

The Splendor of Creation – The Triumph of the Divine Will on Earth and the Era of Peace in the Writings of the Church Fathers, Doctors and Mystics

by Rev. Joseph Iannuzzi

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The author's main purpose in this book is to convince us that, in the very near future, we will witness a historical and universal 'era of peace', driven by a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as at Pentecost: "As humankind enters the third millennium, it will witness an explosion of mystical gifts, particularly that of 'Living in the Divine Will'. By means of this most powerful gift that elevates man's internal powers to God's continuously eternal activity, all creation will be set free from its former slavery to corruption and glory and enjoy the glorious freedom of the sons of God. This liberating process of man and the cosmos introduces God's sons and daughters to the splendor of creation, where a 'new Pentecost' will assist his creatures to live in harmony and in holiness."(pp. 187-188).

He sets out to persuade us of this attractive prospect by arguing that the 'era of peace' (an expression taken from the Fatima apparitions in 1917, see note 22) has been prophesied by a formidable array of authoritative sources since the early days of the Church, and has been further confirmed and clarified over the last century in the 'approved' writings of a variety of Catholic mystics. He quotes extensively from the writings of these mystics, especially when explaining how the Holy Spirit's work of divinization will bring all men to behave peacefully, during the imminent 'era of peace', through a voluntary and loving adherence to the divine will.

The strength of this book lies in the author's evident desire for the imminent 'era of peace' and his ardent conviction that this 'period of triumphant Christianity' corresponds to Christ's reign of one thousand years prophesied in chapter 20 of the book of Revelation. One hesitates to criticize a book that anticipates such a pleasant and painless interim for the Church and for mankind, but it must be said that the force of the author's conviction should not obscure our vision of the truth and our understanding of reality.

Even though a host of worthy churchmen and women may wish for Christianity to be seen to triumph in this world, and for this triumph to be expressed in an historical and lengthy 'era of peace', one must seriously consider whether their wish truly conforms to reality, or whether it simply reflects a form of ecclesiastical idealism, or wishful thinking, that has become isolated from the 'real world', and especially from the ugly presence of unforgivable or 'eternal' sin (cf. Mk 3,29; Mt 12,32; 1Jn 5,16-17; Heb 6,4-6; 10,26-31; Rev 16,9-11.21). Given that this kind of sin can only be removed from the creation at the final judgment, and also that it is implacably hostile to God's kingdom, it follows that before the final judgment there can be no historical realization, or consummation, of God's kingdom. In the symbolical language of the book of Revelation, this means that the chaining of Satan in the abyss during the 'millennium' does not stop him from exerting his influence through spiritual (angelic) deputies and willing humans. In this way Satan is still able to oppose the Kingdom of God and impede its full realization. This is confirmed by the Catechism when it says "the kingdom will be fulfilled, then, not by a historic triumph of the Church through a progressive ascendancy, but only by God's victory over the final unleashing of evil...God's triumph over the revolt of evil will take the form of the Last Judgement after the final cosmic upheaval of this passing world" (CCC 677b).

So instead of the 'historic triumph of the Church' we should rather expect that "The Church will enter the glory of the kingdom only through this final Passover, when she will follow her Lord in his death and Resurrection" (CCC 677a). The inescapable conclusion is that the long-awaited and greatly desired consummation of God's kingdom will be attainable only through a grueling persecution of the Church followed closely by the final judgment. The author's 'era of peace' is exposed as a pious pipedream, an illusory escape from the hard realities that we should even now be spiritually preparing for. Far from being a miraculous

placebo inducing a global ‘era of peace’ and a ‘historic triumph of the Church’, the new Pentecost (Rev 8:5) is actually granted to the Church to prepare and strengthen her for the last and greatest tribulation she will ever have to face, “her final Passover, when she will follow her Lord in his death and Resurrection” (CCC 677a), a persecution that to all the world will seem like a humiliating defeat.

Related to this general theological objection to the author’s proposal for an imminent, historical ‘era of peace’, is the claim that it represents the millennial rule of Christ with his saints described in chapter 20 of the book of Revelation. Throughout the book, the author takes pains to distinguish his futuristic interpretation of the millennium from the various forms of millennialism that the Church has robustly condemned (chapter 7). Although he does not spell it out, the author’s proposal clearly conforms to the class of interpretations defined as ‘postmillennial’, which is to say that it expects the Second Coming of Christ to occur after a millennial ‘era of peace and triumphant Christianity’.

