

Session #3: Revelation 1:1-20

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The reading, studying and praying with scripture is important and should be a part of our daily routine. As we embark on this journey into the book of Revelation we need to recognize that, within the various writings we find in the Bible (history, prayer, prophecy, story, parable...), the book of Revelation stands unique among all the other documents. The Old Testament gives us history and perspective on the active role God took in human history to prepare the world for His Son's coming. The gospels tell the story of Jesus' teachings, life and gift of salvation through His death and resurrection. The New Testament letters were written to offer teaching, support and inspiration to the first century Church and to each of us as well. The book of Revelation presents to us the risen Lord, Jesus Christ who is entrusting his disciple, John with an urgent word of comfort, instruction and prophecy. While this prophecy is directed at the original seven Churches of Asia Minor in the first century, this prophecy still holds truths for each and every Christian today. As we read, as we study take heart and hear God's personal call to each of us.



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As we finally delve into the Book of Revelation we will see that the first three chapters of Revelation comprises one unit. What we will discover in this unit is the messenger and personal messages to individual Churches in Asia Minor. Chapter one is divided into two parts:

1. The introductory comments that will give us the title of the letter, its origin and purpose (1:1-3).
2. The second part of this chapter (1:4-20) will include a prophetic vision. This vision gives us a foundation to the entire book.

Prologue, 1:1-3: Title, origin, and purpose of Revelation

Like most other prologues within the scriptures, these three short verses offer us much information:

- The title of the book: *The revelation of Jesus Christ* (1:1)
- The divine origin of its content: *which God gave to him* (1:1b)
- How it was transmitted: *by sending his angel to his servant John* (1:1c)
- And a blessing: *Blessed is the one who reads aloud and blessed are those who listen to this prophetic message and heed what is written.* (1:3)

It is interesting to notice, in these opening verses, the relationship of those identified. *The revelation belongs or pertains to Jesus Christ (1:1). It is given by God but is mediated through an*

angel to John, who in turn reported what he saw to others (the community of believers, 1:1-2).
New Collegeville Bible Commentary.

1:1 revelation: In most circles this document is either call *The Book of Revelation* or *The Apocalypse*. In truth the real title is in those first words: *The revelation of Jesus Christ*. The Greek word we translate to revelation is *apokalypsis* which literally means “unveiling” and as we have discussed in the introduction speaks to the unveiling of a bride at the wedding feast. Today when we put the word “revelation” together with discussion or study of the bible our thought immediately moves to end-time thoughts, (which is a part of this document). But there is more to the word. The word revelation (Greek: *apokalypsis*) while only appearing once in this manuscript is used up to seventeen times in the New Testament (depending on the translation). The use of the word focuses generally around three themes:

- In reference to Christian prophecy: 1 Corinthians 14:6, 26; 2 Corinthians 12:1
- The disclosure of God’s previously hidden plan: Luke 2:32; Romans 16:25
- Or the manifestation of a new order with the second coming of Christ: Romans 2:5, 8:19; 1 Corinthians 1:7

What we will discover as we continue our study through the various chapters all three themes will appear. In this verse the “revelation” is not St. John’s but Christ’s given to St. John. This message that comes to us is not simply about Jesus Christ but is directly from Christ. Jesus is the ultimate source of the revelation, and through it God’s hidden plan of salvation will be revealed as well as hints to Christ’s coming at the end of time. We are also told that the vision is eminent in that it ***must soon take place*** which reinforces those scholars who believe this document is written primarily for those Christians in the 1st century. There is a sense of urgency in this message because God wants them to be prepared. But even if the scholarship who dates this document as having been written sometime 90-100 AD, we can understand this urgency as having the effect of reinforcing those who are being persecuted, giving them hope and strength to endure what they must endure.

1:2 who gives witness To feel the full power of this document we must appreciate that it was not written by John, but is ***sent by an angel*** and it is John’s role to ***give witness ... by reporting what he saw***. What we are about to study is ***the Word of God*** and Jesus’ ***testimony***. Sometimes the greatest give we can give to one another is to report the miraculous happenings we encounter and see.

