood but at the same time of the faithfulness of those who follow Him, as is evident from Rev 3: 4-5. The followers of the Lamb in Rev 14 are not presented under the aspect of clothing, but under the aspect of purity:

“These are they who were not defiled with women: for they are virgins. These follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. These were purchased from among men, the firstfruits to God and to the Lamb: *And in their mouth there was found no lie*; for they are without spot”

(Ap 14: 4-5)

It is not a question of purity understood only as 'virginity', sexual continence, because in a parallel way the text refers to truthfulness presented in a series of micro-quotations: “Blessed is the man to whom the Lord hath not imputed sin, and in whose spirit there is no guile” (Ps 32 (31): 2), “neither was there deceit in his mouth” (Is 53: 9) and “shall not do iniquity, nor speak lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth” (Soph (Zeph) 3: 13). Purity in the sense of refraining from sexual relations only illustrates and exemplifies moral purity (integrity). The sacrifice of Christ the Redeemer is thus connected in a way that is associated (complementary) with the moral conduct of Christians.

The most impressive (but not the most important) scene in Revelation, where we readily see the theme of following, is the vision of the countless crowd of multilingual and multi-ethnic individuals worshipping before the throne and the Lamb (Ap 7: 9-17). Being a dynamic and composed scene, we are not all interested in it in the same way, but we cannot disregard its whole structure, composed of four parts: 1) descriptive part (v. 9), 2) the singing of the crowd (v. 10), 3) the adoration by the angels (vv. 11-12), 4) the dialogue between one of the presbyters and the visionary (v. 13-17). We will deal with the last part, which in turn consists of the introductory dialogue (vv. 13-14a) and the explanation of the presbyter (vv. 14b-17). For us this passage is the heart of this episode. This explanation concerns in part the elements of the vision itself present in Ap 7: 9: the standing crowd and white robes. In the words of the priest, the seer (in terms of the text) and the reader (in terms of literary communication) are given an explanation of these elements. The colour of the garments is explained by the influence of the sacrificial blood of the Lamb, while the standing expresses the attitude of religious and liturgical veneration in the temple in Heaven (λατρεύουσιν (latrévousin, i.e. adore) [...] ἐν τῷ ναῷ αὐτοῦ). Beyond this horizon of explanation lies the theological interpretation of the action of the Throned One. We recall that at the beginning of the scene the throne and the Lamb are listed

separately. In Ap 7: 11 it is noted: “angels stood round about the throne, and the ancients, and the four living creatures; and they fell down before the throne upon their faces, and adored God” (v. 11). Thus, the adoration of the angels is addressed to God (Father), and not to Christ the Lamb. However, if we read: “they are before the throne of God, and they serve him day and night in his temple: and he, that sitteth on the throne, shall dwell over them” (v. 15), we must also think about the mutual relationship between God and the followers of the Lamb. But as in the other moments of Revelation the identity of God and the Lamb is fluid and more than once we see the transition from God to his Son (Lamb), as we have seen for example in the case of the formula of the three times in Ap 1: 4-8.

The active role of shepherd and guide to the sources of life is reserved for the Lamb. The role of the Lamb, then, is not that of *leader* and actor in the historical drama, but rather consists in introducing the group he leads to communion with God, to an eschatological reality. In this perspective, is presented the promise of consolation (Ap 7: 17c) taken from Is 25: 8 and quoted more extensively in Ap 21: 4. Even the image of the source of life (Ap 7: 17b) finds its correspondent in Ap 21: 6. But we can, however, observe the progress of the action. From guiding at the source, we pass to drinking from it. The leading of the Lamb then fulfils a double function. It reveals the divine identity of Christ and at the same time fulfils the purpose of the following: namely, participation in the covenant in the communion of the New Jerusalem. ‘Following’ therefore, has as its goal eternal life and as a personal point of reference - Jesus Christ in his glory of identification/identity with God the Father. For this reason, the culmination of active discipleship is found in God's communion with his people (Ap 21: 1-8). This covenant, stipulated with the formula of mutual belonging (Ap 21: 3), explains the difference in the commitments to follow: God is God, people are people. It is not a case of becoming a people like God through external and historical imitation.

