

Apocalypse 21

The New Heaven and New Earth

1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband;

3 and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them;

4 he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away."

5 And he who sat upon the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true."

6 And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the fountain of the water of life without payment.

7 He who conquers shall have this heritage, and I will be his God and he shall be my son.

8 But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death."

9 Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues, and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb."

10 And in the Spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, 11 having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.

12 It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed;

13 on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates.

14 And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

15 And he who talked to me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls.

16 The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its breadth; and he measured the city with his rod, twelve thousand stadia; its length and breadth and height are equal.

17 He also measured its wall, a hundred and forty-four cubits by a man's measure, that is, an angel's.

18 The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass.

19 The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every jewel; the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald,

20 the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst.

21 And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass.

22 And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.

23 And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.

24 By its light shall the nations walk; and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it,

25 and its gates shall never be shut by day -- and there shall be no night there;

26 they shall bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.

27 But nothing unclean shall enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Commentary on Apocalypse 21

What Will Heaven be Like?

Chapters 20-22 is the Seventh Drama of the Apocalypse. Here is where all the loose ends are tied together. Each of the previous Six Dramas (Ch 1-3; Ch 4-6; Ch 7-9; Ch 10-11; Ch 12-14; Ch 15-19) gave us details of the events stemming from the First to Second Coming of Christ, each from their unique perspective. The Seventh Drama, Apocalypse 20-22, does the same from its unique perspective.

As we read Apocalypse 21-22, we might be tempted to think that it is somewhat anticlimactic. After all, since the previous chapters give so many details of Satan's attack upon the world, we might expect John to give as many details about the New Heaven and New Earth. The diligent Bible reader, after having read all the details of the terrible judgments of

the preceding chapters, has probably been waiting for the point in this intriguing narrative that he finally discovers what life will be like in heaven. Wouldn't knowing what heaven has in store for us be an extra incentive to get there? Does it really have pearly gates and golden streets? Will we be able to see God as he is? What will our new bodies be like? What precisely will we be doing for eternity? Unfortunately, these and many other questions are not answered for us. In fact, most of the language in Apocalypse 21-22 is highly symbolic, and only a few small non-symbolic details of the constitution of the new universe are given to us.

Although in one sense this lack of information may be disappointing, in another sense we can logically surmise that the new universe will be so glorious, so far above our imagination, that it would simply be impossible to describe in human words. As the old saying goes, 'this is something you have to see to believe.' In this case, we already believe it, but we need to see it because words cannot describe it. Words might actually detract from the new universe's full splendor, not only because our human language is so limited in its scope, but because our words are tied to what we have experienced on earth. For example, we often use the word "spirit" or "angel" in our everyday speech, but what, precisely, are they? Can one draw a spirit? Can one picture an angel? It's impossible for our minds to do so because spirits and angels are immaterial entities, and we don't have the power to visualize or conceive of something that does not have physical substance.

We also have little conception of how our new spiritual bodies will be constituted. We know only what St. Paul revealed to us in 1Co 15:37-44, that is, our spiritual body will be vastly different in glory from our present body, but we don't know exactly what that means. We can surmise that, if it resembles the body we have presently, and at least has some physical substance to it, the new universe must be built to accommodate our physical necessities, and thus there will be some physicality to the new universe, although we are not quite sure of the nature of that physicality. We know Jesus is presently in heaven with a body, for he did not stop being human when he went back to heaven. He will be divine and human for the rest of eternity (That in itself shows us what a great sacrifice he made for us). Thus, for all the symbolism John gives us in Apocalypse 21-22, we know intuitively that the symbolism is tied to physical and spiritual realities in the new universe, but the precise connections are very sketchy.

Concepts from the Fathers and the Saints

Although Scripture does not contain very many details that explain what life will be like in the New Heaven and New Earth, some of the Fathers and saints of the Catholic Church have offered us suggestions based on what we already know from revelation and life itself. This

information is especially abundant in the writings of **St. Augustine** and **St. Thomas Aquinas**. As Augustine once said: “While the truth, which you are, was present, we were wondering what the future, eternal life of the saints would be like.”¹ Or, “That which is first and that which is last is this: to begin in faith, to end in vision.”² The “vision” about which Augustine speaks refers to the new universe that the elect will see with their very own eyes. The time of believing without seeing will be over.

Unfortunately, due to the theological speculation often required in such ventures, these two great doctors of the Church sometimes had different views. On the one hand, Augustine was more apt to see the afterlife as an extension of the life we have on earth, although certainly with a perfection that we would expect in the eternal state. For example, Augustine had little problem believing that we would eat and drink in the afterlife, if not for any other reason but the sheer enjoyment of doing it, even if such consumption contributed nothing to sustain our existence. He writes: “The body in the future resurrection would have imperfect happiness if it were not able to take food, but imperfect happiness if it needed food.”³ Thomas, on the other hand, was more austere in his approach. He dismissed such physical appetites as superfluous because they would serve no real function.⁴ Thomas believed that most, if not all, of our time in heaven would be spent in direct contemplation of God, whereas Augustine, although never dismissing the contemplative dimension, held that we will live and experience the new universe in all its beauty and functionality. In Thomas’ view, the physicality of the new universe is quite limited, while Augustine believed that most of the things we experience in the physical realm at the present time will be much more enhanced in the afterlife. Other Fathers and saints, of course, had their own views, but they came somewhere between the spectrum created by Augustine and Aquinas, as is usually the case in Catholic thought.

