

The Infidelity of the Future:

The Great Apostasy

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“When the Son of Man returns, will he find any faith left on earth?” (Luke 18: 18)

As in every generation, the “near future” approaches, never quite materializing in ways we had imagined. Because of this, our perennial temptation is to dismiss the teleology of history, and the eschatology of revelation, as mental constructs produced by irrational fears or limited by enflamed analyses of contemporary situations, a cycle that is supposedly repeated without end, never delivering the promised omni-catastrophe. Even so, according to Christ in the Gospels and the Book of Revelation, and the letters of Sts. Peter, Paul, and John, and the Old Testament prophets, as well as the ecclesially approved private revelations that have increased in number and intensity for the past 150 years, the time is drawing near when all speculative scenarios will evaporate in the face of a real and ultimate peril for mankind. Then the future will become the present. Its prologue will be an apostasy unprecedented in scope. Indeed, day by day this apostasy spreads all around us. Its climax is the Day of the Lord, a day of fire.

In a number of sermons, Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman wrote prophetically about the near future that was looming in his own times:

“I know that all times are perilous, and that in every time serious and anxious minds, alive to the honour of God and the needs of man, are apt to consider no times so perilous as their own. At all times the enemy of souls assaults with fury the Church which is their true Mother, and at least threatens and frightens when he fails in doing mischief. And all times have their special trials which others have not. And so far I will admit that there were certain specific dangers to Christians at

certain other times, which do not exist in this time. Doubtless, but still admitting this, still I think that the trials which lie before us are such as would appall and make dizzy even such courageous hearts as St. Athanasius, St. Gregory I, or St. Gregory VII. And they would confess that dark as the prospect of their own day was to them severally, ours has a darkness different in kind from any that has been before it. The special peril of the time before us is the spread of that plague of infidelity, that the Apostles and our Lord Himself have predicted as the worst calamity of the last times of the Church. And at least a shadow, a typical image of the last times is coming over the world.”¹

Newman’s approach was conditioned partly by the context of the times he lived in and also by his understanding of the constant temptation of Christians, that is, to make compromises with the *spiritus mundi*. It was clear to him that the spirit of the world in his day was making ever greater advances against what remained of old Christendom. And in other sermons, he went farther, warning that the diabolic spirit was moving toward a final confrontation.² Newman pointed out that eras of lukewarmness and laxity among the faithful had always been the prologue to persecutions, and that the ultimate persecution would be preceded by the greatest apostasy in the history of the Church.³ There had been, of course, other periods of apostasy and heresy, such as the Arian crisis, and severe as they were, they arose at a time of vastly diverse religious confusion when civilized man was still crawling up out of the fever swamps of paganism.

And that is the difference between what has occurred in the past and what is occurring now across the entire Western world. A civilization that has known Christianity (and is now largely ignorant about how dark paganism can be) is choosing to go back down into the swamp, and all along the downward trajectory is calling it progress, proclaiming at every turn its tragically stunted concept of freedom and aggressively imposing it on everyone.

That the revolution has so swiftly overturned the fundamental principles of civilization is one of its more ominous characteristics—principles recognized by any sane society. Needless to say, there are historical and sociological factors involved, such as the shattering of confidence in a benevolent God by two unthinkably destructive world wars,

by the looming threat of nuclear war, by genocides, by the sexual revolution, and by the phenomenal growth of new media so powerful that it overwhelms consciousness, and hence conscience, making of the human will an instrument of its purpose—redefining not only the meaning of man but of Reality itself.

The Lukewarmness of Christians

But why have so many Christians proved to be so vulnerable, even eager, for these pathological narratives? Why, in short, do we tell lies to ourselves? We deceive ourselves because there are abundant rewards for doing so, while simultaneously the inner tensions inherent in the moral struggle of the human condition are eased, left behind, as if we were discarding an outmoded legend. Daily, we gulp plausible lies, a web of falsehoods coupled to flattery, to emotional and physical pleasures, and constantly reinforced by a new world culture largely contrived by the entertainment and communications media, by the corruption of education, by morally compromised politics, and most reprehensible of all, by ambiguous theology and spurious spiritualities.

