The Perennial Revelation of Jesus Christ

Eugenio Corsini

The Apocalypse

From the Introduction:

The work that follows is not intended to be a commentary on the Apocalypse. There have been many such commentaries, reaching back into the earliest times of the Christian era. Some, especially during the Middle Ages, have been quite spectacular in their ingenuity and depth. The modern era has seen a series of fine commentaries, applying all the criteria of literary-critical analysis to the difficult text. The purpose of this work is to provide a series of series through the links which can be made with the Old Testament tradition, the coherent and unified argument of the New Testament, and to the older commentaries. I have introduced something quite new to the interpretation of the Apocalypse.

About the Author:

Eugenio Corsini was the professor of Ancient Christian Literature at the University of Turin. He studied at the University of Turin, the Sorbonne, Paris, and the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, and he has a long list of important publications in the area of early Fathers of the Church.

About the Translator & Editor:

Francis J. Moloney, SDB, is an internationally renowned Johannine scholar. He teaches at Catholic Theological College, University of Divinity, Australia, and has lectured extensively.
The Apocalypse
The Perennial Revelation of Jesus Christ

by
Eugenio Corsini

Translated & Edited by
Francis J. Moloney, S.D.B.

WIPF & STOCK • Eugene, Oregon
FOREWORD TO THE
2019 REPRINT EDITION

Eugenio Corsini (1925-2018) was Professor of Early Christian Literature at the University of Turin. In 1980, his interests in very early Christianity led him to publish a provocative interpretation of the Book of the Apocalypse, with the Italian title Apocalisse prima e dopo (Turin: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1980). As a young scholar, with an interest in the Johannine literature, I found his interpretation fascinating. Corsini argued that the almost universal use of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature as a paradigm for the interpretation of the biblical Apocalypse ignored the fact that the victory of God in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is proclaimed from the first to the last pages of the book (see, for example, Apoc 1:5-6; 5:1-14; 8:1; 11:15-18; 26:17-21; 19:4-8; 21:6). The Apocalypse did not ask persecuted Christians at the end of the first century to persevere in suffering, assured that God will ultimately destroy all evil forces; it proclaimed that the victory over evil had already been won. Indeed, the victory of the slain and risen Lamb has been with us “from the foundation of the world” (see 5:6; 13:8).

The cover created for this reprint is representative of the widespread Eastern Christian Iconographic theme of the Anastasis portraying the risen Jesus’ descentio ad inferos (“descent into hell” or “harrowing of hell”), raising Adam and Eve into life by taking their hands and leading them upward. Old Testament kings
and prophets look on. Although the artistic tradition is associated with the temporal, indicating what happened in the silence of Holy Saturday (see 8:1), it can also be interpreted as an indication of the transtemporal saving effects of Jesus’ death and resurrection “from the foundation of the world” (13:8).

The book that follows, *The Apocalypse: The Perennial Revelation of Jesus Christ*, was my edited translation of Corsini’s original Italian, first published in English in 1983 (Good News Studies 5 [Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1983]). The goal of my translation was to make available in English a challenging study, written in a language rarely consulted by mainstream New Testament scholars. To my disappointment, although the book was commercially very successful, it made no impact upon English or European scholarship. Craig R. Koester’s outstanding recent commentary upon Revelation (*Revelation*, Anchor Yale Bible 38A [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014]) does not even list Corsini’s work in his 53 pages of general bibliography.

By the 1990’s, given its almost total neglect, I accepted that Corsini’s suggestions must have been unacceptable to scholarship at large, and thus no longer pursued his line of interpretation. However, in the early stages of my direction of a doctoral dissertation on the hymnic material in the Apocalypse in 2012, I asked the candidate to read a cross-section of major commentaries to “get the feel” of the document itself, and classical and contemporary commentary upon it. He returned to me overwhelmed by the potential of Corsini’s reading of the text. By this stage, Professor Corsini himself had decided to return to his earlier research, publishing a further study entitled “The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ according to John” (*Apocalisse di Gesù Cristo secondo Giovanni*, Sestante [Turin: Società Editrice Internazionale, 2002]). I took the occasion to read this further study, and was once again impressed by the somewhat maverick but challenging interpretation of the most puzzling of New Testament books.

