

The Two Witnesses of Rev 11 and the Mission of the Church

by

Daniel Mihoc, Sibiu – Romania

1. Introduction

To begin with, I would like to make three introductory remarks concerning the text that I am now bringing to your attention.

i. Chapter 11 of Revelation is considered by the majority of the commentators¹ as one of the most difficult in the whole book of Revelation and the multitude of the proposed interpretations attest this fact. But it is quite clear from the first reading that its central theme is the way in which some people fulfil a special prophetic-testimonial mission that was commissioned to them by Jesus Christ. Therefore it definitely has a message related to the theme of this seminar.

ii. When interpreting it we must remember that this is an inspired text written in a prophetic-apocalyptic style, which means that it has an authoritative message which is possible to be hidden behind a variety of analogies, allegories, symbols, sometimes contradictory or paradoxical, as it happens in the books which belong to the same literary genre.

iii. Also, we have to remember that it is part of a larger letter addressed by the author to the whole Church and that his main concern is to convey to his brothers a message of encouragement and hope by unveiling or reminding how the Church fulfils its mission in the context of a hostile world.

The two witnesses appear meteorically in the construction of the book of Revelation. Apparently without any introduction, in v. 3 of chap. 11 an unidentified voice introduces them as some well-known figures. They are identified both as witnesses and prophets. Their task is to prophesy and, being beneficiaries of some extraordinary powers, they accomplish it successfully. Having finished their mission, the beast that ascends from the bottomless pit, makes war against them and they are killed. Their bodies lie three days and a half in the streets of the great city. Then they are resurrected by a special intervention of God and called to ascend to heaven. All their enemies see those events. Immediately afterwards an earthquake kills 7,000 inhabitants of the city and the rest give glory to the true God.

This is in short what St John tells us about these two enigmatic figures. It is clear that the whole narrative has a parabolic or allegorical character². What does the author mean by inserting it in the centre of his book? And which is its meaning for the theme of our seminar? In order to respond to these questions, the first thing we must do is bring the story back in its original context.

When one reads v. 3 of chap. 11, one has the impression that here begins a new section, but the absence of any introductory formula (as for example: καὶ εἶδον, μετὰ ταῦτα εἶδον,

¹ E. LOHMEYER (*Die Offenbarung des Johannes* [Handbuch zum Neuen Testament 16], Tübingen: Mohr, 1970, p. 87), for example, considers it as one of “dunkelsten Aschnitten der Apok.,” and that because of its content as well as of its relationship with the context.

² R. BAUCKHAM, “The Conversion of the Nations”, in *The Climax of Prophecy. Studies in the Book of Revelation*, Edinburgh: T&T. Clark, 1993, p. 373-4.

καὶ ἰδοὺ) suggests that it continues the preceding verses. And indeed, between vv. 1-2 and 3-14 there is a thematical continuity: the former ones provide the background on which the story of the two witnesses takes place. For these reasons it is better to see them as forming one literary unit with two subunits, vv. 1-2 and vv. 3-14³. This literary unit is preceded by a scene in which St John is called to accomplish a universal prophetic mission (chap. 10). The text says nothing about how he actually does accomplish this task. In exchange, the author inserts the allegorical narrative about the two witnesses.

We must also remark the position of these two sections (chap. 10 and 11, 1-14) in the *oikonomia* of the whole book: They are situated between the sixth and the seventh trumpets. It is a position similar to that of chap. 7 within the sevenfold cycle of the seals⁴. In both cases, the series is interrupted to make place to images which show that on the scene of history, synchronically with the manifestation of God's judgment of the unfaithful world, some people have chosen a different way of living. Therefore, they are protected by their God and they can give the world a perfect testimony about Him.