In his second letter to Timothy, St. Paul exhorts the shepherds of the flock of the Lord to preach the word of God with determination, in season and out of season, to “convince, rebuke, and exhort,” to be unfailing in persistence and in teaching. “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound doctrine, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths.” (2 Tim 4: 3-4).

If the current studies of faith and practice in the Western world are accurate, it appears that more than 80% of Catholics no longer believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the need for Confession, nor in other fundamental doctrines of the Faith. Consistently, this majority rejects Church teachings on sexual morality. Yet many among them continue to attend Mass or define themselves as Catholic as a kind of cultural religious identity, useful as an ethical system in which to raise one’s children as law-abiding citizens—as “basically good people”—but demanding no accountability before God and man.

In 2 Thessalonians 2: 1-4, St. Paul cautions us to not be hastily shaken by any spirit or

word to the effect that the Day of the Lord has come, for that day will not come until after the great apostasy (“falling away” and “rebellion” in some translations) which is the *prelude* to the revealing of “the man of lawlessness, the son of perdition,” who opposes God and exalts himself, taking his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. This is the Antichrist, who through lies and flattery will rise to power upon waves of a strong delusion, which takes root in the minds of men because they have opposed the truth and the authority of God and, in effect, exalted themselves as gods over their own lives.

In his second letter to Timothy he warns:

“But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of distress. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderous, licentious, brutal, hating what is good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding the form of religion but denying its power.” (2 Tim 3: 1-5)

Clearly, St. Paul is not so much referring here to the external enemies of the Church as to those who remain within her ranks. St. Peter’s second letter also reinforces this warning, pointing out that the coming infidelity will be not only external but internal:

“There were false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who ransomed them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their licentious ways and because of them the way of truth will be reviled.” (2 Peter 2: 1-2) . . .

“ . . . Remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles. First of all you must understand this, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own passions, saying, ‘Where is this promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation.’ They

deliberately ignore this fact, that by the word of God the heavens existed long ago, and an earth formed out of water and by means of water that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.

“But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a mighty roar, and the elements will be dissolved by fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up.” (2 Peter 3: 2-10)

Because man is religious by nature, the void that opens within him in the absence of a truly ennobling faith is soon filled with some kind of faith-system. As G. K. Chesterton once pointed out, when men cease to believe in God they do not then believe in nothing; they then become capable of believing anything.⁴ Nevertheless, the apostate must live with himself, and so he demands that *he* be the arbiter of the meaning of good and evil and that he enjoy an untroubled conscience as he goes about it, and woe to him who disturbs it. In order to live with the remnant of his conscience the apostate must see himself as a reformer-liberator: he is enlightened, he is compassionate, he is mellow—until he is resisted, and then he becomes merciless. The self-proclaimed “liberal” soon finds himself behaving very much like a fascist, and not knowing why—not even questioning why. This is also true of many a liberal heretic who remains in the ranks of the Church and takes upon himself the project of deconstructing her from within and attempting to rebuild her according to his own notions—offering the world a tame Christ rather than a merciful one, an undemanding Christianity rather than one which calls man higher to become his true self, an amputated Gospel missing vital limbs and organs. They are rebels masquerading as moral reformers.

In his prescient 1942 book, *The Judgment of the Nations*, historian Christopher Dawson warned that in the near future the imposition of neo-totalitarianism and corrupt

morality would be purveyed as a *moral* crusade, one that by necessity would demand the Church's submission to the will of the State:

“It is due to the invasion of the spiritual by the temporal, the triumphant self-assertion of secular civilization and of the secular state against spiritual values and against the Church. The real meaning of what we call totalitarianism and the totalitarian state is the total control of all human activities and all human energies, spiritual as well as physical, by the State, and their direction to whatever ends are dictated by its interests, or rather the interests of the ruling party or clique. . . . In such an order there can be no place for religion unless religion forfeits its spiritual freedom and allows itself to be used by the new power as a means for conditioning and controlling the psychic life of the masses. But this is an impossible solution for the Christian, since it would be a sin against the Holy Ghost in the most absolute sense. Therefore, the Church must once again take up her prophetic office and bear witness to the Word even if it means the judgment of the nations and an open warfare with the powers of the world.”⁵