As we elaborate on the contrasts, we find that Aquinas believed the new universe would not contain any “animals, plants or minerals.” He insists that these will serve no function. He writes:

¹ *Confessions*, Bk. 9, Ch. 10.

² *Enchiridion*, I, 5.

³ *Sermons*, 255, 7. In another place he says: “They will not eat unless they wish, since they will have the capacity not the necessity” (*City of God*, Bk. 13, Ch. 22). In Augustine’s favor is the fact that Adam and Eve ate from the trees in the Garden of Eden before their fall, and thus when they were considered immortal.

⁴ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk. 4, Ch. 83.

The material universe cannot remain in existence without its essential parts. But the essential parts of the universe are the heavenly bodies and the elements, for the entire world machine is made up of them. Other bodies do not, apparently, pertain to the integrity of the material universe, but contribute rather to its adornment and beauty. They befit its changeable state in the sense that, with a heavenly body acting as efficient cause, and with the elements as material causes, animals and plants and minerals are brought into being. But in the state of final consummation another kind of adornment will be given to the elements, in keeping with their condition of incorruption. In that state, accordingly, there will remain men, elements, and heavenly bodies, but not animals or plants or minerals.⁵

It is not clear, however, why Thomas insists on allowing the “heavenly bodies” to overcome corruption if he believes that other material things cannot be incorrupt. Perhaps it was due to his penchant for Aristotelian philosophy, which held that the heavenly bodies were incorruptible, while earth and its elements were corrupt. In any case, Thomas’ view prevailed in the medieval period. In Augustine’s age, the view was different. **St. Jerome**, in his interpretation of Is 65:17 and Rm 8:19, believed that the new universe would be a perfected renovation of the present universe.⁶ At the same time, however, Jerome allegorized many such texts and thus there was not a lot of detail to what he understood about the physicality of the afterlife. **St. John Chrysostom** believed in the same type of renovation, and seems to include all material things in it. He writes:

It will no longer be corruptible, but will follow after the beauty of your body. As you were rendered corruptible, it too was made corruptible. Thus when you are made incorruptible, it too will follow.⁷

Augustine led the way in developing these ideas. As we noted, he believed in an elaborate and vast universe that would be created as such

⁵ Aquinas’ *Compendium of Theology*, trans. C. Vollert, St. Louis, Herder Book Co. 1955, p. 170.

⁶ *Commentary on Isaiah*, xviii, 17-18; ix, 26

⁷ *Epistle to the Romans*, xiv.

for the sheer sake of its beauty. It would be one in which the individual could move about and experience the wonder of it all. He writes:

If, therefore, of all those members which are exposed to our view, there is certainly not one in which beauty is sacrificed to utility, while there are some which serve no purpose but only beauty, I think it can readily be concluded that in the creation of the human body comeliness was more regarded than necessity. In truth, necessity is a transitory thing; and the time is coming when we shall enjoy one another's beauty without any lust, a condition which will specially redound to the praise of the Creator, who, as it is said in the psalm, has "put on praise and comeliness."

All the members and organs of the incorruptible body, which now we see to be suited to various necessary uses, shall contribute to the praises of God; for in that life necessity shall have no place, but full, certain, secure, everlasting felicity. For all those parts of the bodily harmony, which are distributed through the whole body, within and without, and of which I have just been saying that they at present elude our observation, shall then be discerned; and, along with the other great and marvelous discoveries which shall then kindle rational minds in praise of the great Artificer, there shall be the enjoyment of a beauty which appeals to, the reason. What power of movement such bodies shall possess, I have not the audacity rashly to define, as I have not the ability to conceive. Nevertheless I will say that in any case, both in motion and at rest, they shall be, as in their appearance, seemly; for into that state nothing which is unseemly shall be admitted. One thing is certain, the body shall forthwith be wherever the spirit wills, and the spirit shall will nothing which is unbecoming either to the spirit or to the body.⁸

This view of the new universe carried well into the middle ages. For example, in the seventh century, **Julian of Toledo** held that "the world, having been renewed for the better, will be suitably accommodated

⁸ *City of God*, Bk. 22, Chs. 24, 30.

to humans who will also have been renewed for the better in the flesh.”⁹ **Peter Damian**, in the tenth century, stated that

The heavenly paradise will be a blessed and glorious region, full of pleasure and of the glory of pleasantness and joy, grace and kindness There is rest from labor, pleasure arising from what is new, and eternal security.¹⁰

In the same century, **Arnold of Bonneval** enhanced the concept of paradise as a land of utter enchantment in which humans would be moved to ecstasy by the mere smell of a flower or the touch of its petals.¹¹ **Rupert of Deutz** believed that

In heaven...our soul alone will feed on the happy vision of the Divinity; our body...if it wishes, will eat from every beautiful and pleasant tree, not out of any necessity, but simply for the sake of the great and ineffable pleasure.¹²

Augustine also believed that our bodies would be exceptionally beautiful and well manicured. He writes in another work:

And this earthly material, which when the soul leaves it becomes a corpse, shall not at the resurrection be so restored as that the parts into which it is separated, and which under various forms and appearances become parts of other things (though they shall all return to the same body from which they were separated), must necessarily return to the same parts of the body in which they were originally situated. For otherwise, to suppose that the hair recovers all that our frequent clippings and shavings have taken away from it, and the nails all that we have so often pared off, presents to the imagination such a picture of ugliness and deformity, as to make the resurrection of the body all but incredible. But just as if a statue of some soluble metal were either melted by fire, or broken into dust, or reduced to a shapeless mass, and a sculptor wished to restore it from the same quantity of metal, it

⁹ *Prognostikon*, Bk. ii, ch. 46.

