

The Papal Antichrist “Prophecy”

From the very beginnings of the Christian Church, the end-time manifestation of the ‘Antichrist’ became a fixed element of Christian tradition. The term itself has its origin in the New Testament (1Jn 2,18-19.22), where there are a number of passages dealing with this expectation.¹ These scattered references were later brought together and developed by the Church Fathers, so that, by the third century, it was widely taught that the Antichrist would be a human figure, a person, who would rule the world on behalf of Satan for a brief period at the end of history, and that he would persecute the people of God.² His reign would be brought to an end by the intervention of the Lord himself, at his second coming.

In the course of time, however, the Antichrist tradition became so embellished with bizarre and fantastic speculations that its real and historical significance was obscured. It is not surprising then, that in modern times, scholars have come to consider the Antichrist tradition as a ‘myth’, or a ‘legend’, with little or no relation to future, end-historical events.³ In the Catholic Church, it is rare to find a priest, biblical scholar or theologian who will affirm the early Church’s teaching on Antichrist as a person. Instead, the ‘Antichrist’ is explained in a collective way, as the collection of people through whom Satan has acted, and continues to act, throughout history.⁴ The expectation of Antichrist as a person has all but disappeared and those who continue to hold this teaching are guided, not by Scripture, but by popular visionaries.

It seems to have been the renowned Abbott Joachim of Fiore, writing in the 12th century, who started a tradition that the Antichrist would be a leader of the Catholic Church, a “Pope”. He wrote: “*Toward the end of the world, Antichrist will overthrow the Pope and usurp his See.*” The Protestants seized on this tradition and, by applying it to the contemporary Pope, made it one of the slogans justifying their separation from the Church of Rome. Ever since, many are the Protestants who have identified every Pope as Antichrist and the Church of Rome as Babylon, as described in the Book of Revelation. The adoption of Joachim’s Papal Antichrist “prophecy” by the Protestants, however, has not deterred many Catholics from believing and maintaining this tradition. In fact, it has received a huge boost, in modern times, from

¹ Especially 2Thess 2,1-12; Mk 13,6.14.22; Mt 24,5.15.24; Lk 21,8; Rev 11,7; 13,1-8; 17,8-14.

² For a brief account of this tradition in the early Church, see Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1996; 57-70. Also David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson 1998; Excursus 13B, 751-55. Apart from the biblical sources, special note should be made of the *Didache* (end of first century) which describes the end-historical appearance of “the Deceiver of the World...pretending to be a Son of God and doing signs and wonders, and the earth will be delivered into his hands, and he will work such wickedness as there has never been since the beginning” (*Didache* 16). The Antichrist teaching was important for several Fathers of the second century, especially Sts. Irenaeus and Hippolytus, and many other celebrated churchmen of the following centuries, including St. Cyril of Jerusalem and St. Jerome. In the 18th part of his 15th Catechical Lecture, delivered at the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, St Cyril says: “*Guard yourself then, O man; you have the signs of Antichrist; and remember them not only yourself, but impart them also freely to all. If you have a child according to the flesh, admonish him of this now; if you have begotten one through catechizing, put him also on his guard, lest he receive the false one as the True. For the mystery of iniquity does already work (2Thess 2:7)*” (from <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310115.htm>).

³ This is evident, for example, in the titles of some of the most important academic studies on the subject, over the last century: *The Antichrist Legend: A Chapter in Jewish Folklore*, by Wilhelm Bousset (Eng Trans. 1896), *The Origins and Early Development of the Antichrist Myth*, Gregory C. Jenks (1991); *The Combat Myth*, Adela Yarbro Collins (1976).

⁴ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 675, and our article at <http://www.newtorah.org/Antichrist.html>.

visionaries issuing prophecies about the end of history in the name of Mary, mother of Jesus. Perhaps the best known of this kind was recorded at La Salette, in France, in the 19th century, by Melanie Calvat: “*Rome will lose the faith and become the seat of Antichrist. The Church will be in eclipse, the world will be in dismay.*” Since then, and especially towards the end of the 20th century, there has been a steady stream of Marian prophecies, issued by various visionaries, repeating the same formula: Maria Valtorta, Don Stefano Gobbi (for his “Movimento Sacerdotale Mariano”), Ms. Vassula Ryden, and others. It is a view that seems to be associated with a triumphalist form of Millennialism, the start of a Catholic “Era of Peace”,⁵ which can also be traced back to the Blessed Joachim of Fiore and his “Third Age – the Age of the Spirit”.

With such a respected provenance and wide circulation, it is not surprising that the belief that the Antichrist will be a future Pope has gained such a persistent foothold in the Church, but respected provenance and wide circulation do not make it true. Can we really accept that one day, sooner or later, the Pope, who preaches eternal salvation, will be replaced in his office by the Antichrist, who takes his followers with him to eternal condemnation? Such a flip in the leadership of the world’s oldest institution seems far-fetched to say the least, but is nevertheless taken seriously by a great many faithful people.