The future that Dawson foresaw seventy-five years ago is now here. It should be noted that this social revolution has been legally enforced in the once-Christian West by governments led by heretical or apostate Christians, complete with punishments for resistance to the new “orthodoxy.” It is perversely logical, therefore, that state-sanctioned, state-funded murder of widening categories of the human community (children, the elderly, the weak, the infirm, the depressed, *et cetera*) is promoted in the name of humanity, and that the erosion of freedom is done in the name of freedom. Moreover, wherever this spirit and ethos cannot cross the guarded frontiers of Islamic and Marxist nations (which have their own masks of the Beast), it does so through the medium of culture, electronically. It is thus a *global* revolution that has as its purpose the exaltation of man and the denial of the absolute rights of God. As the consequences of this brave new religion are hidden from man's eyes, he has now come to call darkness light; he promotes betrayal as romance and murder as compassion; he calls the depths the heights. He will gain nothing and call it everything. He will lose everything and call it

nothing. He will worship, as all created things must worship, yet as he strains to worship himself alone he will come, without knowing it, to worship the father of lies. Then follows the unleashing of greater and greater degrees of evil that will, in the end, seek to devour everything.

Only one thing stands in its way: the Roman Catholic Church—that is, the Church when it lives to the utmost the fullness of life in Christ. When it is the bulwark that stands firm against all the malice and deceptions of the diabolic, and when it is a “sign of contradiction” against every corrupt rationalization produced by fallen mankind.

The gulf between the authentic follower of Christ and the heretic (or *de facto* apostate) is not always clear, because human beings are ever in transition, cannot be reduced to any one thing. For Newman, however, the distinction between the two could be seen in the conscience:

“ . . . Christ dwells in the conscience of one, not of the other; that the one opens his heart to God, the other does not; the one views Almighty God only as an accidental guest, the other as the Lord and owner of all that he is; the one admits Him as if for a night, or some stated season, the other gives himself over to God, and considers himself God’s servant and instrument now and forever.”⁶

But what happens when the bulwark and sign of contradiction becomes the very instrument for malformation of conscience? When its universal charity for sinners mutates into a parody of itself and degenerates into empathy for sin? When its voice grows feeble and no longer calls man higher to become his true self?

Sacred Scripture is replete with warnings:

“And I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found none. Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them; I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath; their way I have requited upon their heads; says the Lord God.” (Ezekiel 22: 30)

And the words of Jesus:

“I know your works; you have the name of being alive, and you are dead. Awake, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. Remember then what you received and heard; keep that and repent. If you will not awake, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you.” (Rev 3:1-3)

These warnings will strike us as harsh, authoritarian and loveless, to the degree that we do not hear the authentic voice of the speaker. “. . . he that will hear, let him hear; and he that will refuse to hear, let him refuse; for they are a rebellious house” (Ezekiel 3: 27). When Christ himself tells us that we must repent lest we lose what has been given to us at so great a cost, can we not hear the sweet fire of love in it? Can we not hear his words as the *urgency* of a passionate shepherd, rather than the vindictiveness of an autocrat?

And if we cannot hear this burning love, what has gone wrong with our interpretive lens? Have we approached the holy ground of God without removing our sandals? Have we presumed that God is there to serve *us*, on *our* terms? Have we placed ourselves, consciously or subconsciously, above the exigencies of Divine revelation, above the living Word of God, above the teaching authority of the Church which the Savior has given us and formed through two millennia of countless martyrs, great doctors, pastors, teachers and the humblest of hidden saints, a cloud of witnesses, “the great and the small”? Have we presumed that *we* are on the cusp of a new and better revelation. Have we been seduced into thinking of ourselves as the most advanced generation of Christians, the most enlightened, the last best interpreters of the law and the prophets—and of Christ himself? If so, we have become neo-gnostics—the Knowers—without knowing that we are “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (Rev 3:15-18).