One great weakness of his work is that he does not deal with the classical objections to this form of interpretation, namely that New Testament writers do not anticipate a millennial age to dawn on earth. As noted recently by a Protestant Scholar, “There is no biblical evidence that the nations as a whole will become Christianized. In fact, just the opposite appears to be the case. After all, we read the great lament of our Lord. “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:8). Indeed the Bible teaches that Christ will judge the nations when he returns because of their unbelief and hostility toward his kingdom (Matt. 25:31-32; Rev. 19:15; 20:11-12). It is hard to attribute this deplorable condition to a brief period of apostasy after Jesus Christ and his saints have ruled over these nations for a thousand years and, according to postmillennial expectations, the nations have become Christianized. Therefore, postmillennial expectations do not fit easily with the New Testament’s emphasis on our Lord’s return to judge the unbelieving world.” (*A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times*, Kim Riddlebarger, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books; Leicester, UK: IVP, 2003, p.237). And again, “But postmillenarians err when they attempt to locate the triumph of the kingdom in the Christianizing of the nations and the economic, cultural, and religious progress associated with an earthly millennium. Christ’s kingdom is not of this world. But one day, John said, the kingdoms of the world will “become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” (Rev. 11:15). That day will come when Jesus Christ returns but not before.” (op.cit. p. 239). Rev. Iannuzzi may be correct in asserting that postmillennial interpretations have not yet been censured by the Church’s Magisterium, but he appears to be blissfully unaware of the fact that they are not consistent with rest of the New Testament.

While arguing against other interpretations of the millennium in chapter seven of his book, the author rather too hastily sweeps aside the traditional amillennialist view, according to which the millennium corresponds to the present Church age: “Not only did the *Amillenarians* disavow belief in the Pre- and Postmillenarians’ literal views of biblical eschatology, they denied and opposed the possibility of the magisterial ‘historic period of triumphant Christianity’. Needless to say, the Magisterium condemned their beliefs due to faulty interpretations of the 20th Chapter of the book of Revelation.” (p.200). This comment is contentious for several reasons: firstly because the Magisterium has never declared itself in favour of a ‘historic period of triumphant Christianity’ as the author claims. On the contrary, the Catechism of the Catholic Church asserts that “...the kingdom will be fulfilled, then, not by a historic triumph of the Church...” (CCC 677) as already seen above. Secondly, it should be observed that the author’s lengthy descriptions of the proposed future ‘era of peace’ are equally applicable to the present Church age (e.g. ‘the first resurrection’, pp. 69-72). In this way, the author goes a long way in recognizing the arguments in favour of the amillennial interpretation. Thirdly, to the best of my knowledge, the Magisterium has never condemned the amillennialist interpretation of Rev. 20, and is never likely to condemn it, because this was the interpretation long ago proposed by St. Augustine (*City of God*, book 20, chs. 7-10) and adopted by the

Church to oppose millennialism. Noteworthy in this regard is the absence of a reference in the endnotes to any document confirming this erroneous assertion.

This last objection raises doubts about the veracity of the author in promoting his 'era of peace'. Regrettably, there are several other instances in this book where the author seems to be drawing false conclusions from his sources. He does this, deliberately it would seem, by selectively quoting from the writings of ancient authors, in order to make them appear to support his postmillennial 'era of peace', even though they do not. In some cases this means hiding dissonant features and, in other cases, inventing consonant features. An example of each will suffice to illustrate this: the first is his 'accommodation' of the writings of Lactantius, and the second is his distortion of the views of St. Augustine.