At this point, it is worth reflecting on the effects and consequences of tolerating this highly contentious prophecy in the Church.

1. It casts doubt on the very words of Jesus:

Shortly after the commissioning of Peter as head of the Church, Jesus goes on to assure his disciples that “the gates of Hades will not prevail against her” (Mt 16,18). The gates of Hades and the netherworld will never be able to resist the Church’s saving mission. This assurance would be empty if there is ever a time, in her history, during which the Church’s saving mission is led by the Antichrist, for, as the embodiment of Satan, the Antichrist is the archenemy of the Church’s saving mission. This prophecy works to sow doubt in the words of this promise of Jesus Christ.

2. It casts doubt and suspicion on each and every Pope:

⁵ In a section entitled ‘**The Three Ages of the World**’, Dr Kelly Bowring writes: “At the monastery in Casamari, south of Rome, the twelfth century Italian monk, Bl. Joachim of Fiore, contributed greatly to Christian prophetic thinking. He has been called the most important prophetic thinker of the whole medieval period and maybe, after the Apostle John, the most important in the history of Christianity. Joachim saw human history as aligned in three ages with the Holy Trinity. The first age of the Father had been the age of Ancient Israel. The second age of the Son has been the age of the Church. The third age of the Spirit, brought about by a great purification, will usher in a time of peace, and the whole world will look like and live like a monastery and people will believe like in ancient times.....”

As the third stage begins, the **Latins (Catholics) and Greeks (Orthodox) will be united** in the new spiritual kingdom, freed alike from the fetters of the letter; **the Jews will be converted**, and the “*Eternal Gospel*” will abide until the end of the world. In this third age, that of the Kingdom and the Holy Spirit, there will be a new dispensation of universal love, which will proceed from the Gospel of Christ, but transcend the letter of it, and in which there will be no need from disciplinary institutions.

Prophesizing about the upheaval that would occur before the era of peace, Joachim of Fiore held that the third epoch would begin after some great cataclysm. And he prophesied about this, saying: “*Towards the end of the world, Antichrist will overthrow the pope and usurp his see.*” *The Secrets, Chastisement, and Triumph Of the Two Hearts of Jesus and Mary And What Heaven is Calling Us To Do*, by Kelly Bowring, Cumming, GA: Two Hearts Press, LLC, 2009, pp. 215-217.

Since nobody knows the time of the end of history, nor the time immediately before the end when the Antichrist will be revealed, there is a temptation to regard every Pope with the suspicion that he may be the ultimate Antichrist. His words are weighed and his actions are scrutinized for indications this way or that. Mentally infected by this prophecy, the Catholic faithful may always have to cope with this nagging doubt about their leader. Furthermore, if not this Pope, then maybe the next one. Can such a person ever feel comfortable inside the Church?

3. It casts doubt on the entire leadership of the Church (the Papal electors):

The Pope is elected by a process involving more than a hundred cardinals, themselves chosen from among the bishops in all the world. If the Antichrist is going to take over the leadership of the Catholic Church, he will first have to be elected by these cardinals. To believe that these leading churchmen could one day elect Antichrist to the throne of the Successor of Peter induces a baseless lack of faith in entire leadership of the Catholic Church and, along with it, a questioning of obedience and loyalty. Taken to the extreme, this “prophecy” could be a significant factor in the growth of schismatic movements within the Church.

4. It deters people from joining the Church:

People coming to the faith from outside, or from other denominations or religions, may be shaken and deterred from their desire to join the Catholic Church if they ever become convinced that Antichrist would sooner or later be at her head. They may rightly question themselves about joining an organization with the intention of gaining eternal salvation, but which, at some point in the future, would put themselves, or their descendents, in close proximity to the prince of eternal condemnation. Those who are outside the faith would rightly be confirmed in their prejudice against such an organization.

5. It maybe a factor impeding ecumenical efforts:

We have already mentioned the role of the Papal Antichrist “prophecy” in the separation of the Protestant “Reform” Churches. It is worthwhile asking whether this belief may not be acting, even up to the present time, in maintaining this separation. Similarly, may it not be operating, consciously or even unconsciously, in the hearts of those members of the Orthodox Churches whose loathing for the Catholic Church knows no limits and permits of no compromise? If so, then it is really not going too far to suggest that this prophecy is contributing to the continued failure to restore full communion between Rome and the Orthodox Churches, especially since the main impediment concerns the role of the Papal office.

