

The Antichrist Doctrine of the Church: Personal or Collective?

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 also 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 time of St. Irenaeus in 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.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 a personal Antichrist. 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. The expectation of a personal Antichrist has all but disappeared and those who continue to hold this teaching are labeled pejoratively as ‘fundamentalists’.

In this context, it is important to examine the most recent and authoritative statement of the Church’s teaching on the subject. This is presented as a passing reference in a single paragraph of the Catholic Catechism (CCC), as follows:

“Before Christ's second coming the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers. The persecution that accompanies her pilgrimage on earth will unveil the “mystery of iniquity” in the form of a religious deception offering men an apparent solution to their problems at the price of apostasy from the truth. The supreme religious deception is that of the Antichrist, a pseudo-messianism by which man glorifies himself in place of God and of his Messiah come in the flesh”(CCC 675).

That is to say, the Antichrist is the author of a supreme form of religious deception, or ‘pseudo-messianism’, in which *“man glorifies himself in place of God and of his Messiah”*. This ‘pseudo-messianism’ represents the end-historical unveiling of the ‘mystery of iniquity’; it coincides with a final persecution of the Church, and it will be brought to an end by the final Judgment and the eschatological transformation of this passing world.⁴ In all but one respect, this teaching on the Antichrist reflects that of St. Paul in his second Letter to the Thessalonians, which is indeed given as a

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.

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. paragraph 677 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994.

reference. 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 subject, whom he calls ‘the man of lawlessness’ and ‘the son of perdition’, as a person. The Catechism however, while alluding to the main elements of St. Paul’s description, makes a simple change: instead of referring to the subject as a person, ‘a man’, the Catechism omits the article, leaving the collective noun ‘man’: *“The supreme religious deception is that of the Antichrist, a pseudo-messianism by which **man** glorifies himself in place of God and of his Messiah”*. With this simple omission, the personal end-historical ruler known as the Antichrist is replaced by a term representing the apostate, unfaithful mass of mankind. Nevertheless, some traces of the original teaching on the personal Antichrist can be discerned:

1. The term ‘Antichrist’ simply means ‘instead of’ and ‘opposed to’ Christ.⁵ In its intrinsic relation to the person of Christ, the term ‘Antichrist’ also implies personhood—an individual who puts himself in the place of God and his Christ, as stated in the Catechism. Similarly, the use of the definite article and capital letter in ‘the Antichrist’ suggests that it is referring to a specific figure of some importance, familiar to the Christian tradition.
2. The Antichrist passage in the Catechism is primarily endorsed by a reference to the cited passage in 2 Thessalonians (2Thess 2,4-12), which unambiguously refers to a human person, as noted above.
3. In Latin, the original language of the Catechism, there is no indefinite article, so its inclusion or omission in this context is a matter of interpretation. It is quite reasonable to translate the Latin *‘in quo homo se ipsum glorificat’* as ‘by which **a man** glorifies himself’, referring to a particular man and not to humankind in general. By using Latin as the original language, the Catechism does not therefore exclude the interpretation of a personal Antichrist.
4. The ‘supreme religious deception’ of the Antichrist is somewhat understated when described collectively as the body of men and women who glorify themselves after turning away from God and Christ. This ‘apostasy’ may lead to a very selfish, proud and vain society of human beings, who have turned away from God for various reasons, but it does not amount to a ‘supreme religious deception’, or ‘pseudo-messianism’.⁶ ‘Supreme religious deception’, or ‘pseudo-messianism’ describes a situation even further down the road to perdition: it implies a situation in which people, having once turned away from God and Christ, are then deceived by a false messianic leader, or movement, claiming to offer *“men an apparent solution to their problems at the price of apostasy from the truth.”* Stated more simply, the society in

⁵ McGinn, *Antichrist*, 56.

⁶ Over the last century, huge numbers of Western Europeans have turned away from God and Christ, and have glorified man and his achievements instead, but their apostasy is not identified as a form of pseudo-messianism *per se*.

which “**man glorifies himself in place of God and of his Messiah**” is at an earlier stage of religious deception than the society which is governed by “**a man who glorifies himself in place of God and of his Messiah**”. Only this later stage can be considered ‘supreme religious deception’, or ‘pseudo-messianism’.

