



## The Mystery of Iniquity in the Church

by the Rev. Archimandrite Fr. Eusebius Stephanou, Th.D.

*In preparation of this most urgent article, we had seen in the previous newsletter how the Mystery of Iniquity had operated in past world events and how the future Antichrist may arrive on the future world-stage.*

*Father Eusebius Stephanou had given an outstanding and detailed overview of how this Mystery had infiltrated into the Church. Fr. Stephanou was the only one I have known of in the modern day Orthodox Church to write so extensively on the subject. It is by far the most important teaching for our day! The conviction that Fr. Stephanou felt to share these matters were of utmost importance to him. This article is a compilation of his writings on the subject. Sincerely, Joseph Abbate*

The frightening peril that casts a dark shadow over the Orthodox Church today is the spirit of Antichrist. I am reaffirming what I have stated in previous articles. It is the major “sign of the times.” It is not for the timid in heart who contend themselves with a comfortable Orthodoxy. What follows is not personal speculation, but rooted in the revealed Word of God. I intend to consider how “the Mystery of Iniquity” will ultimately disfigure the Bride of Christ, so progressively that the process will evade the notice of the casual church member. It is predicted in Bible prophecy that he will emerge at the close of the age as the Bride of Christ-Imposter, The Antichrist. **Very simply put, the spirit of Antichrist aims at undermining the headship of Christ over His Church. It works at replacing Christ Jesus with the substitute christs.** The very word “Antichrist”

reveals that fact: “anti” in Greek means instead of. “Christ” means the Messiah, the Anointed One of God.

The spirit of Antichrist does not lead to open opposition to Christ. It avoids such a conflict. It is subtle and deceptive, because it originates with the great Deceiver and Seducer, Satan. The spirit of Antichrist looks to man’s usurping of Christ’s rightful position of preeminence and lordship in the Church.

The disposition toward accepting single government and religious leaders as saviors for solving social or religious needs is one of the major signs of the times. Such leaders may be sincere and well-intentioned, but in effect they could very well be preparing the way for the coming of the predicted world dictator. Christ-substitutes are less likely to be detected within the churches, particularly when they are duly ordained and vested with authority, such as when they act as de facto vicars of Christ on earth. The most significant phenomenon, therefore, pointing to the soon return of Jesus in glory is the trend of men in the Church playing God.

It is very important to remember what St. John Chrysostom states regarding the Antichrist: **“He will sit not only in the temple of God in Jerusalem only, but in every church”** (Homily on Thessalonians 2). In other words, He will gain control

over the churches. Such churches that yield to his deceptive influence will end up constituting the Harlot Church mentioned in the book of Revelation Ch. 17. Many in the Church do not realize that in refusing to go all the way for Christ are being prepared by Satan to accept the deception of the Antichrist. Their fear of being labeled as “religious fanatics” and their placing public opinion over and above the will and opinion of God are in effect making them ready.

Is it possible that God has given up on us Orthodox? After all, we need to remember how many of his prophets we have rejected in the past and those sent by God have we persecuted and ostracized as villains and subversives of Orthodoxy. Theoretically the Church represents the presence of Christ in the midst of His covenant people. But too often it appears in reality that the visible institutional church hardly reflects the true character of Christ and His Apostles. Tragically, however, the Church lacks the awareness that – not the secular world – but she herself has come under divine judgement.

Some complain, saying, “Look at the courts! Look at the government and public education!” But the Lord is responding: “Look at the Church! The salt has lost its savor!” One wonders whether or not she remains “subject to Christ,” as the Bride to her Divine Spouse. Who is standing in the “holy place?” Christ or Satan?

If we are serious about the Church being truly the Church Militant, then she must be expected to be tried by fire. It is normal for her to be subjected to the attacks of adversaries and be engaged in spiritual conflict with the powers of

darkness. The true Church is never at peace with the world around her or with the world system. Only a church that compromises the Gospel of Jesus Christ enjoys harmony and a peaceful coexistence with this world whose prince is Satan, as God's word explicitly reveals (John 12:31).

### Another Gospel

The Lord has quickened an awareness within me, as never before, that enthusiasm for ministering His Gospel is missing in the Church. It is customary for us to boast that the Orthodox Church is the Apostolic Church. We confess it regularly in the Nicene Creed. When we say the Church is Apostolic, we normally should mean it has priests and bishops who are fired up with an inner drive to evangelize.

The Apostolic mark of the Church is zeal to preach the Gospel. **The Church is Apostolic when it speaks in apostolic language, in the flow of the word of God contained in scripture.** What comes out of the mouth or pen is the overflowing of the heart. Only a heart that is evangelical in awareness, resulting from a life-changing meeting with the Lord Jesus Christ, is truly Apostolic.

As we zealously emphasize, however, the real change of the Eucharistic elements, we have become guilty of committing a serious oversight: we have failed to declare the Lord's death till He come. We have neglected to bring into a sharper focus what God's word affirms. Why beat around the bush. Say what the Gospel is, clear and simple. Why not say like St. Paul that *"the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes"* (Rom. 1:16).