The New Phariseism

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines heresy as an “obstinate post-baptismal denial of some truth which must be believed with divine and Catholic faith, or it is likewise an obstinate doubt concerning the same; apostasy is the total repudiation of the

Christian faith.”⁷

Let there be no mistake about it: The spreading apostasy in our times has been caused only in part by the unprecedented power of secular forces brought against us. Its root cause is to be found in the heresies that have spread among us, a new kind of Phariseeism that would empty the Faith of its power and meaning, creating a psychological/spiritual milieu in which the spirit of *anti*-Christ is able to increasingly control men’s perceptions, thoughts, and emotional lives. It is this that makes it now possible for the actual “Man of Sin,” the Antichrist himself, to arise.

The overwhelmingly dominant problem within the Church of the West at this time of history is a Phariseeism that is connected to corrupt moral theology and disordered ecclesiology, whereby false teachers make people believe that *they* are the righteous, even if sinning in terms of sexual morality, or by teaching that such sin is not grave sin and is no impediment to reception of the sacraments. They feel self-justified by their belief in a new Gospel of social justice—and a very selective social justice it is—reducing the fullness of the Gospels to a false either/or choice: you are either a liberal dissident (“loving, compassionate”) or you are a Pharisee (a “dour legalist”). They make their peace with personal sin because they believe they are fulfilling the Gospel imperatives by helping the poor. And whenever their own hypocrisies and compromises with personal sin and error are questioned, they simply shoot the messenger, pointing the finger at anyone who stands in opposition to their agendas, demonizing the voice of truth by superficial comparisons to the legalistic Pharisees of the Gospels. The fact is, the new Pharisee not only neglects the “weightier matters,” he so often actively undermines them, and in the worst cases contributes to the death of the innocent. He does it, O most grievous of ironies, by appealing to mercy.

Thus, in the growing confusion in which we are all immersed, there is need for sober reflection on what, precisely, Jesus was rebuking in his interactions with the Pharisees of his times. The pertinent passages are to be found in Matthew 23: 1-39; Mark 7: 1-13; Mark 12: 35-40; Luke 11: 37-54; Luke 20: 45-47 (see also John 9: 1-41).

In each of these, Christ is, above all, confronting the Pharisees’ hypocrisy—their outward appearance of virtue, their inner corruption, greed and evil thoughts. (Matt 23: 27-28; Luke 12:1). They lay heavy burdens on man while neglecting the weightier

matters of total fidelity to God. These hard sayings of Jesus can be properly understood only in their fullest context:

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12: 28-31).

Jesus is clearly teaching that loving one’s neighbor is founded on total fidelity to the divine commandments. Without that context, the supposed righteousness of the old Pharisee degenerates into legalism without love. Equally, without that context, the supposed compassion of the new Pharisee tends to degenerate into superficial sentiment, self-indulgence and presumption. If love is not founded on total fidelity to God’s commandments, it is soon truncated and fosters short-range kindnesses that breed long-range cruelties. In Mark 7: 1-13, Jesus chastises the Pharisees for their disregard for God’s commandments, while they quibble over man-made fine points of their laws; for example, their allowing a person to neglect the basic needs of his aged parents because he has made a donation to the Temple treasury. In Matthew 23: 15, Jesus says that they make their converts twice as fit for hell as they are. In Luke 17: 3-4, he says, “If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in one day and returns to you seven times saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.” In John 8: 2-11, where Jesus meets the woman caught in adultery, the Pharisees would have condemned her and stoned her to death. After Jesus has shamed their consciences and blocked their evil intent, he says to the woman, “Neither do I condemn you. Go and do not sin again.”

In these and numerous other examples in the New Testament, building upon the Old Testament, Jesus does not shy away from rebuking sinners, again and again calling them to repentance, for he knew that *repentance* is the precondition for receiving mercy,

liberating us from slavery to sin. It is the *truth* that will set us free, says the Lord.

The old Pharisees were very much preoccupied with the minutiae of the Law and its observance. They were quick to judge the weak and to condemn all those who fell short of their exacting standards. They were generally heartless, lacking in mercy. Moreover, they themselves were “whited sepulchers,” teaching the Mosaic Law and its elaborate derivatives but inwardly corrupt. And the end-fruit of their blindness was made manifest when they engineered the torture and execution of the Author of Life.

