Everyone knows the world is in an economic crisis. What everyone doesn't know, however, is the *real reason* for the crisis. There are many theories that the crisis is caused by too much spending, trade deficits, fiat currency, national debt, natural disasters, and many other suggested causes. Certainly all these play their part in fomenting the crisis, but they don't tell us the ultimate reason they are all coming together. The real reason why economies fail is that they are ordained by God for the sins of man. God knows we need a stable economy to provide for our basic needs as human beings (food, clothing, shelter, *etc*). As such, it should come as no surprise that one of God's main punishments for sin is to deprive or reduce the amount of these essential items in hopes that man will see his destitute state and call upon God and repent of his sins. God has done this with every society since the dawn of time. If the society begins to slide into immorality, the economy of that society will soon begin to crumble by God's direct intervention. One can examine the historical profile of any ancient or modern civilization to confirm this fact. One will also see that if the society ignores these divine warnings and punishments and remains on its path of immorality, then total collapse and large tools of death will be the next step in God's program. If the society recognizes its errors and reforms, then God will withdraw his judgment and the economy will be restored to a healthy condition.

This divine pattern of judgment is outlined in Apocalypse chapter 6 in the famous passage

about the Four Horsemen. Despite what fanciful applications one may have heard proclaimed about the meaning of these intriguing symbols, they are really very simple. The four horses represent how God approaches mankind, in any society and at any time in history. Every society goes through the same four stages, whether it's the Greeks, Romans, Spanish, French, English, American, Russian or Chinese. Each society is given the knowledge of God and then is tested based on that knowledge. If the society passes the test, they are blessed. If they fail, they are punished. If after being punished they do not reform their ways, death will be the ultimate punishment.

THE WHITE HORSE

The WHITE horse represents God's imparting of Himself to man. It is the knowledge of God we obtain either indirectly from the creation and the laws God puts into the heart of each man (Romans 1:18-20; 2:13-15; 10:18) or from that which He has given directly in the Gospel of Jesus Christ (John 3:16).

THE RED HORSE

The RED horse represents the forces of evil in the world, Satan and his minions, who tempt men to turn away from God. God taught us from the beginning of creation that this kind of testing would be his normal program, for he allowed Adam and Eve to be tempted by the devil.

Throughout time God has permitted this testing of man, for God's program is designed to determine who will follow Him and who will follow the devil. There are only two choices. Man has a free will to choose whom he will serve.

THE BLACK HORSE

If after this divine testing man decides to turn away from God, which occurs when he sins (*e.g.*, homosexuality, abortion, divorce, adultery, murder, theft, sexual perversion, blasphemy, idol worship, and many other sins), then God will bring the BLACK horse, which symbolizes His earthly judgments. These judgments are ultimately economic in nature, for whether the judgment is from floods or misfortune, they are all designed to deprive man of his needs and desires so that he will be forced to remember God and hopefully repent of his sins.

THE PALE HORSE

If, after receiving God's chastisements, men do not repent of their sins, then God sends the PALE horse, which represents death and hell. Since there is no longer any hope of repentance, God consigns man to death, and ultimately, eternal damnation. As noted above, God follows this same four-stage pattern with each society and with each individual. It never changes. As such, our present economic crisis is a sign that we are being sent the BLACK horse. We are being given a chance to turn back to God and repent of our sins, and if we fail to do so, then the PALE horse will come next.

Apocalypse Chapter VI

Detailed Commentary

1 Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say, as with a voice of thunder, "Come!"

2 And I saw, and behold, a white horse, and its rider had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.

3 When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!"

4 And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another; and he was given a great sword.

5 When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" And I saw, and behold, a black horse, and its rider had a balance in his hand;

6 and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, “A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; but do not harm oil and wine!”

7 When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!”

8 And I saw, and behold, a pale horse, and its rider’s name was Death, and Hades followed him; and they were given power over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.

9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne;

10 they cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?”

11 Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

12 When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood,

13 and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale

14 the sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

15 Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals and the rich and the strong, and every one, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains,

16 calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb;

17 for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?”

As in Apocalypse chapter 4, the Four Living Beings symbolize God’s rule and dominion as it is at the present time, which includes all the agents and agencies he employs. They are said to be “full of eyes,” symbolizing how God is looking intensely at earth, in every direction and in every hiding place. We also noted that the reference to the eyes being “in front and behind” shows us that the living creatures look to the earth in order to observe its happenings and to God for his decisions on what is observed. Because we can’t see God, we might be tempted to think that he is far away in heaven and doesn’t know or care about what is happening on earth. But the bodies of the Four Living Beings covered with eyes let us know in symbolic language that God is fully aware of what is taking place. God knows the smallest details and he makes his decisions accordingly, and thus we have the journeys of the Four Horsemen.

