

CHAPTER THREE

“LORD, GOD ALMIGHTY” (1:8)

I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

The Greek word for *Almighty* as a title of God is *Pantocrator*. The author uses it frequently, nine times in this book. It comes from the Greek, meaning *ruler of all*. In the churches of the East this is a common name of God carried over into theology, spirituality and art. Since the architecture of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., is derived from the Byzantine or Eastern style, high above the main altar in the apse is the Byzantine mosaic image of the *Pantocrator*. To convey the idea that Jesus is almighty, all-powerful, without peer or competitor, he is made to appear so stern, if not angry. There are those who feel the image would be more at home in the Pentagon. They have a point.

In the West, *Pantocrator* has not become part of our spiritual vocabulary, but we use synonyms, taken from Old Testament imagery: “Lord God Almighty, *Yahweh Sabaoth*, Lord of Hosts.” This vocabulary is borrowed from military language. To say that God is “Lord of Hosts” or “*Yahweh Sabaoth*” is to say that he is commander-in-chief.

The force and power of the title may have been diminished by repetition, but as a response to the Preface of every Mass we proclaim that he is “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of power and might.” The previous translation proclaimed him “Lord of Hosts,” which is the translation of *Yahweh Sabaoth*. This was one of the earliest and most common forms of address for God in the Hebrew Scriptures (used over 250 times!). God’s people, besieged on every side by their enemies, had only to raise their eyes to behold the *Sabaoth*, the hosts, the heavenly powers, the “troops” of *Yahweh*, who was their commander-in-chief.

When Israel settled in the land, she was vulnerable to the attacks of the surrounding nations: Canaan, Philistia, Syria, Edom and Moab, to say nothing of the great empires to the north and south that were ready to

pounce on her. In one of the earliest usages of the title, little David with his slingshot, challenges Goliath, the giant of the Philistines: “I come to you in the name of the Lord of Hosts, the God of the armies of Israel whom you have defied” (1 Samuel 17:45). He may have seemed to be alone and helpless, but almighty God in all of his power was with the lad. And David won! Or rather, the Lord of Hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, prevailed again on behalf of his people.

This military language of the commander-in-chief of the Israelite armed forces is carried even into the Bible’s poetry and song. The second half of Psalm 24 (vv. 7–10) is a celebration of victory when *Yahweh Sabaoth* on the Ark of the Covenant aboard a wheeled cart returns from battle. At the portal of the temple a choir chants:

“Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
That the King of glory may come in.”
A second choir, within the temple, chants:
“Who is the King of glory?”
Then the first choir, accompanying the Ark, chants the reply:
“The LORD, strong and mighty,
the LORD, mighty in battle.”
And they repeat the plea:
“Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.”
Then the refrain from within: “Who is this King of glory?” And
as the entrance to the Holy of Holies, the throne room of Yahweh
Sabaoth is opened to the resounding chorus:
“The LORD of hosts, / he is the King of glory.”
(The Advent hymn, “The King of Glory comes, the nation
rejoices” is derived from this passage.)

This concept of God as almighty creates a problem, however. If God is all-powerful, that does not leave room for anyone else to have any power. He

has it all. And in order to show that he has it all, every other creature must be depicted as powerless, even without the power to make a choice. It is for this reason that so many stories narrated in the Old Testament show that there is no contest when Almighty God is involved. They make for some incredible, and sometimes amusing, reading. Chapters four and five of Exodus basically tell the story of God commissioning Moses to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let his people go. But then God says of the supposedly almighty ruler of Egypt: Before you get to him I am going to harden his heart so that he will not let my people go, and then I can punish him for having a hardened heart! Obviously, Pharaoh had not the slightest chance. And that is precisely the point when you are dealing with the Lord almighty!