1:3 Blessed is the one: In our study there is the potential of receiving two of God’s graces. First is the reading aloud of this text (This we will do in class). The second comes to us if we ***listen to this message and heed*** it (That will be up to you.). There will be six more blessings found in the Book of Revelation: 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:14. Another name for these blessings is beatitudes and similar wording is found in Matthew 5:3-8 and Luke 6:20-22 in Jesus’ Beatitudes. We now learn that the purpose of this book, this manuscript is to have the reader/listener to prepare for their eventual final encounter with Christ by being obedient to what is written in this text.

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Because we read that the **reader** is singular and the listeners are multiple (*those who hear*) We know that this book is meant to be read in a public manner. It is most probable that come the Sunday celebration the text would be read in its entirety or over the course of multiple weeks, much like what we do each weekend. This would give the opportunity for what is being read to be explained and expounded on similarly to our homily. The Word of God has always been held as part of the core of our faith and an essential part of the Mass: *Sacred Scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. For it is from it that lessons are read and explained in the homily, and psalms are sung. It is from the scriptures that the prayers, collects, and hymns draw their inspiration and their force, and the actions and signs derive their meaning. (Second Vatican Council, Sacrosanctum Concilium, 24)*

While the majority of this book is written to those Christians in the first century, there are **words of prophecy** throughout. This is not a personal message meant for St. John who later choose to share with the larger Church, which we find in some of the letters St. Paul wrote. The words we are about to explore were meant for the entire Church, throughout history. This section and this verse end with stressing urgency, **for the appointed time is near**. We will discover the word soon and near (speaking of time) appear frequently once again supporting those scholars who date this document as having been written in the 60's AD for primarily those Christians of the 1st century.

Greeting: 1:4-8

As with all New Testament letters, St. John begins with a greeting to those who will receive this letter, but unlike the other documents St. John abandons the regular formula and immediately begins by making a declaration of the authority of God.

1:4 grace to you: John begins his letter in the same way that nearly all the letters in the New Testament are begun. He begins by offering a blessing of **grace...and peace** to his readers. But there the similarity ends. St. John goes one to name the those whose power provide the blessing – the Holy Trinity beginning with God the Father and the Holy Spirit: **from him who is and who was and who is to come** (God the Father). Scholars agree this is an expansion of God's identify Himself in the burning bush to Moses by saying *I am* (Ex 3:14) In verse two St. John will identify the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is described in an unusual way: **the seven spirits before his throne**. It should be no surprise to us that St. John identifies the Holy Spirit of God as being sevenfold. When we are Confirmed how many gifts do we receive from the Holy Spirit? Seven. These seven gifts are based in the work of the prophet Isaiah who revealed the sevenfold nature of the power of the Holy Spirit. In speaking of the Messiah to come he prophesied:

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,*

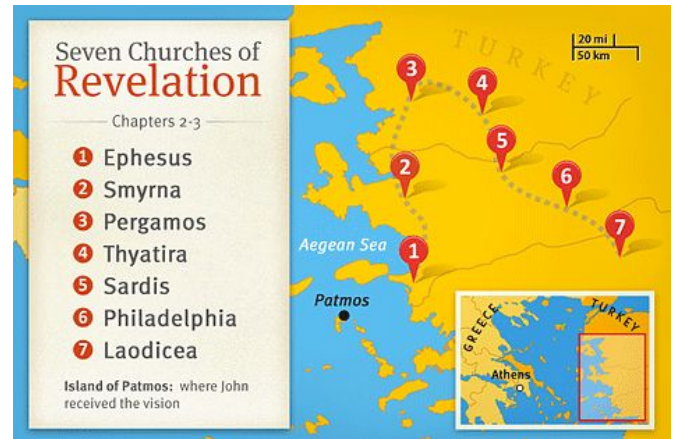
*the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord (piety).*

His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

(Isaiah 11:1-3)

A sixth-century Church Father, Apringius of Beja wrote about this version of the Holy Spirit:
*Here the seven spirits are introduced, which are one and the same Spirit, that is the Holy Spirit,
who is one in name, sevenfold in power.*

We have already established that the immediate recipients of this letter are the **seven Churches in Asia Minor**. We will hear more about each individual Church as we study chapters two and three. For now it is interesting to note that some scholars suggest why St. John choose these seven churches is primarily because they were on the Roman mail route and therefore more deliverable.