5. Two successive stages in the historical evolution of the ‘mystery of iniquity’ can therefore be identified: firstly, the historical operation of this mystery resulting in the apostasy of large numbers of people and their willing service to the Antichrist. Secondly, the final unveiling of the mystery, leading to the ‘supreme’ form of religious deception headed by the Antichrist himself. If the historical operation of the ‘mystery of iniquity’, via willing human agents, represents the collective Antichrist, then the final unveiling of this mystery can be understood as the manifestation of its author, the Antichrist in person. Since the Catechism is talking about the final and ‘supreme’ phase of the Antichrist’s activity, it would therefore seem to be speaking about the personal Antichrist. Viewed in this way, there is no fundamental opposition between the collective and personal interpretations of the Antichrist tradition: they are simply two successive stages in the progressive historical disclosure of evil.

As presented in the Catechism, however, the Antichrist teaching conflates these two successive stages: the authors describe the future and final revelation of a personal Antichrist in terms which are better suited to its current, collective mode of operation. They seem to want to speak about the end-historical revelation of the personal Antichrist in the same way as St. Paul in 2 Thessalonians, but they retreat at the last moment and describe the collective Antichrist. This not only introduces confusion, but more importantly it betrays a strong reluctance to speak about the future coming of Antichrist as a person. How did this ambiguous position come about and how can it be overcome?

The answer to the first question is academic, but it probably relates to the irresponsible use of the doctrine of the personal Antichrist at various times in the Church’s history. Of particular note was the trading of Antichrist accusations by both sides in the 13th century quarrel between the Papacy and the Emperor Frederick II Hohenstaufen (1194-1250).⁷ Again during the Reformation, Luther’s conviction that the Pope was the Antichrist succeeded in drawing many away from the Church.⁸ In modern times, the title of Antichrist has been attributed to numerous national leaders and statesmen, bringing the personal Antichrist doctrine into even greater disrepute. So it is really quite understandable that the Church’s leaders should wish to dampen Antichrist enthusiasm as much as possible. They have evidently chosen to do this by reducing the Church’s Antichrist doctrine to a minimum,⁹ and by concealing the teaching of a personal Antichrist under a collective interpretation of this figure.

The answer to the second question is more relevant. The way out of this confusion is to return to the biblical sources and to the teaching of the early Church, all of which speak clearly of a personal Antichrist.¹⁰ As shown above, St. Paul

⁷ McGinn, *Antichrist*, 152-7.

⁸ McGinn, *Antichrist*, 201-12.

⁹ In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, this teaching occupies a fraction of 1 paragraph out of a total of 2865 paragraphs.

¹⁰ Cf. McGinn, *Antichrist*, 33-78. 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)—a description that could only refer to a personal Antichrist. Then there are the Fathers of the second century, especially Sts. Irenaeus and Hippolytus, and the many other celebrated churchman

prophesies the coming of a personal Antichrist, at the end of history, in his second Letter to the Thessalonians.

The ‘Little Apocalypse’ in the Gospels of Matthew (Mt 24,1–25,46) and Mark (Mk 13,1-37) mentions the ‘abomination of desolation standing in a holy place’, which recalls ‘the little horn’ of Daniel (Dan 7-12), who was not only a real historical person (King Antiochus IV Epiphanes), but also one of the original models on whom the Antichrist doctrine was based.

The most detailed account of this figure, however, is given by St. John in the Book of Revelation. In this prophecy, the Antichrist is also described as a person (Rev 13,18)—the personal representative of all diabolical power and authority (13,1-4). 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 the cult are outlawed, or killed, and as martyrs they will attain heaven (13,11-17; 15,2). On the other hand, those who 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 no need to speculate who the Antichrist may be, because at the appropriate time the public mission of the two witnesses will warn the Church and the world of his imminent arrival.

In the meantime, it is not helpful to deny, or in any way obscure, the doctrine of the personal Antichrist, who will appear at the end of history. This may actually lead some people to mistake the false Christ for the true, as St. Cyril of Jerusalem once warned (c. 315-386). After noting that the Antichrist will be the one who rebuilds the Jewish temple and enthrones himself there as God, St. Cyril encouraged the faithful to spread the teaching of the personal Antichrist, and tell future generations, in order that no one will be deceived: “*So be warned my friend. I have given you the signs of the Antichrist. Do not merely store them in your memory. Pass them on to everyone without stint. If you have a child after the flesh, teach them to him forthwith. And if you have become a godparent forewarn your child, lest he should take the false Christ for the true. For ‘the mystery of iniquity’ doth already work.*”¹¹

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of the following centuries, including St. Cyril of Jerusalem and St. Jerome. Even though some Fathers, such as Origen and St. Augustine, gave greater emphasis to the collective Antichrist, they never abandoned the traditional doctrine of a personal Antichrist appearing at the end of history.

¹¹ St. Cyril’s 15th Catechetical Lecture, paragraph 18, delivered in the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem, quoted by McGinn, *Antichrist*, 71. Another version is available online at: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310115.htm>.