2. The identity of the two witnesses

The history of the interpretation of our text records a great variety of opinions in what the identification of the two witnesses is concerned⁵. Making a brief overview of the identifications that have been proposed so far is a difficult task, given being the complexity of the problem. Some authors simply identify them with famous characters from the Old Testament such as Enoch or Elijah, or Moses and Elijah, who must come back on earth to fulfil a prophetic mission before the *parousia*. For others, Moses and Elijah are used by the author of the Revelation only as prophetic models which help outline the figure of new characters that are to fulfil an eschatological role. Others identify them with well-known figures from the New Testament such as the Apostles Peter and Paul, Jacob and John, the sons of Zebedee, John the Baptist and Jesus Himself. Finally, some others prefer to interpret them symbolically, claiming that they represent the Old and the New Testament, or the Law and the Prophets, or Israel and the Church, or just the latter in its prophetic-witnessing dimension. Certainly, all these interpretations are more or less grounded in the data provided by our text. They show us its complexity and the fact that it provides support for an identification of the two figures with individual persons as well as for a collective interpretation.

But let us see what the text tells us.

To begin with, we notice that the two are introduced as if they had been spoken about previously (let us remark the presence of the definite article τοῖς.” „I will give⁶ power unto My two witnesses, and they shall prophesy a thousand two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth” (καὶ δώσω τοῖς δυσὶν μάρτυσίν μου καὶ προφητεύσουσιν ἡμέρας χιλίας διακοσίας ἐξήκοντα περιβεβλημένοι σάκκου) (11, 3). Their identity must, therefore, be sought in the contents of the book itself, and not out of its boundaries.

The two are firstly identified as “witnesses”. The idea will be reaffirmed in v. 7 (ὅταν τελέσωσιν τὴν μαρτυρίαν αὐτῶν). In the rest of the Revelation the following characters are

³ D. E. AUNE, *Revelation 6-16* (Word Biblical Commentary, 52b), Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998, p. 585.

⁴ Cf. P. PRIGENT, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, translated from French into English by Wendy Pradels, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001, p. 341.

⁵ For the history of the identification of the two witnesses see D. E. AUNE, *Revelation 6-16*, p. 599-602 and M. BLACK, “The ‘Two Witnesses’ of Rev. 11, 3s in Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic Tradition”, in *Donum Gentilicium. New Testament Studies in Honour of David Daube*, Oxford, 1978, p. 126-137.

⁶ Even if the author does not say precisely who is speaking, the possessive pronoun μου makes us think about Christ (cf. 2, 13). The verb “to give” (δώσω , „I will give”) shows us that it is the Lord Who has the initiative.

identified as witnesses: John (1, 2.9), Jesus Christ (1, 5; 3, 14), Antipas (2, 13) and all those with the blood of whom the great mother of harlots became drunk (“martyrs/witnesses of Jesus”, 17, 6). Christ and Antipas are presented as paradigmatic witnesses of all Christians, about whom the Revelation, even though it does not directly identify them as witnesses, tells us that they have “the testimony of Jesus Christ” (12, 17). Those the souls of whom have shown themselves under the heavenly altar to the author in his vision are also witnesses, because they have been slain “for the word of God, and for the *testimony* which they held” (διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἣν εἶχον, 6, 9).

Immediately after having identified the two as “witnesses”, the Lord shows that their mission is to prophesy. This means that they are also prophets. This identification is confirmed twice as follows: in v. 6, where we are told about their “prophecy”, and in v. 10, where we are assured that these ones are “prophets”. If in what the notion of “witness” is concerned the Revelation makes proof of great generosity, identifying Christ as well as all the Christians as witnesses, this does not happen in what the notion of “prophet” is involved. The prophetic ministry seems to be reserved to a well-delimited group within the Church, part of which is St John himself (10, 7-11; 11, 18; 18, 20.24; 22, 9). But 19, 10 establishes a surprising correspondence between prophecy, as work of the Holy Spirit, and the “testimony of Jesus”, which is – as we have seen above – characteristic of all Christians: “the testimony of Jesus is the Spirit of prophecy” (ἡ γὰρ μαρτυρία Ἰησοῦ ἐστὶν τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς προφητείας), fact which suggests that all Christians, giving testimony about Christ, fulfil a prophetic ministry.

In the exertion of this prophetic-witnessing ministry they benefit from a special protection and from special gifts which remind of the Old Testament figures of Moses and Elijah.