This would allow the letter to be delivered

easily with the intension of it going from these churches to those outlying Christian communities. Remember the number seven symbolically means fullness or perfection.

Scholars all believe that the Book of Revelation, while initially directed to these seven churches was meant to be read by all the churches of that age and all people of faith to this age and beyond.

1:5 and from Jesus Christ: The usual Trinitarian formula always has Jesus in the position of follow the Father and before the Holy Spirit. St. John has placed him third, not as an insult because he follows up the reference because St. John has singled Jesus out for a longer description followed by a doxology (1:5b) focused uniquely on him. We add to that the fact that Jesus plays a central role in this book. St. John identifies Jesus with four titles or roles three of which are taken from Psalm 89 (28-38) but are given new meaning in the light of Christ:

- **Christ:** Greek word for “the anointed” meaning Jesus the Anointed One of God, the Messiah. He is the ...
- **Faithful witness:** At the end of the Gospel of John, Jesus stands before the Sanhedrin, preparing for his death. He responds to their questions with: *I came into the world, to testify to the truth* (John 18:37). We have come to know and believe that Jesus is the way and the truth. Jesus gave his testimony in his life and in his death. As we move further on in this document we will hear one of the major themes, a call for all Christians (including us) to become imitators of Christ by living as faithful witnesses. That might mean laying down our own lives as martyrs in faith.
- **The firstborn of the dead:** This is a title given to Jesus by St. Paul in Colossians 1:18, the title not only identifies Jesus as the first member of the human race to pass from death

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to eternal life but as the exalted ruler of all humanity, the King of kings. As such Jesus stand before all humanity as:

- **Ruler of the kings of earth:** Jesus holds supreme authority. No king or principality can match the power of God through Jesus Christ.

St. John goes on in this verse to offer the only doxology in the New Testament that addresses God the Son alone. The focus is not on His power or authority, His activity on behalf of the Christian community and on the extent of Jesus' love for us to the point of his own human death. In St. John writing **to him who loves us**, notice the tense. It is present participle meaning that Jesus loves not just in the past but in the present. Jesus loves US, you and me. Jesus' love is continuous. *It is Christ's covenant love for his Bride, the Church which will be celebrated at the wedding feast of the Lamb (19:7-9) and consummated in the new Jerusalem (21:2) that shapes all of Christ's interventions in this book.* (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: Revelation.) And how deep is this love of Jesus? He **has freed us from our sins by his blood**. We will see a recurrent theme of the power of Christ's blood throughout Revelation.

1:6 made us into a kingdom: St. John continues in the doxology to identify what Jesus has done for us. In Exodus God promised to make Israel into *a kingdom of priests (19:6)*. The Israelites failed and so through Jesus this promise is fulfilled in a greater way through his death and resurrection. All who believe in Jesus not only become a part of His royal people, but we are invited to reign with Him for all eternity in heaven. This kingdom, while present and existing, is incomplete but will be fulfilled at the end of all time.

PERSONAL THOUGHT: As Catholics, as believers in all the promises of God through Jesus Christ, we short change ourselves by giving all our power over to the ordained ministry. All too often we see ourselves as powerless and unable to act in the world as God's ministers of peace, mercy and love believing the only ones who can effect people's lives are deacons, priests and bishops. This is not to say that this grace filled sacrament of Holy Orders is not important. They, through the sacramental grace act *in persona Christi*, meaning in the person of Christ in our lives. But we to are baptized into the priesthood of Christ. Within the liturgy of the Sacrament of Baptism, while the ordain anoint the child these word are prayed: *God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin, given you a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and welcomed you into his holy people. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation. As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet and King, so may you live always as a member of his body, sharing everlasting life.* We become sharers in the life of Christ from this moment on, and this life of Christ is one of leadership (priest), living as Christ in the world (prophet) and service (Christ's Kingship). For further reflection SEE Article: *All the Faithful are Priests in Baptism* by Fr. Brian Mullady.