¹⁰ Sermon 59, PL 144, 838.

¹¹ *De Operibus Sex Dierum*, PL 189, 1535-1538.

¹² *De Sancta Trinitate et Operibus Eius*, Bk. 2, 26.

would make no difference to the completeness of the work what part of the statue any given particle of the material was put into, as long as the restored statue contained all the material of the original one; so God, the Artificer of marvelous and unspeakable power, shall with marvelous and unspeakable rapidity restore our body, using up the whole material of which it originally consisted. Nor will it affect the completeness of its restoration whether hairs return to hairs, and nails to nails, or whether the part of these that had perished be changed into flesh, and called to take its place in another part of the body, the great Artist taking careful heed that nothing shall be unbecoming or out of place.¹³

He adds that no one need worry that he will carry deformities, obesity or any other physical malady into the afterlife:

Shall He not be able to remove and abolish all deformities of the human body, whether common ones or rare and monstrous, which, though in keeping with this miserable life, are yet not to be thought of in connection with that future blessedness; and shall He not be able so to remove them that, while the natural but unseemly blemishes are put an end to, the natural substance shall suffer no diminution? And consequently overgrown and emaciated persons need not fear that they shall be in heaven of such a figure as they would not be even in this world if they could help it. For all bodily beauty consists in the proportion of the parts, together with a certain agreeableness of color. Where there is no proportion, the eye is offended, either because there is something wanting, or too small, or too large. And thus there shall be no deformity resulting from want of proportion in that state in which all that is wrong is corrected, and all that is defective supplied from resources the Creator wants, and all that is excessive removed without destroying the integrity of the substance.¹⁴

¹³ *Enchiridion*, Ch. 89.

¹⁴ *City of God*, Bk 22, Ch. 19.

Augustine believed that our restored bodies would be perfectly suited to our needs and, in appearance, akin to the youthful age we once had on earth.

...He promised that, not a hair of their head should perish. It remains, therefore, that we conclude that every man shall receive his own size which he had in youth, though he died an old man, or which he would have had, supposing he died before his prime... or if we are to refer it to the resurrection of the body, the meaning is that all shall rise neither beyond nor under youth, but in that vigor and age to which we know that Christ had arrived. For even the world's wisest men have fixed the bloom of youth at about the age of thirty; and when this period has been passed, the man begins to decline towards the defective and duller period of old age.¹⁵

Augustine also believed that the male and female genders will be preserved in the afterlife:

...some conclude that women shall not rise women, but that all shall be men, because God made man only of earth, and woman of the man. For my part, they seem to be wiser who make no doubt that both sexes shall rise, for there shall be no lust, which is now the cause of confusion....

And later in the same chapter he says, while there will be no marriage in the new universe, males and females will populate it and enjoy each other's company:

And though it was a fit opportunity for his saying, she about whom you make inquiries shall herself be a man, and not a woman, he said nothing of the kind; but "In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven." They shall be equal to the angels in immortality and happiness, not in flesh, nor in resurrection, which the angels did not need, because they could not die. The Lord then denied that there would be in the resurrection, not women, but marriages; and he uttered this denial in circumstances in which the question mooted would have been more easily

¹⁵ *City of God*, Bk. 22, Ch. 15.

and speedily solved by denying that the female sex would exist, if this had in truth been foreknown by him.¹⁶

Augustine also taught that we will be endowed with the gift of not being able to sin, just as God is not able to sin.

Neither are we to suppose that because sin shall have no power to delight them, free will must be withdrawn. It will, on the contrary, be all the more truly free, because set free from delight in sinning to take unfailing delight in not sinning. For the first freedom of will which man received when he was created upright consisted in an ability not to sin, but also in an ability to sin; whereas this last freedom of will shall be superior, inasmuch as it shall not be able to sin. This, indeed, shall not be a natural ability, but the gift of God. For it is one thing to be God, another thing to be a partaker of God. God by nature cannot sin, but the partaker of God receives this inability from God. And in this divine gift there was to be observed this gradation, that man should first receive a free will by which he was able not to sin, and at last a free will by which he was not able to sin, the former being adapted to the acquiring of merit, the latter to the enjoying of the reward.¹⁷

Aquinas adds that our abilities in the new universe will be superior to the old earth by the mere fact that the soul will have complete mastery over the body. Referring to St. Paul's words in 1Co 15:44 concerning the contrast between the "spiritual body" and the "natural body," Thomas remarks:

...the dominion of the glorified soul over the body, by reason of which the glorious body is said to be spiritual, complete subject as it were to the spirit....Just as by the gift of subtlety the body is completely subject to the soul...so by the gift of agility it is subject to the soul as its mover so that it is prompt and suited to obey the spirit in all the movements and actions of the soul.¹⁸

¹⁶ *City of God*, Bk. 22, Ch. 17.

¹⁷ *City of God*, Bk. 22, Ch 30.

¹⁸ *Supplementum*, q. 83, a. 1; q. 84, a. 1.