If up to this point the image of two persons seems to be outlined, in the second part of v. 3 we are obliged to change perspectives. The two prophesy for 1,260 days. Or, this is precisely the duration of the period in which the Gentiles tread under their foot the holy city (11, 2), the time of the refuge of the Woman-Church into the wilderness (12, 6, 14) and of the persecution of the ones that “dwell in heaven” (13, 5-6). These three parallel images regard the entire earthly existence of the Church, and not only a limited period from its history. Here we have, therefore, a first argument to identify the two prophesying witnesses with the Christian community as a whole.

Verse 4 confirms this identification: they are “the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth” (αἱ δύο ἐλαῖαι καὶ αἱ δύο λυχνῖαι αἱ ἐνώπιον τοῦ κυρίου τῆς γῆς ἐστῶτες). This phrase betrays an immediate dependence on Zech 4, 1-14. The prophet Zechariah saw in his vision a golden lampstand (λυχνία) with seven candles standing between two olive trees. Then it was revealed to him that the two olive trees are “the two chosen leaders who stand beside the Lord of all the earth” (Zech 4, 14), that is, the great priest Joshua and the politic leader Zerubbabel who worked together for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and of the Temple.

In Judaism, Zechariah’s vision has also been interpreted in a collective way, the two lampstands being identified either with the believing Jews in the eschatological times⁷, or with the entire Israel⁸. It is possible that St John was inspired by these interpretations. But he modifies the details of the prophecy, showing that he wants to give the image a new meaning. Let us not forget that the same prophetic text has provided St John material more than just once. In Rev 4, 5, the seven lamps of fire represent the seven Spirits of God, and in Rev 1,

⁷ *Pesikta Rabbati* 51, 4; apud G. K. BEALE, *The Book of Revelation. A Commentary on the Greek Text* (The New International Greek Testament Commentary), Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, U.K.: W. B. Eerdmans & The Paternoster Press, 1999, p. 574.

⁸ *Pesikta Rabbati* 7, 7; apud G. K. BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 574.

12-13.20 the Church in its entirety is represented by seven lampstands (λυχνίαι). The seven spirits of God (= the Holy Spirit) are “sent forth into all the earth” (5, 6); the same is the task of the Church (Mt 28, 19-20; Acts 1, 8) and the task of the two witnesses is also universal (11, 9-10). This is why we believe that, by identifying the two witnesses as lampstands – an image which has previously been associated with the Church and the work of the Holy Spirit – all that St John does is make it clear that these ones represent the Church, the true Israel of God, and underline an essential characteristic of this one’s task, i.e., that it is fulfilled by the inspiration and the co-working of the Holy Spirit.

The scene of the defeat and resurrection of the two also pleads in favour of identifying the two witnesses with the Christian community. All “those that dwell upon the earth” – that is, all those who obey Satan and fight against the Church – rejoice over their death, are overcome with fear seeing their resurrection and are present at their ascension to heaven (vv. 9-12).

In conclusion, we must notice together with G. E. Ladd⁹ that the allegory of the two witnesses contains „a blending of the symbolic and the specific”. The prevalence of the data which favour the symbolic interpretation shows that they must be firstly identified with the Christian community as a whole. On the other hand, the details which seem to designate definite persons may suggest that this community consists of individuals with the co-operation of whom God’s plan is fulfilled in the human history.

3. The mission of the two witnesses and the means by which they fulfil it

St John tells us that Christ-the Lord gives the two witnesses a prophetic mission. He does not tell us anything directly about its contents, but he tells us many things about the way in which it is fulfilled and about its importance in the framework of God’s plan. The fulfilment of God’s salvation plan depends on the fulfilment of the mission of the two. Only when this one is brought to an end can the seventh angel blow his trumpet, marking the end of a historical process that the Church, now triumphant, probably (not certainly) proclaims in the following terms: “The kingdom of the world has become *the kingdom* of our Lord and of His Christ” (v. 15). In what follows we will analyse the fundamental data provided by the allegory of the two witnesses about the mission of the Church, and implicitly of its members, in the realization of the plan of God.

a. From the initiative of Christ

The allegory of the two witnesses begins with a fundamental statement: καὶ δώσω τοῖς δυσὶν μάρτυσίν μου καὶ προφητεύσουσιν ... The majority of the translations render this phrase by “I will grant *authority* (or *power*) to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy...”. Even though the noun “power/authority does not appear in the Greek text, it is implicated. Therefore, the two do not begin their activity from their own initiative; Christ (cf. 2, 13) sends them in mission and gives them the power/authority required to fulfil it.

b. Through prophetic testimony

We have noticed above that the two witnesses (v. 3) are to an equal extent identified as prophets (v. 10; cf. v. 3), and their whole activity is characterised by equivalent terms, such as “testimony” (“and when they will have finished their testimony...”, v. 7) and “prophecy” (“in

⁹ G.E. LADD, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, p. 154.

the days of their prophecy”, v. 6). Thus we can establish the following equivalences: witnesses = prophets and testimony = prophecy.