As members of the priesthood of laity a big part of our responsibility is to acknowledge God as God and we do this by giving to God acknowledgement of who is the one true ruler. Of where the true power rests. St. John's doxology ends with the recognition of this by saying: **to him be glory and power forever. Amen.**

1:7 Behold: St. John now transitions from his offering of prayer to one of a prophetic voice. The word “Behold” signals in the mind of the 1st century Jewish Christian the prophetic oracles of the Old Testament. The prophets of old would make these abrupt changes from their own voice to the “voice” of God beginning with this one word, Behold. The prophecy firsts identify what becomes the principle theme of this document; that **he is coming amid the clouds**. Jesus is coming! In making this prophecy, St. John is alluding to a prophecy made by Daniel (7:13) speaking of the Messiah as one who comes before God’s throne to receive everlasting power and dominion, and Zechariah (12:10) who speaks of the compassion and mercy of God for those who will mourn for *piercing* the one whom God will send. We also are drawn to the words of Jesus (Mark 14:62) who promised to return coming on a cloud and an angel at Jesus’ ascension (Acts 1:11). In this prophecy we are being informed that unlike the birth of the Christ Child which was someone hidden (except for those who had eyes to see), when Jesus returns it will be very public because **every eye will see him, even those who pierced him**. And who pierced Christ? All those who rejected Him. The prophecy goes on to say that **on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail**. Once again these words of lament echo not only what the prophet Zechariah preached (12:10) but the words of Jesus himself when He said: *Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see ‘the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven’ with power and great glory* (Matt 24:30). Taken as a whole this verse speaks to the reality that when Jesus returns those who have remained faithful will be in exultation but those who remain in sin and apposed to the power of God will weep bitter tears.

1:8 the Alpha and the Omega: St. John continues to speak in his prophetic voice but this time in the voice of God. God identifies Himself using the first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet. We know through our catechisms that God always was and always will be. In using this title (Alpha and Omega) God is identifying himself as the God of all history. Our human history had a beginning and will have an end, and it is the God of all creation who has ultimate authority over that history. God also identifies Himself as **the one who is and who was and who is to come**, as well as **the almighty** meaning the God of all time and power. When we get to chapter 21:5-6 we will hear God once again identify himself with similar words.

John’s Commission 1:9-11

1:9 I, John, your brother: St. John emphasizes his unity with all believers not by identifying himself in his apostolic role as Bishop but by acknowledging his humanity and relationship with all believers. This documents is as much for him as it is for any and all believers. St. John goes on to identify just how he is one with all believers, because he **share with you the distress, the kingdom and the endurance we have in Jesus**. We are all one in Christ. St. Paul speaks of this idea in writing to the Ephesians (4:1-16) as well as in 1 Corinthians (12) when he speaks of the body of Christ. But as members of that body we share in three things:

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- **Distress:** To paraphrase Kermit the frog who sang, *it's not easy being a Christian*. As people of faith we are meant to be counter cultural. We are meant to swim AGAINST the stream of the self-absorbed, greedy, pride-filled, money hungry culture that surrounds us. This means, at times, life will be difficult, problematic and grueling.
- **Kingdom:** Christ died on the Cross so that all believers might join Him in the eternal kingdom of heaven. We share in Christ's victory. We share in our hope of eternal reward.
- **Endurance:** At Confirmation we were given the gift of fortitude by the Holy Spirit. We need the stamina of God's grace to swim upstream as we remain faithful to God's Word and Way.

Scholars believe that St. John offers these three virtues/gifts in quick succession because he understands them as inseparable elements of Christian life.