If that is the case, we would expect that this power will translate into our having the ability to do astounding feats with a mere thought, much like Jesus was able to do with the power of his spirit over his body (e.g., walk on water, walk through walls, transport over vast distances), or as even some of the Catholic saints experienced in their spiritual ecstasies (e.g., bilocation, levitation, vast knowledge). These kinds of abilities will be commonplace and distributed to all the citizens of the New Jerusalem, each with their varying levels of performance. As **Thomas** said: “their vision might be refreshed by the beauty of creatures in their diversity since in those creatures the wisdom of God will shine forth in an eminent way.”¹⁹ Thomas believed the same degrees applied to the Beatific Vision. He writes:

Therefore it is possible that one who sees God sees him more perfectly than another, even though each sees his substance....Some people are greater in virtue, some less, and virtue is the road to happiness. Thus it is necessary that there be diversity in the vision of God, that some see the divine substance more perfectly, others less perfectly.²⁰

Regarding mobility and our increased perception, **Augustine** writes: “For we should believe that we will have bodies that we will be in any place where and when we want.”²¹ He then adds:

As we do not believe, but see that the living men around us who are exercising vital functions are alive, though we cannot see their life without their bodies, but see it most distinctly by means of their bodies, so, wherever we shall look with those spiritual eyes of our future bodies, we shall then, too, by means of bodily substances behold God, though a spirit, ruling all things. Either, therefore, the eyes shall possess some quality similar to that of the mind, by which they may be able to discern spiritual things, and among these God (a supposition for which it is difficult or even impossible to find any support in Scripture), or, which is more easy to comprehend, God will be so known by us, and shall be so much before us, that we shall see

¹⁹ *Supplementum*, q. 84, a. 2.

²⁰ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, iii, q. 58.

²¹ *Sermons*, 242 a (147), 5: PL 38, 1140.

Him by the spirit in ourselves, in one another, in Himself, in the new heavens and the new earth, in every created thing which shall then exist; and also by the body we shall see Him in every body which the keen vision of the eye of the spiritual body shall reach.²²

The saints will travel through the universe with the express purpose of seeing the spectacular beauty and infinite intelligence of God, and for visiting other saints to further their personal relationships. There will be no hidden agendas, no ulterior motives, and no whispers in secret. As the 12th century theologian **Honorius of Autun** understood it:

O what pleasure sight will have! The saints will discern the King of glory in his beauty; they will behold all the angels and saints, the glory of God, the glory of the angels, the patriarchs, the prophets, the apostles, the martyrs, the confessors, the virgins....They will look into their eyes and see their faces...and discern their very thoughts. They will contemplate all the things that exist in the New Heaven and New Earth.²³

Or as **Cyprian of Carthage** described it:

What a great joy it is both for them and for us together to come into their sight and embrace! What pleasure there will be in the heavenly kingdom without the fear of dying, and what a great and perpetual happiness with an eternity for living!²⁴

And **Augustine** adds:

You will all know everyone. Those who are there will not be known because you will see their faces. In the life to come there will exist mutual recognition because of greater awareness...When they are filled with God, they will see in a divine way. There will not exist anything that offends nor anything that hides knowledge.²⁵

²² *City of God*, Bk. 22, Ch. 29.

²³ *Elucidarium*, Bk. iii, PL 172, 1172.

²⁴ *On Mortality*, 26.

²⁵ *Sermons*, 243, 6.

St. Bernard elaborates with these beautiful words:

Brethren, we will enjoy God in that eternal and perfect beatitude in a threefold way: seeing him in all creatures, having him in our very selves, and, what is ineffably more pleasant and blessed than these two things, knowing the Blessed Trinity in itself and contemplating that glory with the clean eye of the heart and without any obscurity.²⁶

The spirit and the body will be so perfect and so totally integrated with one another that nothing will be impossible, except evil. As the 20th century abbot **Anscar Vonier** put it:

Nothing prevents our visualizing the mighty host of the elect human race as developing untold powers of activity with a freedom of will and resourcefulness of genius unknown to the sons of Adam while they dwell on this planet; their liberty – shall we say their initiative – will be heightened to an unknown power; and may we not think of them as doing things truly worthy of a race of giants for the glory of God and his Christ?²⁷

Regarding work in the new universe, **Vonier** writes:

Eternal rest is the unchanging contemplation of the beauties of God, not somnolency [sleeping] of the spirit. It is the joy of work, the exhilaration of eternal freshness of mind; it is work without fatigue, because it is the creature's best portion busy with the most perfect object; it is the fixity of the created mind on the uncreated Truth.²⁸

This concept of work echoes the thoughts of **Arnold of Bonneval** we cited earlier. He writes:

Humans would work, not building something new with laborious effort but illuminating or shading something

²⁶ *In Festivitate Omnium Sanctorum, Sermo 4, Opera Omnia*, vol. v. p. 357.

²⁷ *The Life of the World to Come*, p. 128.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 110-111.

with delightful cultivation....Without tedium, without bother would man the cultivator be able to work diligently.²⁹

And, with very fitting words, **Augustine** closes with:

God himself will be the end of all our desires; he will be seen without end; he will be loved without satiety; he will be praised without tiring.³⁰

The Narrative Structure of the Apocalypse

As noted previously, the Apocalypse is not unlike other literary masterpieces written by human authors. In fact, it is said that famous authors (such as Shakespeare) modeled their plays and novels from the narrative structure they saw in Scripture. As we noted earlier in Apocalypse 17-18, almost all plays and movies have a distinct pattern of dramatic movement:

- **Setting and Characters**
- **Rising Action**
- **Conflict**
- **Climax**
- **Aftermath**
- **Resolution**

Similar to the plays and movies created by human authors, biblical narratives also contain protagonists, antagonists, plots and subplots. Human-authored fairy tales (which are, in reality, attempts to copy Scripture's plots and literary format), begin and end with the six-step plot noted above, and usually end with a prince and princess getting married and "living happily ever after." The story ends abruptly and we are not given any more information as to their life in the "ever after." We are to assume that the bliss of married life continues forever. This same theme, recurring over and over again in children's stories and fairy tales, is modeled after the Apocalypse and other biblical narratives. The last two chapters of the Apocalypse show visions of a bride adorned for her princely husband, who then go off together to live in a diamond and gold studded castle, where they live, as it were, "happily ever after." No more

²⁹ *De Operibus Sex Dierum*, PL 189, 1535-1536.