I did not agree with everything that Corsini had proposed, and was concerned by his lack of attention to the traditional early Christian expectation of the final action of God in the second coming of Christ (see especially 22:20). In the meantime, Apocalypse studies were moving away from the traditional endtime interpretative paradigm. For example, Leonard Thomson argued that the Christians of Asia lived quite peacefully within the Roman Empire (Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation. Apocalypse and Empire* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1990]), and Steven Friesen’s archeological study of the presence of Imperial Cults in Asia suggested that, however important the Cults may have been, the Apocalypse should not be regarded as a Christian response to their practice (Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John. Reading Revelation in the Ruins* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2001]). My interest was piqued to such an extent that I began to plan my own reading of the Book of the Apocalypse.

It remained only a plan until a significant USA publishing house approached me, requesting a monograph on a New Testament book or theme. Some years ago, therefore, I began my research that has produced *The Apocalypse of John. An Alternative Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020). However distant from my original interaction with Professor Corsini’s work in 1983, his interpretation, repeated with great clarity and detail in 2002, undergirds my recent study. This is especially true of his strong focus upon the famous “sevens” within the Apocalypse (churches, seals, trumpets, and bowls) as the determining elements in grasping the document’s overall literary structure. This structure provides the “skeleton” that shapes the flesh of an eventual interpretation.

Understandably, my translation of 1983, *The Apocalypse. The Perennial Revelation of Jesus Christ*, has long been out of print. It is occasionally available online, but at exorbitant prices. In the light of my recent study of the Apocalypse, referring continually...
to that foundational study and Corsini’s further work of 2002, that has never been translated, I approached Al Ullman, Reprint Acquisitions and Custom Reprinting Coordinator at Wipf & Stock (Eugene: OR), suggesting that it be reprinted, and once be made widely available. I am delighted that Wipf & Stock, an admirable and adventurous trail-blazer among contemporary biblical and theological publishers, has provided easy and affordable access to the study reprinted here. It certainly serves as a companion-volume to my more recent volume. But it is more than that. As I have indicated above, it was the seed-bed for my “alternative approach,” and deserves close attention on its own right. I thank Wipf & Stock for making that possible.

Francis J. Moloney, SDB, AM, FAHA
Catholic Theological College
University of Divinity
Melbourne, Victoria. AUSTRALIA

CONTENTS

Foreword by Francis J. Moloney SDB .......................... 1
Translator’s Preface ............................................ 7
Introduction ................................................. 11
THE PROLOGUE (1:1-8) ................................. 64
THE SEVEN LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES
(1:9—3:22) .................................................. 80
Structure and General Theme .......................... 80
The Introduction to the Seven Letters (1:9-20) .... 83
The “Letters” to the Churches of Asia Minor (chs. 2-3)................................. 95
THE SEVEN SEALS (4:1—8:1) .............................. 118
Structure and General Theme .......................... 118
The Introduction to the Seven Seals
(4:1—5:14) .................................................. 121
The First Four Seals: the Creation and the Fall
of Man (6:1-8) ............................................ 137
The Fifth Seal: The Salvation of the Just Ones in
the Old Economy (6:9-11) .............................. 148
The Sixth Seal: The Two Moments of the Divine
Salvific Intervention (6:12—7:17) ................. 155
The Seventh Seal: The End of the Old Economy
(8:1) ......................................................... 161
THE SEVEN TRUMPETS (8:2—11:19) .................. 164
Structure and General Theme .......................... 164
The Introduction to the Seven Trumpets
(8:2-6) ..................................................... 171
The First Four Trumpets: The Fall of the
Angels (8:7-13) .......................................... 174
The Fifth Trumpet (The First “Woe”): The Fall
of Man (9:1-12) ......................................... 178
The Sixth Trumpet (The Second “Woe”): The Value and Limitations of the Old Economy (9:13—11:14) ........................................ 181

The Seventh Trumpet (The Third “Woe”): The Fulfilment of the “Mystery of God” (11:15-19) ........................................ 201