No less than the first and perhaps greatest theologian of the church, Saint Paul, wrestled with the problem from a personal point of view. Based upon his own conversion experience, he came to believe that the Jewish people would convert to Jesus *en masse*. As he nears the end of his life and writes to the Romans in preparation for his arrival there, he is at a loss to figure out why his kindred have not followed in his footsteps. Is it because they have rejected outright the call of Christ? Or has God withheld from them the grace of conversion? Had God predestined them to be deprived of the saving grace of Jesus, or in their stubbornness had they opted and freely chosen to be without it, and thus outside of salvation?

In trying to reconcile God's omnipotence and the free will with which he endowed his creatures, Paul's reasoning becomes convoluted and confusing, and then when he tries to give an analogy to illustrate it, it falls flat on its face.

You will say to me then, "Why then does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God? Will what is molded say to the one who molds it, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much

patience the objects of wrath that are made for destruction; and what if he has done so in order to make known the riches of his glory for the objects of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—including us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?” (Romans 9:19–23)

But a lump of clay has neither intelligence nor free will. So much for the analogy!

In utter frustration, two chapters of close and intricate arguing later, Paul cries out:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counselor?” (11:33–34)

Do we have a chance, or is God so in charge that everything is predestined? And if the latter is the case, are we not responsible, deserving of neither praise nor blame, reward nor punishment? We do have a chance. Obviously, the very fact that we have a Bible with God’s inspired and inviting word is a sure sign that we can say yes or no, I will or I will not. And just how it can be that God is all powerful and yet he made us so that we can either cooperate with him or resist him is at the very heart of the mystery of free will. Theologians and spiritual writers have wrestled with the question for centuries. And when all is said and done, the mystery remains. We must avoid what has been called the occupational hazard of theologians: their inability to admit: “I don’t know.” What we do know is that Almighty God has given us the gift of free will. If he had not, we would not be able to love, and that is what his word calls us to.

REFLECTION

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he

will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me....” (Matthew 25:31–36)

CHAPTER FOUR

YOUR BROTHER (1:9–11)

I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.

Is this John the Evangelist, the Beloved Disciple, John the Theologian, John the Baptist or another using the pseudonym John (cf. note on authorship on p. xiii)? Many books of the Bible are written under pseudonyms. And all other apocalypses are written under the pseudonym of a famous person like Moses or Enoch. Such anonymity gives a work a borrowed authority and also saves the author from being known to the church's enemies. It is enough to know that the human author is our "brother." The Greek word for *share* here (*koinonia*) is used in an intensive form. The author's deep sharing with us is not because we all belong to the same mutual fraternal organization or club. As Paul has told us thirty years before this was written, our sharing is because we are the body of Christ.

The author of this book, not writing from an ivory tower, knows what we are going through. He knows because he is carrying his own cross. He is in a Roman penal colony on an isolated, waterless and barren island. He is suffering because he is a witness (in Greek, *martyr*) to Jesus and his gospel. That is what it takes to be a Christian! Jesus carried his cross and warned that we could not be his disciples unless we carried ours. He calls for "patient endurance" because just as surely as the cross was followed by the Resurrection, their sharing in suffering will lead to their sharing in the kingdom, which they have prayed for each time they called upon the source of their sharing: "Our Father."

Whether penal colony or imperial persecution, he wants them to know that whatever cross they have, they are not in it alone. Christ has called them not only to suffering and death, but also resurrection and triumph.

It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written:

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:34–39)

Cross and resurrection, sacrifice and exaltation, suffering and triumph, struggle and victory, martyrdom and crown, persecution and vindication, slavery and redemption: These are two sides of the same coin. We will not have one without the other, because the disciple is not greater than the Master.

It is the proclamation of this mystery that a heavenly voice commands Paul to share with seven communities on the mainland. This is not just because they are united in suffering but also because they are “church.” His Greek word *ekklesia* is from *ek*, meaning “out from” and *kaleo*, meaning “call.” They are Christians because they have been called out from isolation, self-pity, trying to save themselves, self-centeredness and futility. They have been called to be sharers, church, the body of Christ. That is the reason for which he was arrested. But even prison did not silence him. He is still the sharer and bearer of the Good News.

REFLECTION

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:11–16)