³⁰ *City of God*, Bk 32, Ch. 30.

details are given to us concerning their blissful married life. It is understood that they are in peace and contentment surrounded by each other's undying love, forever and ever. Except for a few details here and there, this is precisely the way John's vision ends the Apocalypse, and this is all we really need to know. We will, indeed, live "happily ever after" with Christ in the New Heaven and New Earth. No evil stepmothers, no big bad wolves, no poison apples to bother us any longer.

There is a danger, however, in the comparison we have just made between the fairy tales composed by human authors and the narratives of Sacred Scripture. Although we have been careful to stipulate that human authors have composed their stories by modeling the narratives of Sacred Scripture, there are many "biblical scholars" today who reverse this relationship. They claim that God did not inspire Scripture's historical narratives, and that the human authors of Scripture often copied from the stories and fairy tales of the pagan peoples surrounding them. Thus, in their estimation, there is no more truth to Scripture's narratives than there is to the myths and legends we often find in various cultures of the world. This is an egregious error and it has been repeatedly condemned by the magisterium of the Catholic Church, yet it still persists in many universities and seminaries.

In any case, we need to understand that the symbolism in the remaining words of the Apocalypse is not designed to give us many details of the afterlife, or what the essence of life will be like in the new universe. The last two chapters are given to us primarily to complete the theology of the Apocalypse. It is a theology of victory, beauty, bliss and perfection. John's words will center on those four elements in order. Since what God has planned for the new universe is presently beyond our comprehension, John will give us a few word pictures so as to leave us with at least some lasting impression of what lays in store for us, but he will severely limit his information so as to make us yearn that much more to discover for ourselves what is really there. That, of course, can only happen if we are found worthy to enter the "pearly gates."

In Ap 21:1, John sees a New Heaven and New Earth appear before him while the first heaven and earth "passed away," which is the same word that appears in Mt 5:18 when Jesus says: "For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth **pass away**, not an iota, not a dot, will **pass** from the law until all is accomplished." Apocalypse 21 is the time that "all is accomplished." This was also prophesied in the Old Testament. Isaiah 65:17-18 says:

17 **"For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth;** and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind. 18 But be glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy.

Is 66:22 adds:

For as the new heavens and the new earth which I will make shall remain before me, says the Lord; so shall your descendants and your name remain.

The New Testament has one other reference that gives us details as to how the first heaven and earth will “pass away.” 2Pt 3:10-13 states:

10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up. 11 Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, 12 waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be kindled and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire! 13 But according to his promise **we wait for new heavens and a new earth** in which righteousness dwells.

St. Paul gave us some other details regarding this future change in Rm 8:20-23:

20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; 21 because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

We learn from these passages that there are two phases to the new universe:

- the old universe will be destroyed by fire. Out of the remaining elements God will refashion the new universe, and/or he will create new elements for the new universe, at least in part.
- our bodies and souls will have the same essence or identity, but they will be fashioned or recreated into a constitution that is incorruptible.

Our future bodies, although similar to Adam's body in appearance, will be superior to his body. Our new body will be even better than the body that Adam himself would have attained had he passed the test in the Garden of Eden (Rm 5:15-19). His body was made for the first heaven and first earth such that it could deteriorate and die if he sinned. Our bodies will be made for the New Heaven and New Earth and thus will be incorruptible, since there will be no sin or death in the new universe. Hence, the two universes are sufficiently different as to require different bodily constitutions, as St. Paul explains in 1Co 15:42-54:

42 So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. 43 It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. 44 It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. 45 Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. 46 But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual. 47 The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. 48 As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. 49 Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. 50 I tell you this, brethren: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 51 Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. 53 For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. 54 When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory."

No More Sea

In Ap 21:1, John also says that "the sea was no more." Here John gives us a peek, as it were, into the constitution of the new universe. Since the "New Heaven and New Earth" is not symbolic but is a certain reality to come in the future, John must give us at least a few literal details to help develop the picture. He does this because there is a major transition

between the first heaven and first earth as contrasted to the second heaven and second earth. A temporary digression into more literal language is needed in order to make the transition.

Nevertheless, whatever is the scientific reason that the seas will no longer be required, John tells it to us because he is giving a clue that the new universe will be constituted quite differently than the old universe. In other words, John's revealing that "the sea was no more" is his way of allowing the part to stand for the whole, (viz., synecdoche), that is, the entire new universe will be dramatically different than the old universe. Unfortunately, we get only a fleeting glimpse of this dramatic change, for immediately after giving this information John goes back to his more symbolic descriptions.

In Ap 21:2, John sees the "New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven...as a bride adorned for her husband." He then describes this event as "the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them." This is a description of the Church Triumphant who, up until this time, had been separated from the Church Militant that was on earth. The Church Triumphant was spoken of numerous times in the New Testament, often with special reference to "the heavenly Jerusalem," such as Gl 4:26: "But that Jerusalem which is above is free: which is our mother," or Hb 11:16: "But now they desire a better, that is to say, a heavenly country. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city," and Hb 12:22-23:

22 But you are come to mount Sion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to the company of many thousands of angels, 23 And to the church of the firstborn who are written in the heavens, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the just made perfect.