THE SEVEN BOWLS (12:1—22:5) .................................. 206
Structure and General Theme .................................. 206
The Preface to the “Seven” of the Bowls: The First Two “Signs” (chs. 12-14) ...................... 211
The Creation and the Fall of Man (ch. 12) ...... 211
The Corruption of Political and Religious Authority (ch. 13) ........................................ 225
The First Divine Salvific Intervention (The Old Economy) as an Announcing and a Prefiguring of the Second (The Death of Christ) (ch. 14) .......................... 255
The Seven Bowls: The Third “Sign” (15:1—22:5) .................................. 279
The Pouring out of the Bowls: The Death of Christ as Judgment upon the Consequences of the Original Fall (chs. 15-16) ........................................ 279
The Death of Christ as Judgment upon History; The Destruction of Babylon (17:1—19:10) ...................... 313
The Death of Christ as the Definitive Destruction of all Evil Powers (19:11—20:15) ...................... 347
The Death of Christ as the Basis for the Gathering of the Chosen Ones in the Messianic Kingdom (Heavenly Jerusalem (21:1—22:5) ...................... 385

THE EPILOGUE (22:6-21) ........................................ 411
Bibliography ..................................................... 424

TRANSLATOR’S PREFACE

I first heard Prof. Eugenio Corsini’s startling approach to the Apocalypse at a Patristic Congress held in the Salesian Pontifical University in April, 1978 (see the summary in E. Corsini, “L’Apocalisse di Giovanni nella Catechesi Patristica,” Salesianum 41 [1979] 197). Some twelve months later, again in Rome, I was directed by Fr. Egidio Vigano, the Rector Major of the Salesian Congregation, to a book which he had just received in a pre-publication stage from the Turin publishers, Società Editrice Internazionale. The book was a work of E. Corsini, Apocalisse prima e dopo. Fr. Vigano, aware of my interest in matters Johannine, claimed that he had found the work startlingly refreshing and logical in its approach to this most difficult of New Testament documents. I was able to purchase a copy just as I was leaving Europe, at the end of 1980.

In 1981 I researched and taught a course on the Apocalypse at Catholic Theological College, Melbourne, Australia. The more I read, the more it struck me that Corsini had uncovered something surprisingly unique in the area of New Testament scholarship, where many of us tend to go on repeating the same old things in different ways. Whatever its worth, I felt that it needed more exposure than it was likely to receive in its Italian form. I began to write a course which quarried ideas from his book, yet attempted to keep in touch...
with the wider spectrum of other contemporary scholarship on the Apocalypse. Although I tried throughout my course of lectures to present the wider spectrum of current scholarly discussion of the document, it soon became apparent that Corsini’s contribution would stand or fall on its own merits and faults. It is so unique that it cannot be “integrated” into contemporary scholarship.

I completed my course greatly enriched and armed with a very large typescript which had been painstakingly produced from reams of my handwritten notes by my sister, Mrs. Pauline Cullen. As always, I am most grateful to Pauline for her usual care and support. Only when I had the whole typescript on my desk did it occur to me that I was now in a position to present Corsini’s work to an English-speaking public. Too few of us devote sufficient time and attention to Italian and Spanish biblical scholarship, as we are so fascinated by the Germans and (to a lesser extent) by the French. After initial contacts with the publishers and Prof. Corsini, I found that I still had a mammoth task ahead of me: the further “translation” of my schematic, edited and hurriedly written lecture notes into a faithful rendition of Prof. Corsini’s book. At this stage I had the good fortune to obtain the assistance of Sr. Mary Philip, R.S.M., of the Convent of Mary of Mercy, Ballarat East, Victoria. A person of considerable experience and literary talent in her own right, she devoted herself to the thankless task of correcting my already-corrected version of my sister’s typescript! I am sure that there are still difficult passages and turns of phrase that reflect an Italian original, but Sister Mary Philip’s enthusiastic yet exacting contribution to this project makes Prof. Corsini, myself and future readers her debtors.

The major part of the translation which follows is a fairly close rendition of the original. The main feature of the editing process has been an attempt to show a greater economy of words than is sometimes possible in Italian, but necessary in English.

