

**THE CHURCH AND SPIRIT IN THE SEVEN LETTERS OF
REVELATION (2-3)
(resume)**

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Resume:

This paper aims to analyze from an exegetical point of view the seven letters addressed by the Savior of the churches of Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea (Rev 2-3). This analysis is done through the direct recourse to the Greek text of the New Testament, to which is added the specialized literature: dictionaries, commentaries and lexicons. Short epistles placed in an epistle-book (Revelation), these seven messages are independent units of text. Each one has a stable rhetorical structure and provides the recipient with precise theological notions, formulated with the help of comprehensive verbs and very suggestive metaphors.

Everything opens with preliminary notions related to the object, argument and methodology of the research. *The object* of the research is the etymological and hermeneutic investigation of the text of each letter, in a complete analysis, without leaving any detail on the outside. *The argument* of the thesis is given by the neglect of the exegesis on the Apocalypse in the Romanian theological environment, which produced an imbalance in terms of biblical studies (some books received special attention, while others were ignored). *The methodology and purpose* of the paper refer to both the synchronous method and the diachronic method of the texts. After observing the details of the context (geographical, historical, religious, social), each letter will be divided into unitary ideational fragments, naturally following the epistolary rhetoric. The ultimate goal is to explore the universal teachings that flow from these messages that the Savior transmits to those communities.

This paper consists of three main parts, each followed by a conclusion. These parts are: "*isagogy*", *the commentary and theology* of the seven letters, between them there is a certain coherence and progression. Isagogy aims to introduce us to the context of the seven localities, respectively churches; the commentary reveals the immediate meanings of the texts themselves, and theology learns the lessons that the primary recipients are called to learn. The letters are the loving proof of a divine pedagogy, from every detail observing the pastoral care that the Savior has for His Church.

I. THE „ISAGOGY” OF THE SEVEN LETTERS

The first part of the thesis consists of three chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter includes elements of contextualization: general information about Asia Minor and historiographical, cultural and spiritual details. The seven cities were true metropolitan centers in the configuration of the Roman Empire, localities with a special impact from a socio-economic point of view. The historical events that determined the formation of the province are extremely important, especially due to the succession of empires of which they were part or with which they entered into a certain type of relationship. The cultural specificity was determined by the development of these settlements over the centuries, each of them following its own path. The spiritual profile of the region and of each city highlights the religiosity of these populations, including through the unique attachment to the imperial cult.

The second chapter deals with the geography, history and religion of the seven cities. *Ephesus*, nicknamed the "City of Change", was in a privileged position from a geopolitical and cultural point of view. It had a unique political importance in the configuration of imperial power, with promising economic and social elements for the world at the time. The local cult of the goddess Artemis along with that of the emperor represent extremely strong

devotions in the region, which did not prevent the penetration of early Christianity through St. Paul and which was then continued by St. John. *Smyrna*, nicknamed the "Paradise of Vanity", arrived early in the area of interest of the Roman Empire (second century BC), developing architecturally and scientifically (notably the local medical school). In an overwhelming idolatrous context, Christianity enters this city probably through the service of St. Paul (before even Ephesus), after which it will be visited by St. John. *Pergamum*, nicknamed "Athens of Asia", is the seat of the Roman administration and one of the most promising urban centers.