The Four Horsemen

In Ap 6:1, one of the Four Living Beings summons the first of the four horsemen. There is a one-to-one correspondence between each Living Being and each horseman. These four horsemen are actually symbolic extensions of the Living Beings such that they do their bidding. The Four Living Beings receive their information from the one sitting on the Throne, and they, in turn, give this information to the four horsemen. The four horsemen then accomplish the will of God on earth. The meaning of the symbolism is this: each society, each culture, each land and people have been given “four horsemen” at various times in history in accord with their responses to God. The Old Testament is filled with numerous stories of how this drama is played out in history, both with Israel and the Gentile nations. St. Paul tells us that the Old Testament narratives were written so that we can know how God will deal with us, for God’s principles never change (cf. 1Co 10:6, 11; Rm 15:14). Moreover, these divine principles are applied both on a global scale and on an individual level.

The White Horse

It is clear that the white horse is superior to the other three horses because it was introduced by the "voice of thunder," which, as noted in other Scriptures, is associated with God's judgment (Jb 37:2; 40:9; Ap 14:2; Sr 43:17). The white horse's superiority is also evident from the prominence of its mission. This horse's purpose is "to conquer" and thus he has come with all the typical regalia of a warrior set for battle. The white horseman's imagery is similar to that which we will encounter in Ap 19:11-16, which refers specifically to Christ's coming to conquer. While in Ap 19:11-16 Christ, at the time of Final Judgment comes to smite the nations with his word-sword, here in Ap 6:1 the white horse brings the word of God to all the world, both its blessings and its judgments. The white horse therefore delivers the message of the Gospel, which message "conquers" by either saving or damning those who hear its words (cf. Mt 24:13-14; Jn 3:16-19; 5:28-29; 2Co 2:15-16). Those who are saved by the white horse are the martyrs of Ap 6:9-10. Those who are damned will experience the wrath associated with the red, black and pale horses described in Ap 6:3-8.

The Red Horse

For whatever reason, all of the horses are introduced with the same language: "And I saw, and behold…" (Ap 6:2, 5, 8), except for the red horse, which simply reads: "And out came another horse, bright red." In any case, there is little doubt to its meaning: the red horse brings the judgment of war from the Throne. The red horse brings to fulfillment Jesus' words in Mt 24:6-7: "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places." The red horse is said to take peace from the earth. This means that God's normal plan for the world is peace, but when the message of the white horse, the Gospel, is rejected, the red horse will bring war among the nations. Of course, these wars are under the express plan, control, and directive of God himself, who, as noted previously, bases his decisions on the reports given to him by the Four Living Beings who see all that transpires on earth.

As Catholics, we have firsthand knowledge of these divine workings. In the Fatima revelations, for example, both World War I and World War II are predicted and fulfilled. The vision to the three child seers revealed precisely when the wars would start and when they would stop, and each war was said to be the result of the wickedness of mankind. Each war could be curtailed if the world's enemy would be put at bay, which was to be accomplished

through the consecration of a specific nation, Russia, a direct request from heaven by Our Lady. The consecration would bring about the conversion of this enemy and the world would be converted to Christ.

In the case of the Fatima revelations, we see a clear example of the workings of both the “white” and the “red” horse. The white horse comes and gives his message of salvation and judgment. Depending on the response to the white horse, the One on the Throne determines the next course of action and reveals it to the Living Beings, and they, in turn, release the next horseman to do his job. The Fatima revelation shows us that war is never accidental or incidental. If heaven has determined that war will serve as a judgment against men, no amount of politics and deal-making will ever stop it from coming if men remain in their sin. These are direct responses from heaven, showing us that God is intimately involved with our lives on earth.

The Black Horse

In Ap 6:5, the next journey is conducted by the black horse, with his control over the wheat and barley and the oil and wine. First, it is not necessary to view the black horse as the opposite of the white horse. It is also not necessary to allegorize the items in the passage. In the past, for example, some interpreters believed that the wheat and barley represented Jews of the first century while the oil and wine represented the Christians. The black horse is merely giving us another picture of God’s control over the world, and specifically what God uses to warn us of our sin and his further judgments against that sin. In this case, God commissions the black horse to make food scarce. This is no surprise, since famine was one of the more common divine judgments designed to bring man to his knees (cf. Gn 41:27ff; 2Sm 21:1ff; 24:13ff; 1Kg 8:37f; 6:25; Ps 105:16; Is 14:30; Jr 11:22). There is no pain like hunger.