It would be possible to develop this line of thought further, but we must conclude by presenting the opposite situation: those who follow they who are opposed to the action of God and the Lamb. In Revelation we find the worshippers of the beast (Ap 13: 4) and those branded with its mark (Ap 13: 16). They are the property of evil forces, dependent to the point of determination and passively imitating the symbol of evil. Apparently in a different situation is the great harlot Babylon, the Great City. This has its accomplices participating in the adulterous relationship with it, who contemplate its fall with despair. But they distance themselves from her torments. But these two symbolic realities representing evil are in fact a single symbol composed: between these two entities, the beast and Babylon, there is a connection (cfr. Ap 17: 7-8), then there is not opposition, but development, which in the case of persons linked to the

symbolic sphere alien to God culminates in aimless flight. God's faithful also distance themselves from the Great Babylon (Ap 18: 4-7) but with joy (Ap 18: 20). The desolation of Babylon contrasts with the bliss of the New Jerusalem community and life in the eschatological paradise (Ap 21: 9-22, 5). From the first experience of the risen Christ to the last moment of history, Christ's faithful choose to be in an interaction with Him. Faithfulness to Christ is dynamic, and to maintain its vigour it must be continually confirmed in the choice to interact with Him.

Application to the vocational context

As a corresponding element of Christ's self-revelatory activities in Revelation we can then identify firstly the self-judgment of the disciples/followers. Those who follow Him are judged in a positive way, those who do not follow Him are judged in a negative way. This model of judgement finds a parallel view in Jn 12: 46-48: "I am come a light into the world; that whosoever believeth in me, may not remain in darkness. And if any man hear my words, and keep them not, I do not judge him: for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. He that despiseth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him; the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day". The characteristic of the Revelation is the practical and concrete choice that is expressed in the relationship with Christ. Listening to and observing the words of Christ in the Revelation is expressed in acting in collaboration with Him which culminates in the covenant realised in the New Jerusalem.

Following Christ is then not a decision to be taken or not, but a form of existence in which the Christian character of it is realised. It is not a question, then, of spirituality understood as an internal, individualistic and personal attitude, but rather of life in partnership inspired by the Spirit of Jesus. This spirituality is not lived without heroism. One cannot follow Christ by seeking a comfortable place in the cultural *mainstream*.

Following Christ in the Apocalypse is realised in the choices made always with reference to Him: on the level of religion strictly understood as adoration of the Divine Majesty, on the moral level as choices in conformity with the divine law, on the socio-cultural level as the ability to recognise cultural forms that are alien to the worship of values rooted in God. It is a programme devoid of originality, but that is why it remains relevant. It is worth remembering in view of the phenomenon that we can identify as false discipleship or seduction by powers that are foreign to God. Participation in Christ's saving action is only expressed in forms that cannot be explained by mere anonymous Christianity or by clearly speaking Godless Christianity. The figure of following develops as active concentration of the person on the one

we are following as well as interaction with that person. Following culminates in the eschatological covenant with Christ who reveals himself to his followers as God the Saviour.

In vocational pastoral work and formation there is obviously room for social analysis and questions about today's culture. However, we cannot lose sight of the fact that every authentic vocational discourse starts from Christ and leads to Christ. Otherwise, it becomes one of the forms of *headhunting* that leads to disappointment and *burnout*.

Extract

Revelation is one of the New Testament writings most focused on the subject of discipleship. The call to serve Christ comes directly from him and is addressed to the Church as an eschatological community living in time but oriented towards the divine reality. This vocation of Christ is about fidelity in history and communion in eternity. It is realised through the understanding of realities (historical, social, political, cultural) and through commitment.

Original Text in Italian