Although it had a tumultuous history (with many subjugations and shortcomings), the town managed to develop both culturally (becoming a space of scholarship) and economically. Paul is probably also the founder of the church during his mission to Troy (Acts 20: 6). *Thyatira*, nicknamed the "White Castle", was not one of the most privileged cities in terms of natural resources. However, its inhabitants showed a special tenacity, developing guilds of craftsmen, educational institutions and intelligent social policies. Under the sign of Apollo and Artemis, however, the city was also linked to Rome through imperial worship and other economic ties. *Sardis*, nicknamed "Caesar's City", is a city that has gone through successive seismic cataclysms, but each time being helped by Rome. Consequently, it means a certain dependence on the empire and a permanent concern to enter into the graces of the Caesars (whatever they may be). Although we have a considerable presence in the city, the cosmopolitan spirit is especially noticeable in terms of idolatry and hedonism. Prosperous and libertine, this city is also under the sign of the apostolic work (even if we do not know details). *Philadelphia*, nicknamed "Little Athens," was a city full of pagan temples and altars, a space where syncretism and hedonism were highly valued. Affected by multiple earthquakes, the city cultivated a close, even servile, relationship with Rome. Hence the prominence of the imperial cult, associated with the economic prominence of the city. Although the genesis of the local church is shrouded in mystery, it is most likely under the sign of the apostolate of St. Paul. *Laodicea*, nicknamed the "City of Zeus", was a city located in a strategic position, with multiple openings to the world. On the other hand, the fortress was often hit by earthquakes and other calamities, but each time it rose and prospered. With the economic progress, the spiritual and moral crisis of its inhabitants deepened, and this decadence seems to have affected, irreversibly, the community of faith.

The third chapter of this first part identifies what we might call: *similarities, congruences, and particularities*. These can be seen in the political, economic and religious spheres of those cities. The projects, activities and devotion of those populations were

determined by common interests, but also by legitimate competition. Because of this, in some respects the cities resembled each other, in others they were diametrically opposed. All in all, however, we notice quite a lot of congruences between them, but also a certain local prestige very well highlighted.

II. THE COMMENTARY OF THE SEVEN LETTERS

The actual exegesis of the letters uses the synchronous method, but also the diachronic one. The two interpretive techniques are used in a complementary way, especially considering the complexity of the seven messages. Although they make up only two chapters of the book of Revelation, this collection of texts calls for hermeneutics in a special way. The rhetoric of each letter, the relationships they establish between it (as a unitary corpus) and other details related to gender and style, all this creates a high degree of difficulty.

For this reason, the introductory part uses - necessarily - a framing of the letters in the larger corpus of the book. This is followed by the identification of the key elements of each message: the description of the situation, the encouragement put together with the rebuke and the call to repentance. Under these auspices, though in different details, the seven messages convey the Savior's thoughts and plans for communities of faith. The actual content of the letters is flanked (as between two covers) by the two formulas: introductory ("they say") and concluding ("he who has ears to hear what the Spirit says to the churches").

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The exegesis of each letter reveals elements common to the rest of Scripture, but also new notions, which we find only here. Note the common core of themes promoted in the law,

prophets, psalms, the speeches of Jesus and the Holy Apostles (repentance, improvement, love, etc.). It is present - in different proportions - in the seven messages, always applied to specific ecclesial situations. There are many similarities between the calls of the Old Testament prophets and those of the churches in Asia Minor. As there are particular applications of the Savior, those recommendations that are directly based on the given situations of those communities.

The letter to Ephesus is one of the most appreciative, associating with this church impressive virtues: deeds, toil, patience, intransigence, vigilance, etc. All these are described by the Savior in a cordial and motivating language, but also here the major shortcoming of the community is inserted: the loss of the first love. This slippage had to be directed by a return to the first deeds, to the initial state in which they all shone with light and soul. The final promise makes an arc over the scriptural revelation, uniting the last book of the Bible with the first, through that reference to Eden / Heaven which reopens, so that the conqueror has access to the tree of life. Although not the longest of the letters, it introduces most of the concepts that will be repeated in the others and proves an impressive ideational density.

The letter to Smyrna is the shortest and respects, in miniature, the style of the previous one. Unlike the others, the message is astonishing in its concreteness, especially in the mention of "Satan's synagogue" and the prophecy about the imprisonment of certain believers. Because of these details, the letter is rather a message of encouragement, a warning about the persecution that is about to break out in that area. The crowning promised to the victors, however, ends the message apothetically, sending to the divine rewards with which God honors those who do not compromise.

