

Katholische Kirchengemeinde Stuttgart-Möhringen und -Sonnenberg

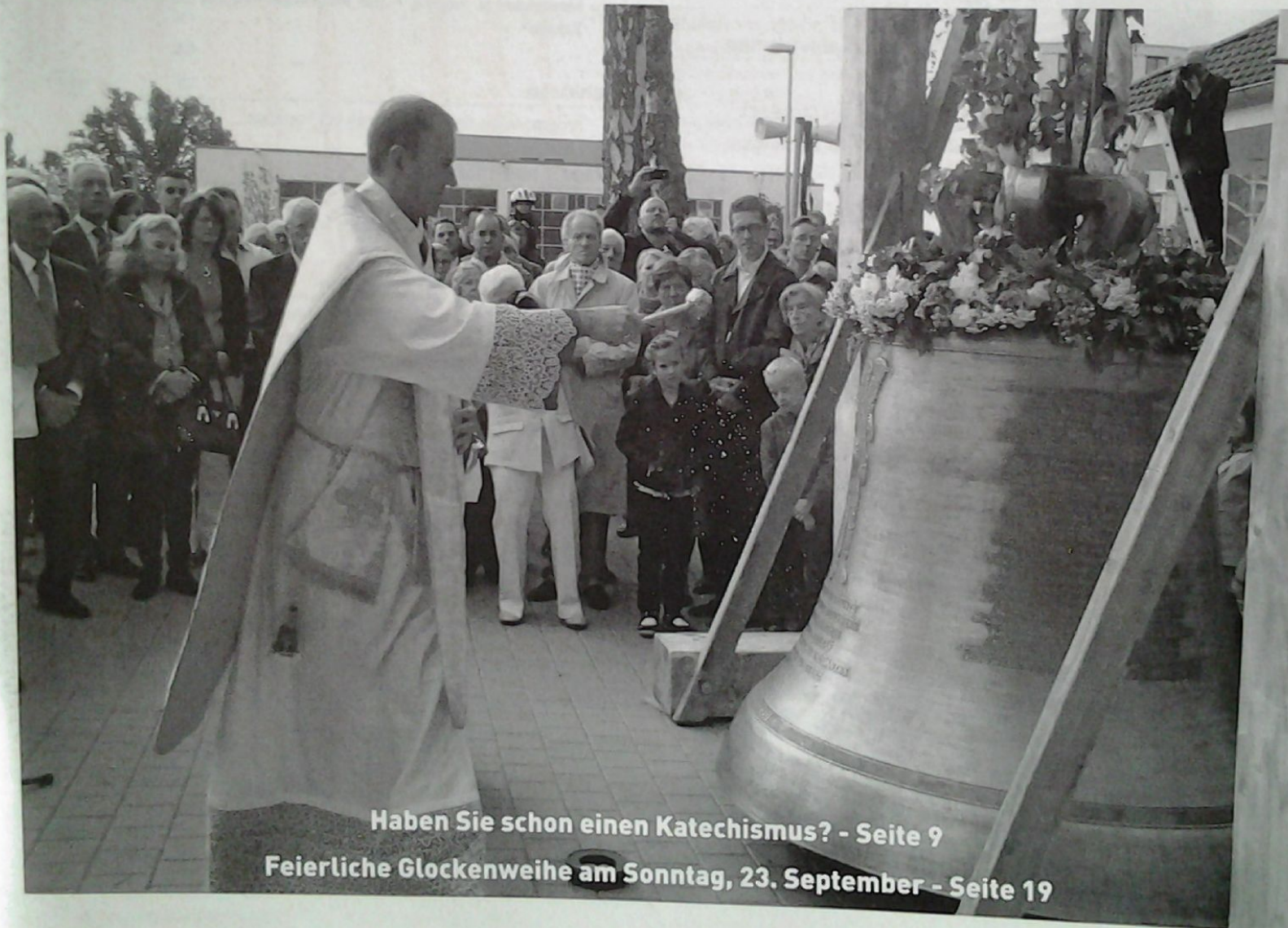
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Illustration: The Light of the World
by William Holman Hunt. 1853

Keble College, Oxford.

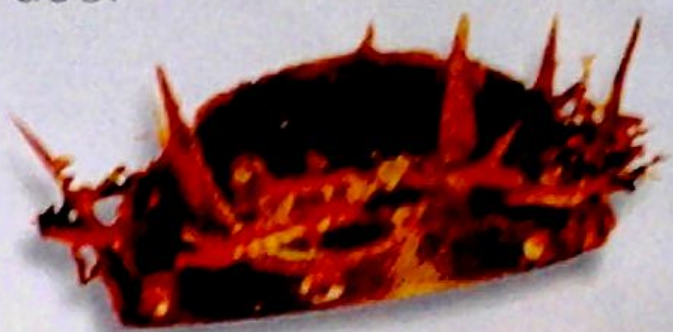
Text: Michael Morris, O.P.

This is the most famous religious image of the Victorian era, if not the entire nineteenth century. It is a picture of a haloed Christ standing in a landscape over which the darkness of night is giving way to day. He is wearing two crowns.



The Warden and Fellows of Keble, Oxford.
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One is a crown of thorns; the other is a crown of gold. He also wears a cope and carries a lantern with a flame that radiates in the foreground. With his other hand he knocks at a wooden door. Will anyone answer? The weeds would indicate that the door has not been opened for a very long time.



What does this mean, and why is it famous?

It is a painting filled with symbols, and it was left for the artist to explain what it meant.

The painting is by an English artist named William Holman Hunt. He wrote that the painting was inspired by a passage in the Book of Revelation: *«Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.»* The artist coupled this

passage with yet another found in the Gospel of John: *«I am the light of the world: he who follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.»*

Scripture provided Hunt with the overall inspiration for the composition of his canvas. But in the detail of the painting the artist devised numerous other symbols which act as clues to be interpreted by the learned observer of his art. If we look at *The Light of the World* in the way that the artist intended, we discover that the painting is not about landscapes and lanterns at all, but rather it is about the relationship between the soul and God.



According to Hunt the shut door represents the obstinately shut mind. The weeds are the result of daily neglect and the accumulated hindrances of sloth. The orchard outside with its delectable fruit hints at the feast that awaits the searching soul. While



darkness is a natural symbol for ignorance, it is being overtaken here by the light of the rising sun. The halo around Christ's head acts as a kind of sun. It accentuates the crown of thorns, symbol of his passion, which is interwoven with his crown of gold, a symbol of his kingship. The cope of a priest completes the ensemble. It is fastened by three breastplates. On the right is the square breastplate of the High Priest of the Hebrews. The circular clasp represents the ancient breastplate of the gentile priesthood. And these are joined by a cross made