St. John then identifies where he is writing from, the island of **Patmos**. With an area of 13 square miles and a circumference of 25 miles, this island formed by volcanic eruptions millennium ago, is primarily mostly rocky and treeless. Off of the coast (37 miles) of present-day Turkey, Patmos is within a chain of Greek Islands. Church tradition suggests St. John was exiled here from the city of Ephesus, when he had been serving as elder for the Church in Ephesus. His crime? Against Roman law, he **proclaimed God's word and gave testimony to Jesus**. Exile to Patmos was a common punishment by the Roman Empire and would have most likely been released at the death of Nero.

1:10 in the Spirit: St. John identifies for us the day of the week that he received this vision, **the Lord's day** which is Sunday or the day of Jesus' resurrection. This is the first and only use of the phrase *Lord's day* in the New Testament. While in prayer and adoration St. John gets caught up in the Spirit. St. John will later write his gospel and remind us of the words of Jesus about prayer: *But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.*" (John 4:23-24) In truth, the whole of a Christian's life is meant to be lived in spirit and truth meaning being as close to God as possible. But there are times when we feel that Holy Spirit's presence – at times in prayer, a joyous moment made richer by faith or when in service to another. For St. John it is while he is in prayer, and it is here that he hears the voice of Christ speaking **as loud as a trumpet**. Remember, a trumpet is a liturgical instrument.

1:11 write...what you see: St. John is commanded by Jesus to record what he is about to experience. This is not simply a verbal dictation but a visual experience. And to whom is St. John to write? The **seven churches** of Asia Minor. Most scholars would say there were more Christian communities, but these were probably the larger Churches who would later have the resources to copy and distribute the letter. The cities are listed as they would be delivered to starting with Ephesus. And, it would take a two to three day walk between each of these cities as one goes to the next one.

The Vision of Christ 1:12-20

We get into the first vision and it is of a divine figure. *The figure is described in extraordinary images that appear strange if they are taken literally. However, if the meaning of each image is sought, they reveal a great deal about this heavenly being.* (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: Revelation) We will discover that St. John is borrowing images from the Old Testament books of Ezekiel and Daniel to describe Jesus in both human and divine terms.

1:12 seven gold lampstands: What St. John is describing could be understood as basically a menorah. A treasured religious article found in many Jewish homes today just as one would find a crucifix in many Catholic homes. The one St. John is describing is most likely the seven branched lampstand of pure gold that the priest kept burning every night at the Tabernacle of the Lord from Exodus (25:31-40; 27:21). It was meant to symbolize the presence of the unseen God. The menorah is a seven branched candelabra or it could be St. John saw seven of these menorah, either way scholars suggest that in this case the seven symbolize the seven Churches Jesus has already identified as the letter going out to. One commentary offers: *This is a reminder that the seven Churches remain aglow with the Spirit and depend on him (Jesus) to enlighten others.* (Ignatius Catholic Study Bible)

1:13 one like a son of man: Standing within these lamp stands is *one like a son of man*. In reading the gospels we encounter the phrase “son of man” on the lips of Jesus in referring to himself. In Hebrew/Aramaic it means “human being” in contrast to an angel or animal. It only occurs once in the Old Testament (Daniel 7:13-14) and describes a humanlike figure ascending to God and being given everlasting, universal kingship and sharing in the authority of God. The person speaking to St. John is described as wearing **ankle-length (long) robe**. Scholars believe that what St. John is seeing are the robes that a Levite (Jewish) priest might wear (Exodus 28:4, Sirach 45:8). The **gold sash around his chest** further indicates priestly authority and in this case, the highest authority. So in this moment Jesus stands before St. John as the High Priest of the heavenly Temple, surrounded by the Temple lamps. The one who has consecrated His people through the cross.

1:14 hair...as white as white wool: We read in Daniel 7:9 this same description of God, and I would suspect that most of us imagine God the father as having white hair. Biblically speaking white hair is symbolic of wisdom. (Now you know why I have naturally white hair) The description goes on to say that Jesus had **eyes were like flames of fire**. This can be understood to mean that Jesus has penetrating vision, able to discern and judge. (Sirach 23:19)

1:15 feet like burnished bronze: Taking this along with the eyes of fire, it resembles the description of an angel who appears to Daniel (10:6) and we also see it in Ezekiel (1:7). His voice **like the sound of many waters**. Here scholars suggest we think in terms of power. Think of Niagara Falls, or the waves of the ocean during a storm pounding against the shore.