The letter to Pergamum is rich in dogmatic and apologetic content. These details are introduced by several mentions of the text: the throne of Satan, the days of Antipas, the Nicolaitans, the teaching of Balaam, and the like. They indirectly describe the challenges of this church, the double front of battle: from the outside (persecution) and from the inside (compromise). The call to repentance is also present, as a definitive remedy for any slip, just as punishment is just as plausible in the case of non-compliance. The reward is also in line with the trials, if we think only of the white pebble and which bears the new name of the winner.

The letter to Thyatira is the longest of all, although it is sent to a smaller locality and probably to a smaller church. A certain spiritual evolution of this community is appreciated, a considerable multiplication of good deeds. On the other hand, the church was torn by the heresy and immorality generated by Isabella - a woman (probably by this name) who acted in

the spirit of the evil Old Testament character. The divine sentence is also in line with the slippage, the Savior calling the church to vigilance and devotion. However, some have not known the "depths of Satan," and they are only required to keep the treasure of the faith intact until the return of Christ. The final promise also sends to the idea of authority and pastorate, a prerogative that the Savior himself will share with the victor.

The letter to Sardis is, from the beginning, a call to revitalize the spiritual life. The church had a good name, but in reality, it was filled with apathy and decay. Consequently, Christ announces an unexpected intervention for the purpose of judging this community (here we have the language used by the Savior in his discourses on Parousie). However, there is a minority of uncompromising believers who keep both the garment of the soul white and who will partake of the bright white garments of the Kingdom of God.

The letter to Philadelphia is addressed to a church that has "little power" - as the text states - but has extraordinary opportunities from Christ. The community stood out for its faithfulness to the teachings of Christ, but also to its Christian mission. He does not receive a word of rebuke, but on the contrary he receives encouragement and promises from the Savior: adversaries will bow before the faithful, and - in the "hour of temptation" - who will try the whole world, those in Philadelphia will be kept unharmed. Note the Jewish imprint of the introduction ("David's key") and the conclusion ("the temple"; "the city"; "the new Jerusalem").

The letter to Laodicea is the most caustic of all, without any positive remarks or appreciation from the Savior. Here we have an unsightly register of epithets applied to a community of faith. She was in a state of wickedness, she was worthy of weeping, in poverty, blindness and spiritual emptiness. But it seems that to no church does the Savior recommend a panoply of solutions as he does here: for the eyes (ointment), for the body (clothing) and for life (gold). These metaphors - extremely present in the collective mind - fully cover all the needs of this community in a deplorable situation. Noteworthy is the insistence with which Christ knocks at the door of this church, His desire to enter and have communion with the faithful. The final promise is also paradoxical, after noticing the contents of the letter. The conqueror is promised the enthronement of Christ, a dignity that surpasses in grandeur all other promises.

The detailed analysis of the seven letters highlights their Christological character. Their tone and content emphasize, in every detail, the sovereignty of Christ addressing the churches from the position of supreme King. For this reason, it is right to consider that their structure follows the pattern of imperial edicts, official and operative documents of the

highest level in the first century. so that they can be easily read and reread in faith communities.

III. THE THEOLOGY OF THE SEVEN LETTERS

The whole theology of the letters (and, implicitly, of the Revelation) is deeply doxological. The notions of christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology are formulated either by the sovereign utterance of Christ or by words of praise to God. The whole textual approach leads to the heavenly liturgy, which has in its center the throne of God, a configuration that becomes, through the centrality of the bishop, a prototype of the earthly liturgy. All these images, accompanied by the divine sentences, are sovereignly coordinated by the glorified Christ who - first of all - spoke to the Seven Churches through letters. Eschatological events thus revolve around the Church of Christ, the only divine-human institution that transcends history. Faithful bearer of the message of Christ, the Church bears witness on the scale of each generation, pointing to an exemplary outcome, in which all will return to their original state.

There are at least three comprehensive theological notions in the text of the letters: the first is related to the person and work of Christ, the second to the unique sacredness of the Church, and the third to the fascinating testimony that the believer bears in the world. These are found - in different proportions and details - in all seven letters, without exception. We can, therefore, speak of a solid theological structure that supports the seven messages. Each offers the chance of an exegetical-dogmatic encounter between Christ and His Church, a welcoming setting in which the Lord of the Church leads his disciples.

