

November 21, 2020

The Two Witnesses

Pope Pius XI instituted the Solemnity of Christ the King in 1925. In the wake of the First World War, and as the storms were beginning to gather for the conflicts that would ultimately lead to the Second World War Pope Pius entered this day into the Liturgical calendar. It was with the rise of nationalism in Europe and all the unbelievable bloodshed and warfare that took place as a result of making the nation-state the highest moral authority, the highest power, that the Pope wanted to remind the people of Europe, and of the world, that at the end of the day Christ alone is the supreme king of the universe and that he is above every earthly authority, every earthly nation, and every earthly ruler.

So it is appropriate that on the eve of this Solemnity that concludes the Liturgical Year, we heard verses from Revelation 11. You may have wondered as it was read, “What in the world does this mean?”

Let me explain it to you.

The first thing to understand about the language here is that it is figurative. St. John is painting a word picture to represent for his readers what is going on in the world, this side of the Second Coming of Jesus – known as the period of tribulation.

The two witnesses are referred to as the two olive trees and two lamp stands. This is taken from one of the Old Testament Books most like Revelation, Zechariah This prophetic writing is also filled with figurative language. The Olive Trees represent the Word of the Lord that is proclaimed to the world from a position of apparent weakness. In Zechariah 4:6 we find these words that are like an inscription associated with the olive trees.

Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts.

The lampstands represent how the Church from a position of seeming weakness radiates the light of Christ into this dark world. The witnesses have been interpreted as representing the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament finding their fulfillment in Christ. They are also understood as representing the twofold mission of the Church to be a royal and priestly witness to the gospel as we read in Revelation 5:10

***and have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on earth.”¹***

The witnesses are then represented as calling the world to God but there is great resistance and so judgment results from the rejection of the Gospel. Again think back to Pope Pius XI instituting the Feast in 1925. He wanted to call the world to the true king – but his call was

¹ [*The Holy Bible*](#). (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Re 5:10). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

ignored. The apocalyptic language of verses 5-6 was realized in ways the world had never before witnessed between - 1939-45:

And if anyone wants to harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes; anyone who wants to harm them must be killed in this manner. ⁶ They have authority to shut the sky, so that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have authority over the waters to turn them into blood, and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire.²

Again, remember this is figurative language that is stressing that if the witness of the Church is unheeded great tribulation will fall upon the world. In response to the tribulation the forces opposed to the Church will intensify their attack. It will appear that the Beast and those gathered with him will be victorious and rid the world of the witnesses. Subsequent to the witnesses' martyrdom in the City of Jerusalem, symbolic here for the world opposed to God – for it was there that Jesus was crucified – they will have a great celebration:

¹⁰ and the inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and celebrate and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to the inhabitants of the earth.³

However this celebratory gathering is suddenly interrupted:

But after the three and a half days, the breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and those who saw them were terrified. ¹² Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up here!" And they went up to heaven in a cloud while their enemies watched them.

The breath of life, refers to the quickening work of the Holy Spirit resurrecting the witnesses. The voice from heaven is one heard repeatedly in Revelation and affirms the authority of God. Clouds in Revelation and other Biblical books are symbolic of the reign of God and his victory.

A passage like this is meant to encourage us to remain faithful and never lose this biblical perspective on the world in which we are living in the faith of our current tribulation, the plague COVID19. Let's affirm the Reign of Christ as we remain centred in him looking forward to that day when in life to come we will be like the angels as we await the New Heaven and the New Earth and glorious resurrected bodies.

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Re 11:5–6). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

³ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Re 11:10). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.