In our own times, it is undeniable that vestiges of the old Phariseeism remain among believers. Leaping instantly to mind are stereotypical images, which is the result of two, perhaps three, generations of an unceasing refrain in the liberalized churches of the Western world. It proclaims that the only truly grave sin is “intolerance,” by which is meant making people feel uncomfortable about themselves. Hand in hand with this is the endless vilification of those who are doctrinally and liturgically correct, but supposedly inwardly lifeless.

It goes without saying that pastors and laypeople who are doctrinally and liturgically correct but who lack charity and authentic missionary zeal are at risk of the “yeast of the Pharisees.” Yet any sincere Christian is vigilant about the potential for Phariseeism within himself, just as he is on guard against his temptations to sin. He knows that without the grace of Jesus he would be both the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son, and the younger brother.

Does the Lord not say to us all, if we would hear: “Beware, my children, of the danger faced by the ‘elder son’ in the parable of the Prodigal Son, for you run the risk of sliding into Phariseeism.”?

And at the same time does he not cry out to each and every soul, “Repent of your sins! Come to me and live!” (Isaiah 55: 3-5; Ezekiel 33: 11; John 14: 6)?

Silencing and Paralysis

Catholics in North America and Western Europe live in near schizoid churches that would give us the former exhortation without the latter. A very large number of dioceses, parishes, and religious orders promote false splits in the mind and heart, positing that truth and mercy are in conflict with each other, that justice and mercy are relativistic free-

floating concepts uncoupled from the foundation, from the One who is Justice and Mercy itself, that doctrine and pastoral practice need not be consistent, and that the authentic exercise of spiritual authority is authoritarianism. The massive corruption of the Church's evangelical mission by dissident theologians, and those whom they shape, vastly outweighs the faults of the pietistic among us, who are a very small minority—I would say tiny, perhaps even proportionally microscopic. Decade after decade we have seen our churches transformed according to a false interpretation of Vatican II, the liturgy often made into a man-centered social ritual, have seen the magnificent teachings of our previous Popes ignored or refuted, or mutated and misapplied. We who live at the grass roots level in such national churches have experienced the marginalization of the faithful Catholic, have suffered silently under countless vehement homilies against Phariseism that equate it with orthodoxy, while at the same time we have received minimal solid teaching from pulpits in a majority of dioceses.

Little by little, with a new generation of apostolic bishops and priests, the situation in some particular churches is improving, though there is a very long way to go before there is a true new renaissance. Most faithful Catholics continue to offer their sufferings for the very people who cause them, and for the ultimate purification and strengthening of the Body of Christ in our times. They strive to live both *veritas* and *caritas* as a single unified whole, in the midst of both the interior infidelities of our particular churches and the hostile social and political environments of our nations, which have largely succumbed to anti-life, anti-family policies.

As the years and decades roll onwards, completely faithful Catholics have increasingly felt like a battered minority, not a self-righteous “elite.” They know they are sinners. They know they need mercy. And because of this they know their need for the fullness of Christ's Church and the Gospels, for authentic spiritual and sacramental life, the worship of God which man was created for—and this in order to have the interior strength to love one's neighbor as oneself, both the person next door and all people in the global human community.

I can count on one hand the individuals I have met during my life who resemble the stereotype of the old Pharisee. By contrast, I know several hundred loving, heroically sacrificial people who do not judge others but who, by merely being faithful to the

deposit of the Faith, are seen as a threat to the “unity” of the particular church. Without provocation, they have often been scapegoats and lightning rods for the fears and malice of others, without retaliating. For the most part, *they* are the judged. If they have at times protested falsehoods taught in the House of God, sacrilege, and disobedience to the Church’s universal norms of worship, it has been done privately and charitably. The Church teaches that it is not only their right but their *duty* to do so. Almost always they are met with irrational anger, or at the best, indifference. Suffering the negative consequences of their painful efforts, and with little or no improvement in their situations, many succumb to discouragement and in the end revert to silence. Their sense of futility grows like a cancer in the Body of Christ and too easily brings about a kind of paralysis. They have accepted as inevitable one of the most insidious, destructive tactics used by the new Pharisees in neutralizing opposition. The faithful have been taught again and again that to defend the truth is to find oneself accused of Phariseism.