This double statute of the two entitles us to state together with P. Prigent¹⁰ that this narrative „presents what might be called indifferently the prophetic ministry of the two witnesses, or the testimony of the two prophets”. Presenting them this way, St John suggests that between testimony and prophecy there is such a tight relationship that they can be identified with each other. At the first sight, this association is surprising. But it is in agreement with his theology.

I was saying above that in v. 3 the two witnesses are presented without any introduction at all, as if they were extremely well-known. Indeed, the Church – that they represent – is abundantly present in the book of Revelation as a prophetic-witnessing community. The Christians are the ones who “keep ... the testimony of Jesus Christ” (12, 17; cf. 1, 2,9; 19, 10; 20, 4), and the “testimony of Jesus is the Spirit of prophecy” (19, 10c). Both expressions are difficult, but the equivalence between them shows us that the meaning of one of them depends on that of the other one as well as the fact that they explain each other.

If the expression “the Spirit of prophecy” appears only in 19, 10c, “the testimony of Jesus” appears, except for this position, in five other places. The prophet John “testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ” (ἐμαρτύρησεν τὸν λόγον τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, 1, 2) and “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ) he was exiled to the Isle of Patmos (1, 9); all Christian believers have “the testimony of Jesus” (12, 17); the brothers of the author also have “the testimony of Jesus” (19, 10b); finally, “the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus” participate in the exertion of the dignity of judge of Christ and reign together with Him (20, 4). Even if, grammatically speaking, the expression μαρτυρία Ἰησοῦ can be understood as the testimony given by Jesus (the witness borne by Jesus) as well as the witness about Jesus¹¹, the second meaning has priority. I use this expression because I think, together with other exegetes¹², that the first meaning must not be excluded because that which Christians say as testimony about Christ has first been said/given as testimony by the Lord Himself. Christ gives His disciples the mission of giving testimony about Him and assures them that as long as they want to fulfil it faithfully they will benefit from the complete assistance of the Holy Spirit¹³. Thus, μαρτυρία Ἰησοῦ is that testimony about Christ that can be given by all those who have the “Spirit of prophecy”, that is, all those who work together with the Holy Spirit, as without His assistance no genuine testimony about Christ is possible (see I Cor 12, 3).

Therefore, all the Christians who give testimony about Christ faithfully fulfil a prophetic mission. But the *prophet* John, even though he presents all Christians as witnesses, never identifies them as prophets. And this may happen in order to avoid confusion, as in his Church there is a special prophetic calling that he insists on asserting clearly repeatedly (11,

¹⁰ *Apocalypse*, p. 347.

¹¹ The modern translations reflect this ambiguity of expression. I quote some examples: *TOB* and *BJ*: always “témoignage de Jésus”; *NJB*: “witness to Jesus” (1, 9); “the witness of Jesus” (1, 2· 12, 17· 19, 10); “beheaded for having witnessed for Jesus” (20, 4); *NRSV*: “testimony to Jesus” (only in 20, 4) and “testimony of Jesus” (in the other cases); in the latest modern Greek translation we find: : μαρτυρία ... για τον Ιησού (1, 2); βρέθηκα εξόριστος ... γιατί ... ομολόγησα τον Ιησού (1, 9); εκείνους που ... μαρτυρούν την πίστη τους στον Ιησού (12, 17; 19, 10b and c); είχαν αποκεφαλιστεί για την μαρτυρία που έδωσαν για τον Ιησού (20, 4).

¹² L. MORRIS, *The Book of Revelation. An Introduction and Commentary*, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press & Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989, p. 228; M. E. BORING, *Revelation (Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989, p. 194; G. K. BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 947 and others. H. STRATHMANN («μάρτυς κτλ.», *TDNT*, IV, 501) sees in μαρτυρία Ιησοῦ the Christian message in general.