This short reflection on the Papal Antichrist “prophecy”, within and outside the Church, reveals a troubling list of actual, and potential, negative effects: it sows doubt about the words of Christ, about the Pope, about the leadership of the Church and about the permanence of her salvific mission. It may therefore be a factor deterring people from joining the Church, and confirming outsiders in their prejudice against her. It maybe at the base of the failure of ecumenical efforts to repair division and restore Church unity. In a few words, this prophecy is nothing more than a piece of diabolical propaganda that causes doubt, division and confusion in the Church. It can and should be compared to a “curse”.

Having explored the nature and extent of the problem caused by the Papal Antichrist “prophecy”, there is no alternative but to refute and utterly reject it. Instead of relying on the mediaeval speculations of Joachim of Fiore and a long list of popular visionaries, there must be a “return to the sources” in the New Testament, and to the teaching of the Early Church. Without doubt, the results of returning to the sources will allow the religious authorities to expel this “curse” from the hearts and minds of the faithful.

To those who believed that the Day of the Lord had already come, St. Paul wrote: “...that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes himself and exalts himself against every so-called god or object, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you this? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing and his coming” (2Thess 2,3-8).

In this passage, St. Paul unambiguously describes the Antichrist figure, whom he calls ‘the man of lawlessness’ and ‘the son of perdition’, as a person who will reveal himself by taking his seat in the temple of God. In St. Paul’s mind, this was the renovated Temple in Jerusalem, which was rapidly nearing completion under King Herod and generating a great deal of messianic fervour among the Jewish people. For St. Paul, therefore, the Antichrist was going to be welcomed by those Jews who had rejected Jesus Christ because they were expecting their messiah to be a successful military leader who would restore their political and religious sovereignty. For a time this was being prevented by the Roman occupation of their Temple, City and country, but clearly St. Paul foresees that this would eventually be withdrawn, or defeated, thus allowing the ‘man of lawlessness’ to be revealed. The context of his appearance, according to this prophecy of St Paul, is the false messianic expectation of the Jews.⁶

The Antichrist prophecy in the ‘Little Apocalypse’ of the Gospels of Matthew (Mt 24,1-25,46) and Mark (Mk 13,1-37) alludes cryptically to the coming of the Antichrist with an expression that recalls ‘the little horn’ of Daniel’s prophecy (Dan 7-12): ‘the abomination of desolation standing in a holy place’. Again, as in St. Paul’s

⁶ Strong confirmation of this is found in the 15th Catechical Lecture of St. Cyril of Jerusalem,: “And again he says, Who opposes and exalts himself against all that is called God, or that is worshipped; (against every God; Antichrist forsooth will abhor the idols,) so that he seats himself in the temple of God” (2Thess2:4). What temple then? He means, the Temple of the Jews which has been destroyed. For God forbid that it should be the one in which we are! Why say we this? That we may not be supposed to favour ourselves. For if he comes to the Jews as Christ, and desires to be worshipped by the Jews, he will make great account of the Temple, that he may more completely beguile them; making it supposed that he is the man of the race of David, who shall build up the Temple which was erected by Solomon. And Antichrist will come at the time when there shall not be left one stone upon another in the Temple of the Jews, according to the doom pronounced by our Saviour ; for when, either decay of time, or demolition ensuing on pretence of new buildings, or from any other causes, shall have overthrown all the stones, I mean not merely of the outer circuit, but of the inner shrine also, where the Cherubim were, then shall he come with all signs and lying wonders, exalting himself against all idols; at first indeed making a pretence of benevolence, but afterwards displaying his relentless temper, and that chiefly against the Saints of God.” (Cyril of Jerusalem, 15th Catechical Lecture, para 15, taken from <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310115.htm>).

2nd letter to the Thessalonians, the ‘holy place’ refers to the Second Temple in Jerusalem. This is going to be the place where the Antichrist will establish his idolatrous form of worship.

The most detailed prophecy of the Antichrist, however, is given by St. John in the Book of Revelation. In this prophecy, the Antichrist is described as the personal representative of all diabolical power and authority (Rev 13,1-4) – the embodiment of Satan. His personal appearance is heralded by the murder of two Christian witnesses in Jerusalem, at the end of their prophetic mission (11,7-13). He then goes on to rule briefly over the whole world and subject the faithful to a severe persecution (13,1-9). His reign is consolidated by the establishment of a personality cult, which is forcefully promoted by an assistant called the false prophet. Those who refuse to participate in this cult are outlawed, or killed as martyrs who will attain heaven (13,11-17; 15,2). On the other hand, those who do participate in the cult will suffer eternal condemnation (14,9-11). The Antichrist’s reign is terminated in a war won by Christ at his second coming, and the final judgment follows quickly (19,11-21).