It is now the time when God's heaven will be joined with the heaven and earth of men, and they will be one. This joining is, as it were, the spiritual consummation that takes place in the marriage of the Lamb with his bride. We had a foretaste of the coming down of heaven and its dwelling with men on earth in the sacrament of the Eucharist, but now this union is in full splendor with nothing hidden and no more dependence on mere theological words to describe the incomprehensible. We now see it in front of our very eyes, and John is our first witness to its reality.

No More Crying

In Ap 21:4, John gives us some symbolic and emotive word pictures of the dispositions and sentiments in the new universe. Twice in this verse John speaks about the human emotion of "crying" ceasing altogether (e.g., "will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall

be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more”). Not only will crying cease, but John describes the cessation in the most intimate way, as a father or mother wiping away the tears of a child and consoling him with their love. We saw the same description in the Third Drama of the Apocalypse in Ap 7:17: “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes,” which again reminds us that the Seven Dramas are speaking about the same things and events. From this we learn that the new universe is filled not just with external beauty but with affective sensitivity and comfort. No matter what changes occur, we will still be human beings, with human needs of love and affection. But our new physical and spiritual constitution, along with God’s constant love, will satisfy every desire and aspiration we have. This is where the beatitudes of Matthew 5 meet their ultimate fulfillment:

- **Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**
- **Blessed are the meek: for they will possess the land.**
- **Blessed are they that mourn: for they will be comforted.**
- **Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after justice: for they will have their fill.**
- **Blessed are the merciful: for they will obtain mercy.**
- **Blessed are the clean of heart: they will see God.**
- **Blessed are the peacemakers: for they will be called the children of God.**
- **Blessed are they that suffer persecution for justice’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**
- **Blessed are you when they will revile you, and persecute you, and speak all that is evil against you, untruly, for my sake: Be glad and rejoice for your reward is very great in heaven.**

The Signature of Jesus

In Ap 21:5-6, John is told to write the words of Jesus, and Jesus says: “Behold, I make all things new...It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.” John is told to “write” because this is, as it were, Jesus’ official signature to the entire revelation of the Apocalypse. He is putting his name and reputation on the dotted line, as it were. The Holy Spirit inspired the New Testament in the Greek language, and thus Jesus signs his name in Greek, for “Alpha” and “Omega” are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, respectively. It is like an oath signed in blood. It is similar to when St. Paul speaks of God not being able to swear by anyone greater, so he swore to himself (Hb 6:13: “For when

God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself.”).

Of course, since the new universe has not yet been created, only promised, we must still strive to get there. Thus, as we have seen many times in the Apocalypse, John issues warnings also. Ap 21:7-8 tell us, in no uncertain terms, there will be a division among human beings. Some will inherit heaven, and some will go to the second death (hell). As usual, Scripture places all the blame for those who go to hell on the people themselves. God only completes what they have already accomplished on their own. They were not predestined to hell; they were not compelled to sin and turn away from God. They did it of their own free will, and God is merely giving them what they have sought for all their lives – to be separated from God and holy living.

Those who inherit heaven will be given “beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the.” This passage, of course, echoes those in Jn 4:10, 14; 7:37-38; cf. Is 12:3; 55:1. Again, this is purely symbolic language; word pictures to give us an impression of the relief and joy awaiting us for the suffering and pain we experienced on earth. The imagery created is of a thirsty man in a lonely desert (symbolic of the first earth) who comes upon an oasis run by a friendly steward. Not only does the steward give him a drink to quench his thirst and ease his suffering, he gives it to him free of charge and in full abundance, whenever he wants it. Never again will he have pain from thirst. These word pictures are really all we need. Our imagination can do the rest to describe what the new universe will be like, provided that we center it on Jesus Christ.

The Bride of Christ

In Ap 21:9, the angel who had the seven last plagues (see Ap 17:1) will now show John a detailed and intricate view of the Bride who was said to be descending from heaven (Ap 21:2). Whereas previously John viewed the Bride from ground level, the angel now brings John to a high mountain so he can view it from a more horizontal perspective. As such, he will be able to see the side of the city and its walls, which he then aptly describes in the following verses.

Once again, John resorts to vivid and beautiful word pictures to create an impression in our minds of what, in essence, is incomprehensible for us. John uses precious gems and metals to describe these things. We can compare this to putting a white light through a prism and seeing the seven brilliant and beautiful colors that make it up (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet). The beauty of the new universe compared to the old universe will be like the seven colors of the rainbow compared to plain white light. Although white light may have its own beauty, few will argue that the seven colors that constitute white light are not exceedingly more beautiful. Yet still, we don't know the essence of light itself, just as

we don't know the essence of the new universe. We know the universe is much more grandiose and beautiful than the old universe as the seven colors of the rainbow are to white light, but John is at a loss to tell us the essence of either. In fact, we could say that the essence of the new universe (and more so God himself), is something we will be discovering and marveling over for the rest of eternity. It is not something that can be described in word pictures, except to describe it partially by utilizing the most beautiful and pure materials we know on this present earth (gems and precious metals) to give us at least some feeling of how splendid the new universe will be.