¹³ Mark 13, 11; Matt 10, 20; Luke 12, 11-12; 21, 15.

immediate closeness of God¹⁹. As long as they fulfil their mission, they participate in the heavenly life, and God – the true Sovereign of the earth – is permanently with them, so that all they do benefits from His upholding²⁰.

d. With the power of God

Verses 4-6 speak about the power of the two in terms which remind us of Moses and Elijah²¹. Like the latter, they have the power to devour with fire all their enemies (v.5a)²² or “to shut up the sky, so that rain will not fall during the days of their prophesying” (6a)²³. And, like Moses, “they have power over the waters to turn them into blood” (Apoc 11, 6b)²⁴. But God gives the two witnesses powers greater than those of all the prophets of Israel: they are able “to strike the earth with every plague, as often as they desire” (11, 6c). This statement tells us nothing different from what we already know from the rest of the New Testament. We mention here only the fact that the Lord has given His disciples “authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy” and assured them that “nothing will injure” them (Luke 10, 19). The Gospel according to St John shows us, however, that this power is conditioned by our communion with Christ, which becomes manifest in the fulfilment of His commandments: “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (John 15, 17).

The invulnerability of the two to their enemies shows that nothing can deter the plans of God, Whom they serve²⁵. This is one more reassurance for the Christians threatened by persecutions that, no matter how difficult their mission may look, like once in the times of Moses and Elijah, God provides them with everything they need in order for their mission to be brought to an end.

e. In repentance and suffering

The two witnesses prophesy “clothed in sackcloth” (v. 3)²⁶. Such clothing was used as sign of mourning²⁷ or repentance²⁸. Sometimes the prophets appealed to sackcloth in order to underline the message of repentance that they were proclaiming²⁹. Such significations of the attire of the two show us the nature of their message as well as the difficulty of conveying it. Their prophetic message is a calling to repentance. Or the essential condition of conveying it successfully is an adequate attitude. Repentance cannot be proclaimed triumphantly, but only

¹⁹ A similar image of the Church appears in chap. 7, v. 10: the large multitude of the believers stands before the Throne and of the Lamb, giving testimony about the salvation that God and the Lamb give to the world.

²⁰ Cf. G.K. BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 576; P. Prigent, *Apocalypse*, p. 352.

²¹ This is precisely the reason for which many exegetes identify the two witnesses with these famous characters from the Old Testament.

²² We will speak about the relevance of this image for our topic in the following pages, in the chapter about the consequences of the mission of the Church for the world.

²³ Cf. I (III) Kings 17, 1 and the following. This miracle was living in the memory of the Christians of the apostolic times; Lk 4, 25 and Jam 5, 17 make reference to it, adding the specification, which does not appear in the text from I (III) Kings, that the period of drought lasted three years and a half, period which corresponds to the duration of the activity of the two witnesses.

²⁴ Cf. Ex 7, 17. This plague inspired the description of the second trumpet (Apoc 8, 8) and of the second bowl (Apoc 16, 3).

²⁵ P. PRIGENT, *Apocalypse*, p. 352.

²⁶ D. E. AUNE (*Revelation 6-16*, p. 611) believes that “the garments of the two witnesses provide the only clue to the nature of their message”.

²⁷ Gen 37, 34; 2 Sam 3, 31; Lam 2, 10; Esth 4, 1; Isa 15, 3; 22, 12; Amos 8, 10.

²⁸ 1 Kgs 22, 27-29; 2 Kgs 19, 1-2; 1Chr 21, 16; Neh 9, 1; Ps 35, 13; Jonah 3, 5-8; Matt 11, 21 = Luke 10, 13.