1:16 right hand...seven stars: From a 1st century perspective, Roman emperors were often depicted in paintings with planets and stars surrounding them. It should make us think of the

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power of God so complete (seven) that He commands the heavens. Continuing this theme of God/Jesus as complete in power and majesty, St. John we hear that coming from Jesus' **mouth issued a sharp two edged-sword**. We read in the book of Isaiah that the Messiah will *strike the ruthless with the rod of his mouth* (11:4), as well as will make the mouth of His Servant a *sharp-edged sword* (49:2). St. Paul will use these images to speak of Christ as the one who defeats lawlessness at the end of time (2 Thess. 2:8). Through all this we should understand that the Lord speaks the truth which can be strengthening and comforting, when confronting evil God's Word destroys swiftly. Finally, completing this image of heavenly glory and power, St. John tells us that **his face shone like the sun at its brightest**.

1:17 I fell at his feet as though dead: I don't know about you but this would be my reaction if confronted with such a vision. This was St. John's reaction as well as Daniel's when he meet an angel (Dan 10:9). This heavenly being which we know to be Jesus places **his right hand** on St. John. This action of placing "the King" placing his right hand on a subject is meant to convey favor (a king does not touch the lowly. He has servants to do that.) and reassurance (just as any one of us would reach out to comfort someone.) Jesus then offers words of assurance, **Fear not**, and then goes on to support this call for calm by identifying Himself as **I am the first and the last**. These are the words that God uses to identify himself three times in Isaiah (41:4;44:6;48:12), so as to differentiate Himself from the pagan gods.

1:18 I died, and behold, I am alive for evermore: This statement is to further delineate just who this figure is – Jesus. For it was Jesus who died, rose from the dead and will rule in heaven for all eternity. A sign of that authority Jesus Christ holds **the keys to death and the netherworld**. Some translations will have Hades or Hell in the place of *netherworld*. All words for the same place – where people who, in the face of God, refuse to acknowledge God as God. While God/Jesus/Holy Spirit have ultimate authority over life and death, here we are asked to understand *death* to mean separation from God. Jesus stands before St. John holding these keys which identify Him as having ultimate authority.

1:19 what you see, what is and what is to take place: In this short statement we have the basic outline of the book. St. John is describing what he is seeing in this present vision (1:10-20), *what is* about to happen to the seven Churches as well as to Jerusalem and the Temple (2:1-19:10) and *what is to take place* at the end of all time (19:11-22:11)

1:20 As for the mystery: An element of apocalyptic literature a heavenly being explaining the elements of the vision. Jesus explains for St. John and for us that the **seven stars** are the **angels of the seven churches** which most scholars believe means the bishop of each of these seven Churches. Some scholars suggest rather than the bishop the seven angels mean the seven guardian angels of each of these churches. The **seven lamp stands** represent **the seven churches**. If we think back to the words of Jesus in speaking to the disciples and their mission, He called them the *light of the world* and challenged them to *set on a lamp stand where it gives light to all* (Matt 5:14-15). The challenge of this image and to each of us today is to remember

that our faith is meant to be seen by the world around us and therefore to lead others, in this dark world to Christ.

Reflection Questions:

- 1.** Often we think of Revelation as the final play book describing Jesus' return at the end of time. What are your thoughts about Jesus returning? If He were to return today would you be ready?
- 2.** When St. John was praying he was filled with the Spirit of God. Do you pray daily? How is your prayer life? What one thing could you do to make it better?

Catechism of the Catholic Church

Baptized as Holy Priesthood: 1140-1144

Blessing and Adoration: 2626-2628

Christ Descends to Hell: 632-637

Christ in the Tomb: 625-626

Christ Return in every moment: 673

Importance of Scripture: 2653-54

Prayer to be Delivered from the Evil One: 2854

The Lord's Day: 1166-1167

Two Participants in the One Priesthood of Christ: 1546-1547

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