In Ap 21:11, John begins his description of the Bride, the holy city, as it descends from heaven. First, we are not to think of this city in its cubical dimensions as a city that is placed on the new earth. The description of the Bride, the people of God, as a "holy city" is merely the best earthly aid that can be employed to give us a sense of the majesty and purity of the Church Triumphant. As St. Paul himself could not describe in human words what he saw when he went up to the Third Heaven (2Co 12:2-4: "caught up to the third heaven...into Paradise – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows – and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter."), so John is limited in his scope as well. God and his people will totally fill whatever the new universe's dimensions will be. The cube presented here is just a symbolic picture of it.

The first clue to the meaning of its symbolism is the number 12 featured throughout the description. In fact, whereas a literal city could only have one foundation, this city has 12 foundations (Ap 21:14). Moreover, this city is 12,000 stadia high, but literal cities are not measured by their height, only their length and width. Thus, we know that symbolism is being employed here.

As we noted previously, Ap 21:12-22:2 give us the symbolic use of the number 12. See following diagram:

1	12 Gates
2	12 Angels
3	12 Tribes
4	12 Foundations
5	12 Apostles
6	12,000 Stadia Length
7	12,000 Stadia Height
8	12,000 Stadia Width
9	12 × 12 Cubit Wall
10	12 Gems
11	12 Pearls
12	12 Fruits

Obviously, it is hard to miss the stress on the number 12. We have 12 sets of 12 items, and some of the sets are repetitive in order to reach the number 12.

Our first introduction to the number 12 was seen in Ap 4:4; 5:8; 11:16; 19:4 with the 24 elders (12 × 2). We also saw in Ap 7:5-8 the 12 tribes of Israel (symbolic of the Church). We also saw the 12 stars around the head of the Woman of Apocalypse 12. In each case the number 12 represents the totality of all God's people, and thus it is fitting that the Bride, which also represents God's people, is signified by the number 12 in Apocalypse 21. This symbolic number is the culmination of God's predestination plan. As St. Paul says in 2Tm 2:19: "But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his." Or as Jesus says in Jn 6:37: "All that the Father gives me will come to me; and him who comes to me I will not cast out" or as Jn 10:27-28 says: "27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; 28 and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand." John sums this theological point up for us in Ap 21:27: "But nothing unclean shall enter it, nor any one who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life."

The New Jerusalem

In Ap 21:11, John sees the New Jerusalem in brilliant light, reflecting and gleaming like a huge fine-cut diamond. Prior to this, Ap 4:3 had included the carnelian stone with the diamond. This was due to the fact that the carnelian, being deep red in color, represented the atonement of Christ for our sin. But that phase of God's program is over, and thus Ap 21:11 eliminates the carnelian from the construction of the city. It is not the case, however, that Christ's atonement will not be remembered, but only that its full effects are accomplished and enjoyed by the Bride. Christ will be forever remembered, even by the nail prints in his hands, for his sacrificial work, yet the metaphors are often interchanged in order to represent the various phases of its accomplishment. In one sense, the citizens of heaven wear "white robes" (cf. Ap 6:11; 7:9, 13, 14), but previously they "washed their robes in the **blood**³¹ of the Lamb" (Ap

³¹ In Ap 22:14, the Vulgate text according to *Novum Testamentum Latine* (editor: E. Nestle, Württembergische Bibelanstalt Stuttgart, 1906, 1952), followed by the Douay-Rheims, adds "in sanguine Agni" ("in the blood of the Lamb") to the phrase "washed their robes," apparently seeking to continue the metaphor of Ap 7:14, but no Greek manuscript of Ap 22:14 contains the phrase "in the blood of the Lamb," although it is clearly evident in Ap 7:14 without any textual variants. Nestle notes that one version of the Latin codex, Amiatinus, omits "in the blood of the Lamb" (*ibid.*, pp. ix, 657), apparently seeking to conform to the Greek text, and which is followed by the 1899 Douay-Rheims. Another variant of Ap 22:14 is

7:14), which literally would make them red but metaphorically keeps them white. Here, the Bride, having previously washed her walls in the blood of the Lamb, is now gleaming with the brilliance of a finely-cut diamond.

The New Jerusalem has walls, but these walls are not fortified barriers with no means of entrance. This is not a replica of a fortified city protecting itself; rather, these walls have three gates on each side. Although the wall contains the city, the gates allow entrance into the city. And since John is writing the Apocalypse in the first century, there are still many of God's people who need to enter those gates. In Ap 21:26 we read of a thoroughfare occurring in and out of the walls of the city, and thus it is these gates that act as the medium for it. As Ap 21:12 says, the "the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed," which names we discovered in the "144,000" of Apocalypse 7 and 14, are the names of all God's elect, from the Old Testament and the New Testament. These redeemed from both Testaments are the ones who will enter the gates. This is the fulfillment of Mt 8:11: "I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." (Incidentally, from Ap 21:21 we see that these gates are made of pearls, and thus this is where we derive the common expression "the pearly gates").

On the other hand, the "the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars" (Ap 21:8) will not be allowed through the gates. Thus Mt 8:12 is also fulfilled: "while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." This is precisely why there are "twelve angels" (Ap 21:12) guarding the twelve gates. They control who goes in and out. Thus John says in Ap 22:14: "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates." Just as the cherubim with the flaming sword was placed at the gate of the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve sinned (Gn 3:24), so it is here. He guarded the Tree of Life, and it is no coincidence that John reintroduces the same Tree of Life in Ap 22:2, 14.