²⁹ Isa 20, 2; Zech 13, 4.

in repentance and humility. On the other hand, their task involves sorrow and suffering, because they must proclaim to the very world which hates them. Thus, their life is a continuous imitation of the Lord on the way of the Cross³⁰.

f. Even at the expense of one's life

Although they dispose of extraordinary powers, the two witnesses are also vulnerable, but only then when they have finished their task: "When they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up out of the abyss will make war with them, and overcome them and kill them" (v. 7). This verse, apparently simple, raises questions. „When they have finished their testimony" would, at first sight, suggest that that which follows in verses 7-13 will take place at the end of history, when the Church will have finished its witnessing mission in the midst of the world and will be put to a difficult test (Mt 24, 9ff.)³¹. But, certainly, it is not this the message that the inspired author of the Revelation wishes to convey. The fulfilment of the task of the two witnesses firstly shows the result of the measuring of the Church-Temple (v. 1) and of the power with which the Church has been invested (v. 5-6): its work is successfully accomplished.

But this fulfilment can also be regarded as a continuous fact, as in the doing of its task the Church is in a continuous state of fulfilling its prophetic ministry. It fulfils its mission through every single witness of Christ. Each witness has a certain task which, as the Revelation tells us, he is able to accomplish. But its fulfilment does not imply the end of the mission of the Church. This synchronicity of the exertion of the mission and of its fulfilment is also suggested by the correspondence of the numbers which characterise the activity, and then the "defeat" (martyrdom) of the two witnesses. They preach for three years and a half, and their bodies are exposed in the streets of the great city for three days and a half. In other words, they proclaim and they are defeated at the same time, but while their prophecy is put under the symbolism of the three years and a half, their martyrdom is, also symbolically, represented by means of the "image" of the three days and a half.

The martyrdom of the two and the place where it takes place confirm once more their statute of true prophets because, as D.E. Aune³² remarks, "in early Judaism there was a widespread view that suffering and martyrdom in Jerusalem were the all but inevitable experience of the true prophet (Luke 13 :33)"³³.

4. The framework of the mission of the Church

When he speaks about the task of the two (i.e., in vv. 3-7), the author mentions nothing about the space where this takes place. But the continuity that we remarked at the beginning between the allegory of the two witnesses and the scene of the measuring of the Temple (vv. 1-2) oblige us to identify it as being "the holy city" (v. 2). On the other hand, the scene of the killing of the two is located in "the great city", title reserved by St John to Babylon, symbol the capital of the idolatrous empire, of Rome (18, 10). In what follows we are given two symbolic equivalents of this place: this city can truly be called Sodom and Egypt (v. 8b), symbols of sin and of enmity towards the people of God. Up to this point everything seems coherent. But the ending of v. 8 spoils the logic that we would like to see here. The author

³⁰ P. PRIGENT, *Apocalypse*, p. 352.

³¹ Cf. G. K. BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 587.

³² *Revelation 6-16*, p. 631.

³³ Concerning the suffering and the martyrdom of the prophets, also see: 2 Chr 24, 21; 36, 15-16; Neh 9, 26; Matt 5, 11-12 = Luke 6, 22-23; Matt 23, 34-36 = Luke 11, 49-51; Matt 23, 37-39 = Luke 13, 34-35; Acts 7, 52; I Thess 2, 15.

identifies this city as the one “where our Lord was crucified”! That is, it actually “the holy city” of v. 2. It is in it that the two witnesses are killed, just like their Lord.

But when the spectators being present at their death compels us to change perspective again: they come “from the peoples and tribes and tongues and nations” (v. 9a) – formula which, in the language of St John, designates universality. Thus, Jerusalem, the holy city, that in which “also their Lord was crucified” (v. 8c), becomes symbol of the entire world³⁴. The extension of the mission of the two witnesses is underlined again in v. 10a, where we are told that “those who dwell on the earth” (οἱ κατοικοῦντες ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς) rejoice over their death. The reason for this joy suggests the intensity and the consistency of the mission of the Church. “Those who dwell upon the earth” are released from the torment that the two witnesses caused them. This means that they have heard the testimony of the Church and that they have retained something about it.

The primary cause of the opposition of “those who dwell upon the earth” against the two witnesses is explained in chapter 13. Enticed by the second beast – the false prophet – they obey the Dragon, the enemy in the true meaning of the word of God, and they bow before the first Beast, which is the main instrument of the exertion of the power of Satan on earth. Therefore, to the prophetic work of the two witnesses is opposed a pseudo-prophetic work; the true prophets of God are in conflict with the false prophets of Satan. From this perspective, the resemblance of the two prophets with Moses and Elijah becomes more significant. Moses confronts the Pharaoh and his magicians; Elijah confronts Isabela and the prophets of Baal. Now the Church confronts the idolatry of its time in a new “prophetic conflict” (Bauckham), and its calling in this new context is to call the peoples from the submission to Satan to the worshipping of the true God³⁵.