The first chapter of this part deals with *the eschatological image of Christ*. The central character of the whole Scripture, Jesus Christ acquires unique accents in the last book. We notice, especially throughout the New Testament, an exponential development of the image of Christ, from His exemplary humanity (from the Holy Gospels) to His divinity manifested by the royal prerogatives of Revelation. The letters highlight this last image through the variety and depth of the Christological titles strategically placed in the opening of each one. Each metaphor used highlights an attribute of Christ, and all together paint a true picture of His person. A possible synthesis would be: Ephesus - the sovereign Christ; Smyrna - the eternal Christ; Pergamum - the victorious Christ; Thyatira - Christ the glorious; Sardis - Christ the omniscient; Philadelphia - the righteous Christ; Laodicea - The faithful Christ. All these titles taken together describe the identity of Christ, His relationship with the Church and the universal-eschatological work. To these are added pastoral and prophetic elements that are

found in the actual content of each letter and are expressed through appreciation, recommendation and prediction. These three components are found in two of the seven letters (Ephesus, Thyatira), and the others having two as follows: Smyrna, Sardis, Laodicea - recommendation and prediction; Pergamum - appreciation and recommendation; Philadelphia - appreciation and prediction.

The second chapter refers to *the holiness of the Church - the dynamic aspect*. The ecclesiology of the Apocalypse is determined by its Christology. Just as Christ is the Conqueror of the devil (and implicitly of the Beast, the Dragon, and the False Prophet), so the Church is victorious over all the forces of evil. Armed with the three components of the Christian life - repentance, faith and forgiveness - the Church remains standing in the most dramatic clashes. She has challenges from the outside (idolatry) and from within (heresy), being constantly exposed to compromise and abdication. His testimony is always put to the test, as is clear from most of the details in the letters. With the exception of the Church in Philadelphia, all six communities are rebuked for a particular offense: Ephesus - indifference; Myrrh - despair; Pergamum - syncretism; Thyatira - permissiveness; Sardis - infantilism; Laodicea - decay. The challenges facing the seven churches are providentially complemented by the promises made at the end of each letter. The eschatological destiny of the Church is represented by seven triumphant hypostases: the reiteration of Eden (Ephesus), the defeat of death (Smyrna), the new identity (Pergamum), the supreme authority (Thyatira), eternal recognition (Sardis), heavenly citizenship (Philadelphia) and Christendom (Laodicea). These rewards are offered by Christ himself, the Lord of the Church, in the form of loving rewards. Individual and community holiness is quantified by Christ who, on the one hand, protects and blesses the Church in the present time and, on the other hand, prepares for her an eternal and great destiny.

The third chapter treats *the martyrdom as missionary dynamism*. The book of Revelation is crossed by a red thread of suffering that most often affects the followers of Christ. The phenomenon of martyrdom thus becomes a constant of the Church since the first century, and the letters are no exception in the approach to the subject. Although the word μάρτυς appears in only two of them - Pergamum and Laodicea - references to the notion of confession and martyrdom exist in all of them. Ephesus suffered (βαστάζω) because of Christ, Smyrna had blasphemy (βλασφημία), Pergamum did not deny (ἀρνέομαι) the name of God in the midst of persecution, Thyatira must keep everything she has (πλὴν ὃ ἔχετε κρατήσατε), Sardis did not stain (ἐμόλυναν) his clothes by cowardice, Philadelphia kept (τηρέω) the Word of God in all situations. Deprivations or persecutions that sometimes led to martyrdom

cultivated a sacrificial attitude in the minds of early Christian communities. Any form of suffering was considered participation in the Savior's passions, an identification of the believer with his Lord. We have here a well-measured resistance of the faith communities, an offensive built on the principle of the love of the enemy and the hope that even the most terrible adversary can be conquered for the Kingdom of God. The exhortations in the letters maintain this state of mind and always call for vigilance in the face of compromise but also for maximum sacrifice (even supreme) in this spiritual endeavor.