There is one sign described in the text which indicates that the idolatrous personality cult of the Antichrist described in Rev 13,11-17 will be based on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, as in the other Antichrist prophecies mentioned above.⁷ His false prophet “*performs great signs such that he even makes fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of men*” (Rev 13,13). In the history of the ancient Israelite cult, the sign of fire falling from heaven appeared at the consecration of a new altar and indicated divine confirmation (Lev 9,24; 1Chr 21,26; 2Chr 7,1; 2Macc 1,18-36). So the false prophet’s imitation of this sign, in an impressive but inauthentic way, implies his participation in the dedication of a new altar connected to the ancient Israelite cult.⁸ This act certainly entails the reconstruction of the temple on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Despite occupying the most sacred site of the ancient temple in Jerusalem (cf. 2Thess 2,4; Mt 24,15; Mk 13,14), the cult established and enforced by the false prophet is nevertheless directed towards the worship of a false messiah (the first beast) and the source of his authority, the devil (Rev 13,2-3.8.15).⁹

Having considered the scriptural basis for understanding the Antichrist as the false fulfilment of the Jewish messianic expectation, based in a rebuilt third temple in Jerusalem, it is worthwhile considering the evidence, also in the Book of Revelation, that tells us this does not occur in Rome. In this prophecy, Rome is called Babylon and at some point during his reign, the ruler we have identified with Antichrist makes an alliance with 10 kings and, in accordance with the will of God, they destroy

⁷ Especially in the light of other NT prophecies: 2Thess 2,4; Mt 24,15; Mk 13,14.

⁸ The imitation of this sign by the false prophet also suggests that he wishes to identify himself with Elijah, since it recalls the divine powers given to this prophet (cf. 2Kgs 1,9-14; 1Kgs 18,30-40).

⁹ Modern interpretations of the religious activity described in this passage identify it with the imperial cult – a form of pagan idolatry practiced in the first century AD, which made the image of the Emperor an object of worship. Very few commentators seem to notice the messianic overtones in this passage, or the allusion to ancient Israelite prophetic and ceremonial traditions. Those scholars who have noticed these allusions do not seem to be aware of their incompatibility with first-century pagan practices. In fact there is only one religion into which the religious activity described in this passage fits, and that is Judaism, especially those branches of orthodox Judaism that await the rebuilding of their temple in its former place. In the Halachah defined by Maimonides, in fact, the rebuilding of the temple in its place is the act that definitively identifies Judaism’s messiah and the inauguration of its messianic age (*The Code [Mishneh Torah]*, Book 14: Judges; Treatise 5: Kings and Wars, chs. 11-12, 238-42). In this it differs fundamentally from the Christian view, as represented in the Apocalypse, which sees this act as diabolical, and its instigator as the Antichrist.

Babylon completely and forever (Rev 17,16-17).¹⁰ The Antichrist would not destroy Rome if Rome were the seat and centre of his authority. This is surely sufficient evidence that the Antichrist is not based in Rome.

Furthermore, the text says that, before Rome is destroyed, God says “*come out of her my people*” (Rev 18,4) and subsequently there is no mourning for loss of life (Rev 18,9-19). This tells us that all the people in the part of Rome that is destroyed obey God’s call and leave, indicating also that they are all God’s people. So even though the historic centre of the Catholic Church can be identified with Babylon in the Book Revelation, there are no grounds whatsoever for identifying the Pope, or the leadership of the Church, with Antichrist. On the contrary, they are all God’s people.

We can ask ourselves how the doctrine of Antichrist changed in the 12th century, with the interpretations of the Blessed Joachim of Fiore. The Antichrist was now going to reveal himself in the Papal See, in Rome, and not in a rebuilt temple on the Temple Mount, in Jerusalem. It is not difficult to understand why this change took place. It happened at a time when the Temple Mount was in the hands of the Catholic Crusaders, when the Jewish population of Europe and the Middle East were vigorously persecuted and repressed. It was inconceivable that they would ever recover and be able to rebuild their temple and declare their own version of the messiah. A reinterpretation of the prophecies was called for, and these were provided by the Blessed Joachim of Fiore. But let us understand his interpretations as a product of his time, and not as the eternal Word of God. Soon after he was writing, the Catholic Church began her gradual retreat from the Holy Land, and in the present day the Jews have regained their control over the Temple Mount. It would be wise to return to the sources and understand the prophecies in their original context and clarity.

John Ben-Daniel
Jerusalem
Ascension 2014

¹⁰ This agrees with the recognition of the reign of this ruler as the realization of the false messianic expectation of the Jews. One of the duties of the false messianic leader will be to take revenge against Rome for the destruction of Jerusalem and her temple in ancient times and the continuous oppression of the Jewish people during the subsequent exile. Although Rome is called Babylon in the Christian tradition (1Pet 5,13; Rev 17,9), in Jewish tradition it is referred to as Edom, and is therefore to expect the same fate as Edom in the Old Testament prophecies (Is 35,5–6; 63,1–4). The destruction of Edom (= Rome, or the ‘evil kingdom’) is believed to remove one of the obstacles to global redemption.