Wheat and barley are common comestibles upon which all people depend, yet in this context we understand that these two items are representative of all foods the earth produces. In times of blessing (flowing from the people’s obedience), wheat, barley and all other comestibles are plentiful and given at a fair price. But in this dire situation, a quart of wheat costs a denarius, which in those days was equal to a day’s wage. Here a man must work all day just to feed himself, with little left over for any other necessity of life. Although there is no abject famine (as will occur when the pale horse comes), there is scarcity and hard labor. Since mankind must spend his full wage on wheat and barley, he has no money left for oil and wine, which at this time in history were the two most precious commodities on the market and considered luxuries. Whereas in the past he was able to buy these items and enjoy the pleasure they brought, they are now out of reach, although God keeps them on the market, as it were, to

remind man that he is being judged (cf. Dt 7:13; 11:14; 28:51; 1Ch 12:40; Er 6:9; Ps 104:15 (103:15 LXX); Jr 31:12; Hs 2:8). When the oil and wine are dried up, then we will know that God has brought severe judgment and the warnings are coming to an end (cf. Jl 1:10; Mc 6:15; Hg 1:11).

We might also say that the “oil and the wine” represent the Gospel. Whereas man’s sustenance is rationed and thus serves as a sign of God’s chastisement, the Gospel itself is not taken away. More specifically, these precious commodities serve as the means whereby the people repent and restore themselves to God before the pale horse comes on the scene, bringing a complete famine.

These judgments are brought against mankind because of sin. Often mankind’s sin is so bad that only a total devastation of his land can break him down to the point of making him realize that he has forsaken God. Pleasures have a way of squeezing God out of our lives, and thus God takes the pleasures away and replaces them with hard labor, and even then, only enough to buy a minimal amount of food. Occupied with work and mere survival, there will be no time for creating evil. The same is true for us. If we are falling into sin, God will bring his warnings through chastisement (Hb 12:1-13). On the other hand, when our ways please the Lord, He makes even our enemies to be at peace with us (Pr 16:7).

The Pale Horse

The rider of the fourth horse is the only one given a name, which is “Death and Hades.” He is also “given power,” which comes from the Four Living Beings, and ultimately from the Lamb himself (Ap 5:11-14). It is important that we notice the dynamic relationship between the Throne and the Horsemen, since some have been tempted to think that the power comes from Satan. Similar to the first three riders, the fourth rider on the pale horse directs his attention to the ungodly of the world. Each horseman is employed by God solely for the purpose of bringing judgment upon the earth and, if they do not repent, eventually taking the ungodly to Hades where they will await the Final Judgment. In order to bring them to Hades, the fourth horseman must initiate their death. This is not death in the general sense (as someone dying of old age), but death in the calamitous sense, as in a direct judgment from God. Hades is said to be following “Death” because as the people are killed, Hades swallows their souls.

Certainly some of the godly will also die in the cataclysms brought by the pale horse, but in their case the divine judgments are understood as trials, sufferings or chastisements

designed to bring them closer to God. God has allowed his people to be killed throughout history and it will continue until the end of time.

Judgment over the "Fourth Part"

The pale horse is given authority over the "fourth part of the earth." The reference to the "fourth" has been a bit puzzling to commentators. Jerome translated the Greek as: "And power was given to him over the four parts of the earth," but this was an obvious mistake in translation. "Fourth" is used in the same sense as is "third part" in Ap 8:7-12 (which, we will see later, symbolizes the extent of the Death of the pale horse). In other words, it is a fractional, not total, judgment. While the judgment inflicted on the "fourth" of the earth is certainly less than the total judgment at the end of the world (Ap 6:12-17), it is more than we would encounter in any one disaster on earth. As noted in Ap 6:6, the symbols of wheat and barley represent the partial judgment of God upon the ungodly, and thus in Ap 6:7 the "fourth" also signifies a partial judgment from God. A "fourth" is big enough, however, for us to take notice, yet still small enough not to depict the Final Judgment.

Some interpreters attempt to pinpoint the judgment of the pale horse to a specific period in time (e.g., in the third century when plagues decimated Rome and 5000 people died daily) but this is not John's intent. The vision he receives is much more universal in scope. It refers to God's partial judgments throughout history. From a global perspective, in any given year, about 50 million people die on earth in the modern age. Many die because of natural causes, but it would not be any exaggeration to posit that a "fourth" of them (e.g., 17,000,000), die because of God's direct judgment. Of course, such figures are not meant to be precise; rather, they are only rough estimates in symbolic language of the quantitative dimension of how God's judgments manifest themselves in the world.

Another symbolic action is that the pale horse brings about the death of the fourth part in "four" different ways: sword, famine, pestilence, and beasts. Notice that one form of death comes from murderous men, the other three from natural disasters. God's use of these four implements of judgment (sword, famine, pestilence and beasts) is a common theme in Scripture. We see this in the 10 plagues of Egypt (Exodus 1-10), in the judgments against Israel (Ez 5:17; 14:21, Jr 16:4); the chastisements against David (1Ch 21:12); and many others (Lv 26:6; 2Ch 20:9; Jb 5:20-22; Is 51:19; Jr 5:12; 11:22; 14:12-18; 15:2; 16:4; 27:8, 13; Ez 33:27).

Robert Sungenis, Ph.D.

Catholic Apologetics International

May 2010