In a homily at a Mass on June 29, 1972, Pope Paul VI said that “the smoke of Satan is seeping into the Church of God through the cracks in the walls.” In a 1977 address, he went so far as to say:

“The tail of the devil is functioning in the disintegration of the Catholic world. The darkness of Satan has entered and spread throughout the Catholic Church even to its summit. Apostasy, the loss of faith, is spreading throughout the world and into the highest levels within the Church.” (*Address on the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Fatima Apparitions*, October 13, 1977)

The choice of this unusual description is significant, for the “tail of the devil” alludes to a passage in the Book of Revelation:

“A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. Because she was with child, she cried aloud in pain as she labored to give birth. Then another sign appeared in the sky: it was a huge dragon, flaming red, with seven heads and ten horns; on his head were seven diadems. His tail swept a third of the stars from the

sky and hurled them down to earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth, ready to devour her child when it should be born.” (Rev 12:1-4).

Stand, therefore!

St. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Ephesians that if we hope to prevail through these dark times, resisting personal temptations to sin and error, the heresies and apostasy, and the alternatives of rage or despair, we must put on “the armor of God” that we may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil:

“For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the Heavenly places. Therefore take the whole armor of God that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; above all taking the shield of faith, with which we can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.” (Eph 6: 10-20)

This exhortation, delivered at the very beginning of the Church, is no less crucial in our own times. Indeed we need it more than ever, for the infidelity of the future is now all around us and among us.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches:

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 (cf. Lk 21:12; Jn 15:19-20) 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. (cf. 2 Thess 2: 4-12; 1 Thess 5: 2-3; 2 Jn 7; 1 Jn 2:18, 22).

The Antichrist's deception already begins to take shape in the world every time the claim is made to realize within history that messianic hope which can only be realized beyond history through the eschatological judgment. The Church has rejected even modified forms of this falsification of the kingdom to come under the name millenarianism (cf. *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 3839), especially the "intrinsically perverse" political form of a secular messianism (*Divini Redemptoris; Gaudium et Spes*, 20-21).

The Church will enter the glory of the kingdom only through this final Passover, when she will follow her Lord in his death and Resurrection. (cf. Rev 19: 1-9). The Kingdom will be fulfilled, then, not by a historic triumph of the Church through a progressive ascendancy, but only by God's victory over the final unleashing of evil, which will cause his Bride to come down from heaven. God's triumph over the revolt of evil will take the form of the Last Judgment after the final cosmic upheaval of this passing world. ⁸

The True Horizon

Our grief over the current condition of the Church, both universal and particular, is immense. And while this grief over the loss of so many souls and the corruption of the sacred is natural enough, we must never allow ourselves to be dismayed. Our chief temptations during this time of confusion may be to bitterness, isolation, and a subtle back-door devil of rebellion—even to the choice for schism, which would bring about a host of alternative evils. Instead, the Lord asks us to stand firm as a bulwark, as a sign of contradiction against the floods of deception and malice, regardless of the consequences, regardless of the prospects for "success" or "failure." He always desires us to go deeper and farther, for at the heart of everything is union with Him. But this union grows only by faith and by suffering. Experiencing rejection, false judgments by others, the inability or unwillingness of shepherds to be true spiritual fathers, and a multitude of other disorders in the Body of Christ . . . all of these are a test for us (sometimes a severe test).

We must keep in mind that throughout its long history the Church has often been in crisis. She is ever populated by, and at times run by, less than edifying people. Yet the ship always steadies and moves forward. God is always at work, seeking to bring good from our seemingly endless follies. So, too, He will raise up new pastors and new saints for our times, and this will probably be in the midst of great tribulations. Our task is to keep turning our thoughts and the movements of our hearts toward the true horizon—to keep our eyes focused on the Church as the Bride of Christ being prepared to meet the Bridegroom.

He is coming. He is near. Human “solutions” such as apostasy or schism only add to the Bride’s wounds and impede her preparation. We must love the Church with a great love, never losing sight of the Lord’s promise that the “gates of hell” will not prevail against her. This implies that hell will surely try to do its worst, tempting us all, sifting us like wheat. Let us be part of the Church’s defense and not a part of the problem.

