



Year of the Word

For more resources, including other articles on Scripture, reflection questions on the Sunday readings, 10 ways your parish can promote Scripture, and much more, visit www.austindiocese.org or call (512) 476-4888.



Diocese of Austin
The Catholic Church
of Central Texas
512.476.4888
www.austindiocese.org
The Year of the Word 2007

Revelation: no code needed to crack it

By Beth Balsam

“Then I saw the heavens opened, and there was a white horse; its rider was called Faithful and True. His eyes were like a fiery flame, and on his head were many diadems. He wore a cloak that had been dipped in blood, and his name was called the Word of God.” (Revelation 19:11a, 12a, 13a)

The last book of the Christian Bible may arguably be one of the most misunderstood and wrongly interpreted of the canon of Scripture. In many situations, the Book of Revelation is incorrectly read as literal predictions of the future or a secret code about the end of the world. If, instead, it is understood as highly symbolic language in which prophetic warnings are given about those who are scornful of God, it can give encouragement to the faithful who are oppressed and persecuted.

Apocalyptic literature is a distinctive writing style found in other biblical texts such as Zechariah, Isaiah, Daniel, Ezra, Maccabees and Esther. In Greek, apocalypse means “to uncover or reveal.” Apocalyptic writings share a common claim to be a record of revelations from God in which evil forces are always defeated by God. Apocalyptic writing incorporates several recurring features:

- a seer who has strange and puzzling dreams or visions.
- an interpreting angel.
- ascents into heaven with guided tours of heavenly regions.
- cosmic imagery of destruction and renewal.
- prayers, hymns, laments, and admonitions.

As apocalyptic literature, the book of Revelation is a prophecy, a message from God for people in the present moment. The main theme of the book is that God and Satan are in a cosmic battle against each other and God is ultimately victorious, especially through Jesus the Lamb.

The book of Revelation is a secret only to those who do not understand the meaning of the numbers, symbols, and images. Code breaking remains popular among some readers who often ignore the complicated textual and cultural history of the writings. Although the biblical writers often did use numbers and images in very symbolic ways, it is certain they did not put hidden codes into the text.

It is possible to interpret and identify what the original writer had in mind. The intention of John the seer is vital to correctly understanding the message. But the codes are sufficiently obscure so that any believer may apply the text to their own times. In other words, Revelation is not trying to describe a precise, predictable, futuristic moment in time or history. Endless claims have been made by religious enthusiasts that the true meaning of the codes in the book of Revelation have finally been discovered and the end of the world is at hand. The book of Revelation should be read for what it is: A way in which Christians were encouraged to stand firm through striking images of faith that persecutors would not understand.

The book consists of visions written in the light of deep scriptural meditation. While the seer never directly quotes Scripture, there are allusions to almost every book in the Bible, especially Genesis, Exodus, the Psalms, the Prophets, and above all, Daniel. These images are like political cartoons and are very bizarre when taken literally. Images are piled on top of images to create highly striking effects: flaming torches on sheets of ice, living creatures with eyes all around and on the inside, a throne that emits bolts of lightning and peals of thunder, a garment washed in blood to become dazzling white. The extravagant images present an unfolding of the destiny of the people of God oppressed by nations or by unfaithful and corrupt leaders. The book is an abundant symphony of images which demands that the reader recognize the powerful majesty of God and the message of redemption. “For the Lamb who is in the center of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to springs of life-giving water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Revelation 7:17)

Beth Balsam is the director of religious education at St. Gabriel's Catholic School in Austin. With a master's degree in theology from St. Mary's University in San Antonio, her husband Charlie finally admits she is now smarter than him.