The fact that the New Jerusalem is presented as a cube (12,000 × 12,000 × 12,000) probably has some connection to the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle (1Kg 6:20), although, as we have noted earlier, the Apocalypse often decides to make indirect allusions to these Old Testament objects and events for its own purposes. This is especially true when we consider that only the High Priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, and then only once per year. As such, the New Jerusalem is in

the absence of "and they washed their robes," which is replaced by "they that do his commandments" (KJV), which was created by the presence of ποιουντες τας εντολας σουτου in the Majority Text, as opposed to πλυνοντες τας στολας αυτων in Codices **Σ** and **A**.

contrast to the Holy of Holies, since it allows all the people of God through its gates. The contrast is noted in Hb 9:7-8,11-12, 24:

7 but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood which he offers for himself and for the errors of the people. 8 By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary is not yet opened as long as the outer tent is still standing. 11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) 12 he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. 24 For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

In any case, objects that are equal dimensions around their perimeters are commonly understood as objects of perfection. The circle is one such example. The cube would be another. The New Jerusalem is the perfection of all the ages of God's communion with man, and it will remain that way for eternity. It will never lessen. It will only become greater as we become intimately closer, eon after eon, to the infinite God whose depths can never be exhausted.

The perfect materials used in the construction of the New Jerusalem then enhance the cube's representation of perfection. Ap 21:18 speaks of the walls being made of diamond (i.e., jasper stone) and the city made of pure gold. This is the finest gem and the finest metal. There is no iron, no aluminum, and even no silver. Only the finest products are chosen to signify that God has made this heavenly city as perfect as it could be. The number 12 displays this perfection, once again, as 12 of the finest gems make up each of the 12 foundation stones:

Jasper (diamond)
Sapphire
Agate
Emerald
Onyx
Carnelian (Ruby)
Chrysolite
Beryl
Topaz
Chrysoprase

Jacinth
Amethyst

A few of these gems are simply unknown today. Some hold that the gems refer back to the breastplate of the high priest (Ex 28:17: carnelian, topaz, emerald; carbuncle, sapphire, jasper; ligurius, agate, amethyst; chrysolite, onyx, beryl), but not all of the gems from the breastplate match those in the New Jerusalem. Some think that the 12 gems are characteristic of the 12 apostles, yet no firm identification has been made. It is most likely that the 12 gems are to be understood as a whole unit but not to be identified with any particular biblical image, other than pointing to a perfection of beauty so dazzling that it boggles the mind. We are not only awestruck by the variety and brilliance of the beauty before us, but the size of these gems and metals staggers the mind even more. These gems are not little stones in a small display case; rather, they are the very materials that constitute the building and the streets of the city! John's vision is trying to make the deepest impression it can upon us. He toys with our imagination, yet even our imagination fails to conceive of just what God has in store for us. These word pictures can only give us an impression but at the same time a dire yearning, since we know that the new universe will be even greater than the beauty of gems, for the gems are only symbolic of the perfection we will experience.

In Ap 21:22, John sees that the city has no temple, for God himself is the temple. The contrast is for the purpose of teaching us that we are one with God, and God is one with us in the most intimate way possible for the divine and the human to coexist. God will so change our bodies and souls that they will be able to commune with him as he is, whatever he is. Moses could only look at the back part of God as he swiftly moved by; otherwise he would have died on the spot. But Moses had a mortal body (cf. Ex 33:17-23). The image portrayed by Ap 21:22 is what Catholic theology understands as the "Beatific Vision." It is not a vision in the sense that we are continually awestruck staring at God, but that we are totally enveloped in the essence of God. Whatever senses we have or however they will be enhanced, each of them will experience God to the fullest, and it will continue to increase for eternity. We might call it the "**Beatific Experience.**"³²

³² There is a question whether our absorption of the knowledge of God will be immediate or progressive. In one place, Aquinas held that "it is necessary that the intellect that sees the divine substance contemplate all things not in succession but simultaneously" (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, iii, ques. 60). In the same passage Aquinas quotes Augustine from *De Trinitate* xv, 16 for support of simultaneous absorption, but his translation is defective since it eliminates Augustine's conditional words "perhaps" and "if." Aquinas seems to relax this position, however, when he speaks of the angels learning from other angels (*Summa Theologica* I, 106, 2, ad 1). Similarly, Augustine advanced the concept of

As he did in Ap 21:1 when he told us there were no seas, John once again slips in a few physical descriptions. Hence, because of the total envelopment of God in the new universe, there is no need for the sun or moon to give light. This is another hint that the new universe, whatever it is, will be dramatically different than our present universe.

In Ap 21:24, the “nations” are said to walk in this divine light, and the “kings of the earth” will bring glory into it. In the Apocalypse, the “nations” represent the peoples of the world. In some contexts they are depicted as evil (Ap 13:7); in other passages they receive the Gospel (Ap 14:6); and in other passages they are a select group who have been redeemed (Ap 5:9; 7:9). Here in Ap 21:24, 26, of course, the “nations” represent those who have been redeemed from the earth. Similarly, the “kings of the earth,” although they are generally in the camp of Satan (Ap 17:12; 18:3; 19:19), also have a representation in the Christian kingdom (Ap 1:5). That these kings will bring “glory” into the New Jerusalem is the symbolic way of saying that the people who were redeemed from the earth will now be the citizens of eternal kingdom (Ap 7:1-17).

“morning” and “evening” knowledge among the angels (*The Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, 12, 4, 23), which distinction Aquinas then applied to a person’s Beatific Vision of God (*Summa Theologica* I, q. 58, a. 7, ad 3), strongly implying that there is a progression of knowledge in eternity.