5. The result of the mission of the two witnesses

As we have already shown above, the mission of the two witnesses is remarkable for both its proportions and its intensity. Thus, all people can benefit from it. However, its result seems to be disappointing. Nobody seems to understand their message. Even more than that, the Gospel – the good news – seems to be only cause for suffering instead of bringing joy. But if we look at the text more carefully, we will see that things are actually not like this. “Those who dwell upon the earth” do not represent all the nations of the world in their entirety. They come *from* (ἐκ) all the nations. This means that in each of these nations there are persons who do not belong to the group of those who “dwell upon the earth”. The Revelation has already underlined this twice, showing that the members of the Church come from all nations (5, 9-10; 7, 9). The mission of the two does, therefore, bear fruit: the new people of God is formed, through the prophetic-witnessing work of the Church, from the very same nations from which Satan recruits his servants by means of his instruments who operate on the arena of history.

The result of the activity of the two witnesses in the midst of the group of those who “dwell upon the earth” is summarized in the reasoning of the joy of these ones on seeing the death of the witnesses: “those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and celebrate; and they will send gifts to one another, because these two prophets tormented those who dwell on the earth” (v. 10). Vv. 5-6 speak about punitive actions of the two witnesses in the world. We are, of course, dealing here with metaphors which reveal, in the first place, their invulnerability until the moment when they have accomplished their mission. However, they can also be interpreted as manifestations of God’s judgement of the world. The Church shares everything that her Lord possesses. And if Christ is Judge, the Church participates in the

³⁴ Cf. E.-B. ALLO, *Saint Jean, l'Apocalypse* (Études Bibliques), Paris: Gabalda, 1933³, p. 153; P. Prigent, *Apocalypse*, p. 357.

³⁵ R. BAUCKHAM, *The Theology*, p. 120.

exertion of this dignity of its Lord as well (cf. 20, 4). Just like Christ “for judgment” came into the world (John 9, 39), the Church is, in its turn, called to exert a ministry of judge on earth as well. “If anyone wants to harm them, fire flows out of their mouth and devours their enemies”, as St John tells us (v. 5a). In the Holy Scriptures, the fire is a symbol for the prophetic word³⁶, but also a sign of God’s wrath and judgement³⁷. In our text we seem to encounter all these meanings. The two bring a prophetic message from God, and the world is already being judged because of its attitude towards their testimony: it is salvation for those who receive it; for the others, it is cause for damnation.

Nor does the resurrection of the two witnesses seem to have any effect upon those who “dwell upon the earth”. They are all present at this event, but except for the feeling of “great fear” (φόβος μέγας) we do not see any attitude of repentance. The two ascend up to heaven in a cloud in the sight of their enemies. And immediately after that, probably as answer to the callousness of its “dwellers”, the earth is shaken by an earthquake, phenomenon which sometimes accompanies the divine interventions in the history and represents a sign which comes before the *parousia*. The result is at the same time calamitous and amazing. Calamitous, because “a tenth of the city³⁸ fell and seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake”, and amazing, because it is the only place in the Revelation where we see those who “dwell upon the earth” giving glory to God as a consequence of a punitive (“the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven”). However, the text is not very explicit. This unexpected change of attitude of the enemies of the Church does not seem to have any other cause but fear. The lack of other details and mostly of the verb μετανοέω makes some exegetes see here nothing else but a superstitious and momentary acknowledgement of God’s almightiness³⁹. Others, on the contrary, believe that the affirmation “[they] gave glory to the God of heaven” indicates conversion⁴⁰. And others claim that here we must see a reference to the conversion of Israel⁴¹.

