

# Book reveals true nature of 'The Apocalypse'

*The Apocalypse: Understanding the Book of Revelation and the End of the World*, by George T. Montague, S.M.; Servant Publications (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1992); 246 pages; \$8.95.

By E. Leo McMannus  
Guest contributor

For a book of the Bible that is at once confusing and enlightening, mysterious and revelatory, inviting and tantalizing, this is a good, popular, and inexpensive commentary.

The Apocalypse, the "uncovering," as the Greeks called this final book of the New Testament, or the Book of Revelation, the "unveiling, pulling back of the curtain," as the Latins called it, is part of "oral literature," itself an oxymoron for the blending of strange and discordant elements.

It is a puzzling one. Even the great Jerome — who translated the Bible into Latin — questioned for a time whether Revelation belonged among the inspired books.

But the book was accepted into the canon, and it has played a great role over the centuries in Christian living, and in art and literature — from the magnificent *Paradise Lost* by John Milton to the screeds by intolerant polemicists. Some of its dramatic figures, such as the whore of Babylon, perfidious Rome, and the beast with the mark of 666, have been staples of historic anti-Catholicism.

Many of Revelation's details remain unclear and uncertain because it belongs to the genre of visionary literature of the prophets, those who speak for God. Despite the intimations of its subtitle, therefore, Father Montague's commentary will not satisfy the curiosity of those who would upset actuarial tables by putting a date on the end of the world.

There is no uncertainty, however, about Revelation's ultimate message,



An angel sounds the second trumpet as a burning mountain is cast into the sea (Rev. 8, 8) in this detail from the 14th Century 'Angers Tapestry.'

that in Jesus Christ all things are made new; that in him there is a new creation; and that "by holding fast to him, we already possess the end and the victory," as Father Montague writes.

By contrast to Revelation's "newness" theme, how pallid is that sought so energetically by modern political figures. Recall Roosevelt's New Deal, Kennedy's New Frontier, Nixon's New Federalism, Bush's New World Order, and now Gov. Clinton's New Covenant.

Apart from its vivid imagery, much of which recalls that of earlier books of the Bible, Revelation is a book in which the symbol prevails, wherein the inner meaning is fitted to the visible sign.

For Christians, who have borrowed freely from Jewish and classical traditions their emphasis upon symbols, everything in creation is a symbol of divine truths. Accordingly, everything reveals symbolic meaning: geometrical figures, for example, colors, fruits,

flowers, stones and gems, trees, animals, music, birds, fish, insects, water and streams, and numbers. (Incidentally, even the symbolism in Biblical chronology is the subject of a recent book by Elmira's Father Joseph Egan, a brilliant lecturer at the former St. Bernard's Seminary, and a student of the

arcane.)

Father Montague begins his commentary with a helpful introduction that acknowledges Revelation's complexity as well as its beauty. "The first step in accurate and balanced interpretation is to try to discover what the human author meant for the audience for which he wrote." Lest pure fancy take over and we become our own allegorists and symbolists in interpreting the myriad details, he points out that the church is there as a safeguard.

After the introduction, his book is divided into three parts. Part One, Setting the Stage, consists of three units; Part Two, The Unfolding Drama, features six units; and Part Three, The Grand Finale, offers two units.

Each unit provides the text of Revelation for consideration, a clear commentary, a one-paragraph meditation, five-to-seven review questions, and a short prayer.

An index would enhance its value, and the inclusion of all works cited in his text would complete the bibliography at the end. For a book already so good, however, that is a cavil. Enjoy.

McMannus, a professor emeritus of English, lives in Venice, Fla.

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