We will receive consolation and courage by offering everything we suffer as a sacrifice united to the Cross for the purification and strengthening of the Church. We men, and especially we pragmatist North Americans, must recognize in ourselves the mistaken belief that we can “fix” anything with enough knowledge, skill, tools, influence, rhetoric, strategies, etc. We must understand that in the case of the Church we cannot overcome this present darkness with our limited human strengths. We can only restore our own selves through cooperation with the grace of Christ—through our personal repentance, prayer, sacraments, sacrifice, endurance and perseverance, patience, mercy, truth, and the faith that is refined in the darkest of fires. It is from Jesus Christ himself that we will learn when to be silent before our accusers and when to speak up, and how, at all times, to stand firm and strengthen the things that remain.

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Readings:

“The judgment announced by the Lord Jesus refers above all to the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70. Yet the threat of judgment also concerns us, the Church in Europe, and the West in general. With this Gospel, the Lord is also crying out to our ears

the words that in the book of Revelation he addresses to the Church of Ephesus: ‘If you do not repent I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place’ (Rev 2: 5). Light can also be taken away from us, and we do well to let this warning ring out with its full gravity in our hearts, while we cry aloud to the Lord: ‘Help us to repent! Give all of us the grace of true renewal! Do not allow your light in our midst to be extinguished! Strengthen our faith, our hope and our love, so that we can bear good fruit!’.”

(Homily of Pope Benedict XVI, 2 October, 2005, at the opening of the synod in Rome)

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“The greater the darkness, the more complete our trust should be.” (St. Faustina Kowalska, diary, *Divine Mercy in My Soul*, n. 357.)

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“Write this: Before I come as the just Judge, I am coming first as the King of Mercy. Before the day of justice arrives, there will be given to people a sign in the heavens of this sort:

“All light in the heavens will be extinguished, and there will be great darkness over the whole earth. Then the sign of the cross will be seen in the sky, and from the openings where the hands and the feet of the Savior were nailed will come forth great lights which will light up the earth for a period of time. This will take place shortly before the last day.” (words of Christ to St. Faustina Kowalska, diary, *Divine Mercy in My Soul*, n. 83.)

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“Many shall purify themselves, and make themselves white, and be refined, but the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand; but those who are wise will understand.” (Daniel 12: 10)

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“Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who stands next to me,” says the Lord of hosts. “Strike the shepherd that the sheep may be scattered. . . In the whole land, says the Lord, two thirds will be cut off and perish, and one third shall be left alive. I will bring this third through the fire, and refine them as silver is refined, and I will test them as gold is tested. They shall call upon my name, and I will answer them. I will say, ‘They are my people’; and they will say, ‘The Lord is my God.’ ” (Zechariah 13: 7-9)

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“For behold, the day is coming, blazing like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that is coming shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, leaving them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.” (Malachi 4: 1-2)

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“So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter.” (2 Thessalonians 2: 15)

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“Behold, I am coming soon.” (Revelation 22: 6, 20)

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Footnotes:

1. John Henry Newman (1801-1890), Sermon of October 2, 1873, “The Infidelity of the Future.”

2. Newman, *Tracts for the Times*, Volume V, 1838-40, Advent Sermons on Antichrist.

3. In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius of Caesarea, the fourth-century bishop and historian, also points out that all the major persecutions of the Church were preceded by periods of widespread laxity among the faithful.

4. This oft-quoted maxim of Chesterton’s is not, in fact, something he wrote, but rather a paraphrase or synthesis of similar insights scattered throughout his writings; for example, in one of his Father Brown stories his priest-detective says, “The first effect of not believing in God is that you lose your common sense.”

5. Christopher Dawson, *The Judgment of the Nations*, Sheed & Ward, New York, 1942.

6. Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, V, Sermon 16, “Sincerity and Hypocrisy”; Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1997.

7. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2089; CIC, *The Code of Canon Law*, can. 751.

8. *CCC*, n. 675-677; see also n. 678-680.