It is not for me to indicate the contents of this extraordinary book. The reader must discover that, and I am afraid that a “spot check” of interesting passages will do less than justice to the work. It gains momentum and increases in its credibility as the overall argument unfolds. Corsini would argue that the Apocalypse itself works in the same way! I would like simply to indicate that there were two aspects of the work which I found most helpful.

a) It explains a great number of internal difficulties which the Apocalypse has always presented: structure, unity, coherent argument, its use of the Old Testament, symbols and symbolic language, and even some difficult textual problems (see his treatment of Apoc 5:7; 13:8 and 20:10). Most recent commentators would probably claim that they have also done this. Corsini has explained all the difficulties of the Apocalypse by detaching them from the eschatological interpretation that is so common, and gathering them all around a single argument: the perennial revelation of Jesus Christ.

b) Despite the many recent attempts to provide a commentary which shows that John was a pastor, I have always been left wondering if we can rightly call the Apocalypse a Christian document. Is it really Christian to ask a suffering Church to live in the hope that in the end all will be well? What of the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth which the rest of the New Testament authors believe has already created a newness and a fulness of life? Corsini attempts to show that the Apocalypse is a profound meditation upon the Old Testament testimony to the Cross and Resurrection as the fulfillment of Jesus’ messiah, and that the new Jerusalem, the new heavens and the new earth are not a description of how things will be at the end of time, but a portrait of the present reality of the Church, “freed from our sins by his blood, . . . a kingdom of priests to his God and Father” (Apoc 1:5–6). If his attempt is successful, then he has restored the Apocalypse to an important place in Christian literature.

There are two practical matters which must be mentioned at this stage. The reader will notice that I have inserted sections of the text of the Apocalypse immediately before the reflections upon them. Any system which enables the
reader to have the text continually before him is useful, but I have also followed this practice because it was part of the design of the original Italian work. The English version of this book, however, loses one of the great achievements of the original: Eugenio Corsini's translation of the Greek text. I have simply followed the Revised Standard Version throughout, except where the commentary forced a different version in 4:9-10; 5:7; 6:8; 13:8 and 20:10. In those places I have made my own translation. Finally, this is not a full-scale commentary upon the Apocalypse, despite its length. It is rather a biblical-theological meditation based on an assiduous use of the text itself, in an attempt to catch the mind of an inspired author whom we shall, for the sake of clarity and simplicity, continue to call “John.”

This translation has been done so that scholarship may eventually come to a decision on the interpretation which follows. I do hope that my work, fitted into the breathing spaces allowed by a very active ministry, makes that decision possible for a wider group of scholars. I have already mentioned the contribution made to this translation by Sister Mary Philip, R.S.M. I would like to conclude this preface by sharing a reflection which she sent to me as she finished her final instalment: “This interpretation reveals that the Apocalypse is really a summing up of the biblical writings - a kind of triumphal climax. I Tim 1:9 (in the Jerusalem Bible translation) strikes me as a summary of all that John is saying:

‘God has saved us and called us to be holy - not because of anything we ourselves have done, but for his own purpose and by his own grace. This grace has already been granted to us, in Christ Jesus, before the beginning of time.'”

Francis J. Moloney, S.D.B.  
Salesian Theological College  
Oakleigh  
Victoria 3166  
Easter Sunday, 1982.

INTRODUCTION

The work which follows is not intended to be a commentary upon the Apocalypse. There have been many such commentaries, reaching back into the earliest times of the Christian era. Some, especially during the Middle Ages, have been quite spectacular in their ingenuity. Our modern era has seen a series of fine commentaries, applying all the criteria of a historical-philological analysis to this difficult book. Outstanding examples of this approach have been the commentaries of Bousset, Zahn, Charles, Allo and Lohmeyer. Quite frankly, I believe that it would be presumptuous to think that I could do better than they have already done. What I have attempted to do here is to provide a continuous reading of the text, trying to show, especially through the links which can be made with the Old Testament tradition, the coherent and unified argument of the whole work. I will insist upon the unity of the structure and theology of the Apocalypse as it stands. The reader will find that, despite my admiration for and debt to the older commentaries, I have introduced something quite new to the interpretation of the Apocalypse. It appears to me that the work is certainly about the coming of Jesus Christ, but not his coming at the end of time. The “coming” which stands at the centre of the argument of the Apocalypse has been going on through the whole of history, beginning with...