

Billot – I

December 21, 2013

For years I have been giving a conference on the Seven Ages of the Church, based on the Venerable Bartholomew Holzhauser's Commentary on the book of the Apocalypse. Holzhauser, a German priest of the first half of the 1600's, said that he wrote it under inspiration. The conference has been popular, especially because it fits the craziness of our age into a harmonious pattern of the history of the Church. What I had not realized, however, is that Holzhauser's vision is shared by a famous classical theologian, making it more difficult to dismiss Holzhauser as a mere visionary or "apparitionist."

It is in an Epilogue to the first volume of his classic *Treatise on the Church of Christ* that Cardinal Louis Billot (1846–1931) lays out in some detail the correspondence affirmed by Holzhauser between seven main periods of Church history and the seven Letters to the seven churches of Asia that make up Chapters II and III of the book of the Apocalypse. Billot's Epilogue never mentions Holzhauser, but it is difficult to imagine that there is no connection. However, Billot takes care to start out the correspondence not from any vision or inspiration, but from the Greek names of the seven churches. The suitability of these names to the Church's evolving history is either a remarkable coincidence, or more likely a trace of Providence at work – God, the Master of History!

Thus Billot says that Ephesus (Apoc. II, 1–7) signifies in Greek a "starting out," obviously suitable to the Apostolic Age (33–70 AD) with which the Church began. Smyrna (Apoc. II, 8–11) names the second church and means "myrrh," corresponding to the passion and sufferings of the Church's Second Age (70–313 AD), that of the Martyrs. Pergamus (Apoc. II, 12–17) was a city famous for literature, so that "pergamum" came to mean material on which to write, corresponding to the cluster

of great Church writers belonging to the Church's Third Age, that of the Doctors (313–800). Thyatira names the next church (Apoc. II, 18–29), and means "splendour of triumph," corresponding to the 1,000-year triumph of the Catholic Church, reaching from Charlemagne (742–814) to the French Revolution (1789).

These thousand years might also be reckoned from around the conversion of Clovis (496) to the outbreak of Protestantism (1517). But whether one marks the decline of Christendom from the Reformation or the Revolution, in any case Sardis, naming the fifth church (Apoc. III, 1–6), was the city of Croesus, a fabulously rich man, evoking an abundance of money, material prosperity and spiritual decadence, such as characterize modern times. Indeed the warnings to the church of Sardis correspond perfectly to our own age today, as we shall see with Billot in further "Comments."

We move clearly into the future with the sixth church, that of Philadelphia (Apoc. III, 7–13), meaning "love" (Phil-) of "brotherhood" (-adelphia). Cardinal Billot has this name correspond to a last great triumph of the Church, marked notably by the conversion of the Jews as prophesied by St Paul (Rom. XI, 12), and by their reconciliation with the Gentiles, brothers at last in Christ (Eph. II, 14–16).

But the church of Philadelphia is warned that tribulation is coming (Apoc. III, 10), which corresponds to the seventh and last Age of the Church, that of Laodicea (Apoc. III, 14–22), named from judgment (dike) of the peoples (laon). It will be the Age of the last and most terrible trial of the Church, the persecution of the Antichrist, followed by the General Judgment of all souls that will ever have lived, and so of all peoples.

Kyrie eleison.