

A window into heaven

Homily for November 18, 2020

An Explanation of the Imagery

4:4 twenty-four elders: Represent the saints, who are dressed like priests (in white) and kings (with crowns). Their number symbolizes the 24 priestly rotations that David established to minister in the Temple (1 Chron 24:1–31). In Jewish tradition, the heads of the 24 divisions were called “elders”. Some see the elders representing the fullness of the royal priestly people of God: the 12 tribes of the sons of Israel (saints of the OT) plus the 12 apostles of Christ (saints of the NT), as in the vision of 21:12–14.¹

Traditional exegesis connects the four living creatures with the four evangelists. Matthew is the *man* whose Gospel begins with the human genealogy of Jesus; Mark is the roaring *lion* whose Gospel begins with the voice crying out in the wilderness; Luke is the sacrificial *ox* whose Gospel begins in the Temple; and John is the soaring *eagle* whose Gospel begins with the highest mystery of Jesus’ divinity (e.g., St. Jerome, *Against Jovinianus* 1, 26). ● The living creatures also refer to the whole Church. Her courage is seen in the lion, her sacrificial service in the ox, her humility in the man, and her sublimity in the flying eagle (St. Bede, *Explanation of the Apocalypse* 4, 6).²

Holy, holy, holy: The *Sanctus* as chanted in the heavenly liturgy. The hymn resembles the song of the Seraphim in Is 6:3, where the threefold repetition of “holy” is a Hebrew way of saying that Yahweh is the holiest of all (superlative degree).³

And one called to another and said:
“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”⁴

Human language can scarcely describe the reality of heaven. The images John uses here—a sparkling throne, an emerald-like halo encircling it, flashes of lightning and peals of thunder—give us some idea of heaven’s glory and majesty (Revelation 4:2-5). The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel had a similar vision of heaven (see chapters 1 and 10). But in the end, no one can really describe the Lord God almighty and his dwelling place. It is something that we one day hope to experience, but until then, we can only live in faith, trusting that we will be filled with joy when we finally see God our Father face-to-face.

¹ [The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament](#). (2010). (p. 498). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

² [The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament](#). (2010). (p. 499). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

³ [The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament](#). (2010). (p. 499). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

⁴ [The Holy Bible](#). (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Is 6:3). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

That's what's so amazing about the Eucharist. At every Mass, ordinary bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ, right before our eyes. When the priest raises the Host and Chalice at the consecration, the bread and wine don't look outwardly different. But Jesus is present in them, Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. God is really with us in all his majesty and glory—and in his mercy, he has provided us a way to see him, touch him, and even consume him.

In John's vision, whenever the four living creatures give glory, honor, and thanks to God, the twenty-four elders also fall down before their own thrones to worship him (Revelation 4:9-10). Praise and worship is the only appropriate response to God. It will surely be our response as well when we meet him in heaven.

Isn't it awesome that we don't have to wait until we get to heaven? Every day in prayer, as well as at every Mass we attend, we have the opportunity to give God thanks and praise. We may be sinners, but God is so generous, so gracious and merciful, that he holds nothing back from us. In his great love, he reveals himself to us and allows us to receive him into our own bodies and souls.

So how will you respond? By joining the heavenly choir that is singing even at this moment: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty!" (Revelation 4:8).⁵

⁵ <https://wau.org/meditations/2020/11/18/177176/>