1. On pp. 49-53 the author presents selected passages from chapters 14 and 24 of the seventh book of *The Divine Institutes* of Lactantius in support of a forthcoming 'era of peace', saying that they provide "what is perhaps the finest exposition on the universal era of peace in early tradition"(p.51). In the same breath, the author assures us that Lactantius is not describing a heretical millenarian 'era of peace', since his expression "*He [Christ] will be engaged among men a thousand years*" is a far cry from the millenarian vision, which teaches that Christ will come visibly and physically to reign on earth within human history"(p.51). However, in chapter 19 of *The Divine Institutes*, book VII, Lactantius clearly speaks about a physical descent of Christ, leading to the defeat of the antichrist and his armies: "For He is the Deliverer, and Judge, and Avenger, and King, and God, whom we call Christ, who before He descends will give this sign: There shall suddenly fall from heaven a sword, that the righteous may know that the leader of the sacred warfare is about to descend, and He shall descend with a company of angels to the middle of the earth...". If there is still some doubt about the physicality of this descent, it is removed in the following passage, where Christ, the king, is represented as being physically present at a certain place: "But other princes also and tyrants who have harassed the world, together with him [the antichrist], *shall be led in chains to the king*; and he shall rebuke them, and reprove them, and upbraid them with their crimes, and condemn them, and consign them to deserved tortures". In the context of this physical description of Christ's descent and presence on earth, the expression about Christ "*engaged among men a thousand years*" must be interpreted physically. Another strongly millenarian feature of 'The Divine Institutes' is the anticipation of the physical resurrection of the righteous at the beginning of this millennium, "Therefore they will not be born again, which is impossible, but they will rise again, and be clothed by God with bodies, and will remember their former life, and all its actions..."(book VII, ch. 23). In summary, Lactantius, in his *Divine Institutes*, is indeed advancing a form of millennialism that was later rejected by the Church, and is called 'historic premillennialism' by modern scholars.

2. When he comes to St. Augustine (p.61-65), the author offers an elaborate argument to explain why we should consider him a leading prophet of the postmillennialist 'era of peace'. Rev. Iannuzzi quotes three passages from book XX of Augustine's *City of God* (chs. 7-8), saying that in each passage Augustine gives a different understanding of the biblical notion of the extended Sabbath rest, which he calls St. Augustine's 'three-fold Sabbath typology'. The author implies that the first two passages support his proposed postmillennial 'era of peace', while the third outlines Augustine's amillennial interpretation. He then suggests that for nefarious reasons the mediaeval Church rejected all but the third. On closer examination, however, the author's argument falls apart. The first of the quotations selected by the author describes: "*a kind of seventh-day Sabbath in the succeeding thousand years*; and that it is for this purpose that the saints rise, viz., to celebrate this Sabbath. *And this opinion would not be objectionable, if it were believed that the joys of the saints in that Sabbath shall be spiritual, and consequent on the presence of God...*"(p.62). On examination of the original text of Augustine's *City of God*, it

appears that precisely at this point Rev. Iannuzzi omits a vital phrase: “for I myself, too, once held this opinion”. It is clear from the text omitted by Rev. Iannuzzi that St. Augustine has rejected the foregoing opinion himself. So in no way, should this passage be invoked to show Augustine’s support for the opinion described in the quoted text. The second quotation bears no relation whatsoever to what the author claims, namely that “The Sabbath day of rest represents the soul’s quest for union with God and its final achievement, continuous rest in him”(p.63). In the quoted passage Augustine continues his exegesis of the text of Rev. 20, suggesting two ways of understanding the historical period to which the thousand years symbolically refer. There is nothing here, or anywhere else in this section of Augustine’s exegesis, which can be understood as an alternative Sabbath typology, least of all, one that supports the author’s postmillennialist ‘era of peace’.

These are just two examples of the kind of treatment to which the author has subjected his sources. One suspects that he has ‘accommodated’ the writings of many others, in order to make it seem that his postmillennial ‘era of peace’ has the backing of several authoritative figures in the Church.

It is difficult to feel at ease with a work of such doubtful integrity, and for this reason I would not recommend this book of Rev. Iannuzzi. The scholar or theologian who appears to be deliberately manipulating his material to support notions that are theologically disputable cannot expect to attract serious searchers for the truth, especially in a subject so fraught with confusion. But perhaps the most significant danger of the author’s proposal is that of being confronted, at the expected time, with a false and deceptive peace – a counterfeit ‘era of peace’ engineered by the enemies of Christ. We are reminded of St Paul’s warning: “*Concerning times and seasons, brothers, you have no need for anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief at night. When people are saying, ‘Peace and security’, then sudden disaster comes upon them, like labour pains upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape*” (1Thess 5,1-3).