We stated above that the defeat, the killing and the resurrection of the witnesses may be regarded as events which characterise the entire history of the Church. From this perspective, it is difficult to identify this seism as an actual event which must occur immediately before the ending of history. At the Synoptics⁴² earthquakes are mentioned among other events which will take place over the course of the history of humanity and are considered “merely the beginning of birth pangs” (ἀρχὴ ὠδίνων, Mc 13, 8). God repeatedly uses such natural calamities to call people to repentance and on every occasion some understand this calling and give Him glory.

6. Conclusions

³⁶The Lord tells prophet Jeremiah: “Behold, I am making My words in your mouth fire and this people wood, and it will consume them” (Jer 5, 14).

³⁷ Gen 19, 24; 2 Kgs 1, 10ff.; Luke 9, 54.

³⁸ For J. Bonsirven (*L’Apocalypse de Saint Jean*, Verbum Salutis, XVI, Paris, 1951, p. 200) the dimensions of the calamity rather indicate that this is a “medicinal punishment” by means of which those who “dwell upon the earth” are called to repentance.

³⁹ E. LOHMEYER, *Offenbarung*, p. 94; Π. ΜΠΡΑΤΣΙΩΤΗΣ, Ἡ Ἀποκάλυψις τοῦ Ἰωάννου, Ἀθήναι, 1992, p. 186; M. Rissi, *Die Zukunft der Welt, eine exegetische Studie über Johannesoffenbarung 19, 11 - 22, 15*, Basel, 1965, p. 78.

⁴⁰ J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation*, London, 1979, p. 106; BAUCKHAM, «Conversion of the Nations», *Climax*, 278; G. E. LADD, *Revelation*, p. 159; D. E. AUNE, *Revelation 6-16*, p. 628; G. K. BEALE, *Revelation*, p. 606.

⁴¹ R.H. CHARLES, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, vol. I, p. 291-292; G.W. BARKER & W. L. LANE & J. R. MICHAELS, *The New Testament Speaks*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1969, p. 381; G. E. LADD, *Revelation*, p. 159; A. Y. COLLINS, *The Apocalypse* (New Testament Message 22), Wilmington: Glazier, 1979, p. 73. Ι. ΣΚΙΑΔΑΡΕΣΗΣ, *Λειτουργικές σκηνές και ύμνοι στην Αποκάλυψη του Ιωάννη* (Βιβλική Βιβλιοθήκη 14), Θεσσαλονίκη: Πουρνάρα, 1999, p. 324.

⁴² Matt 24, 7; Mark 13, 8; Luke 21, 11.

The main purpose of the allegorical narrative about the two witnesses is to show which the mission of the Church in the world is and how it is accomplished. In ch. 6-9 a series of catastrophic events strike the earth. Through all these God calls the world to repentance. But the result is not that one expected. “The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands”, notes with bitterness St John. Then, in the scene of his own prophetic call he affirms the necessary place of the prophecy in God’s salvation plan, and the allegory of the two witnesses comes to demonstrate how this is effectively carried out through the inspired testimony of the Church. In the preceding pages I have pointed out the most important teachings of this text concerning the theme of this seminar. Now, I would like to conclude by summarizing them in seven points which I believe have relevance for nowadays Church:

i. First of all our text says that the mission to the world is not facultative; it is a main task that Jesus Christ has entrusted to His Church⁴³ and thus becomes one distinctive characteristic of every true Church.

ii. The fulfilling of God’s plan depends on the accomplishing of the mission of the Church in the world. The end cannot come until the two witnesses have finished their mission.

iii. Only by accomplishing this mission can a Church be in close communion with God and share the power of its Lord.

iv. The Church accomplishes its mission through its prophetic testimony inspired by the Holy Spirit. The content of this testimony is primarily Jesus Christ and His Gospel.

v. In giving its prophetic testimony to the world the Church recapitulates the earthly life of its Lord.

vi. The delivery of the prophetic message is not an easy task because its content comes in opposition with the status-quo of a world which accepts as normal the sovereignty of Satan by obeying and worshipping his principal agent, the Beast. Thus the Church finds itself involved in a prophetic conflict in which it must overcome the enemy.

vii. But, as its Master did, the full victory in this conflict is possible only by a complete testimony, which means, even at the cost of its members’ life.

⁴³ See also Matt 28, 18; Mark 16, 15; Luke 24, 45; John 10, 21; Acts 1, 8.