When the sermon fails to have an evangelical emphasis, then it remains unrelated to the Liturgy.

When neither the Liturgy nor the sermon *"proclaims the death of the Lord till He comes,"* then we are engaged in a *"form of religion, denying the power thereof,"* and dooming the Church to a spiritual death. This is specifically what St. Paul warned Timothy about regarding the Last Days. *"This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come....having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof: from such turn away"* (2 Tim. 3:1, 7).



Just as the meaning of the word Antichrist equals *"instead of Christ,"* the absence or silencing of the Gospel message leaves a vacuum, a vacuum which is often replaced with something else, as St. Paul describes *"another gospel"* (Gal. 1:8).

The primitive preaching or kerygma of the early Church was the proclamation of the mighty acts of redemption. Do we have any right to add to it or take from it? In any message which claims to be evangelical these must be stated in clear and unambiguous terms: the sufferings and atoning death of Jesus Christ, His burial, His resur-

rection, ascension and promise to return in glory. The sequel must be preached that naturally follows the proclamation: appeal for repentance, faith, baptism, forgiveness and newness of life. The Orthodox Church in America states in one of its documents Evangelism: a Way of Life: "We are called to share this Good News with others, to proclaim the risen Christ just as the Apostles first proclaimed Him – in a word, to evangelize."

### Repent, for the Kingdom is at hand

The evangelist can possibly close his message with the exhortation originally spoken by St. John the Baptist: Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Some of the very first words recorded by Jesus were identical. Jesus then commanded His Disciples to proclaim the very same message: "And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Lk. 24:47). When was the last time you heard a strong message on repentance in your church? Repentance is not a mere suggestion from the Lord. The Good News and repentance go hand in hand. It should be the obvious reaction of the hearer of the Gospel to then repent. In fact, the proclamation of the Gospel is an end-time sign. *"And this Gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then the end shall come"* (Matt. 24:14).

The key word here is Repentance. The Lord made it emphatic. *"Unless ye repent, ye shall likewise perish."* The moment it is announced to us over the public media that a natural disaster (tornados, massive flooding, an earthquake or a hurricane) has occurred in some

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particular location in our own country or abroad, the immediate reaction from the lips of the believer should be: "I repent, O Lord, of all my sins." Our Icons of the Blessed Virgin are not weeping so we can go sponge up some tears with a cotton swab. The tears are there to evoke our own tears of repentance and contrition and to alert us of impending disaster.

The call to repentance demonstrates a sense of urgency. Yet, where are the calls for repentance from our Church leaders? St. Paul cries out: "*Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation*" (2 Cor. 6:2). We are dealing here with the eternal fate of human souls. Their eternal welfare is at stake. Eternal flames of unquenchable fire are the fate of those who are not concerned with the ultimate benefit of human souls. God has called us Orthodox to make Christ's redeeming message visible to the world – not to hide it under a bushel. He founded His Church to bring salvation to all creation – not to prevent it from reaching all creation.

It is spiritually hazardous when we become easily impressed by sermons and messages in Church which are strongly moralistic and ethical without being Christ-centered and related to the atoning death of the Savior. Some priests and bishops unconsciously are taking their place in the program of Satan for his takeover of the Church in the last days by preaching a Christianity without the Cross and without the atoning blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The responsibility for this fall both on the Hierarchy and on the people. Now don't get me wrong, I know many good priests and bishops, but some capitulate to the temptation of spiritual pride which can enable them to control people's lives. Many people in the last days will make the mistake of looking to their Church leaders as the ultimate authority in the Church. Satan is already setting up would be christs who refuse to "**decrease**" so the Lord may "**increase**." Absolute authority and

power corrupts absolutely, because they do not have to answer to anybody. Sergei Bulgakov was right when he stated the episcopate "*harbors the danger of a peculiar kind of man-worship*" (A Bulgakov Anthology, P.16).

In reality some members of the Hierarchy are progressively turning the Bride of Christ into the Great Whore, as described in the Apocalypse. They play God. They are Christ substitutes. Because they are intoxicated with power and the desire for glory, they are incapable of rejoicing when men and woman come to the Savior in a born again experience. They feel threatened by any significant renewal movement. They conceal their real intentions under their glittering gold embroidered vestments. But the Holy Spirit gives the true believer the charisma to discern the spirits. "*These things have I written unto you concerning them that seduce you*" (1 John 2:22). It is the hour of repentance. God is giving us the final warning: "*Repent and turn yourself from your idols and turn away your faces from all your abominations*" (Ezek. 14:6).

There will eventually be a limit to God's patience, as He awaits the repentance and reconversion of His Church people. The time will come when they, as well as those outside the churches, will not be able to believe, even if they wanted to! This is the ultimate in God's judgement – sending "strong delusion" (2 Thess. 2:11).

The Antichrist will take Biblical concepts of light, life, darkness, power, wisdom, love, brotherhood etc. and use them to seduce those who are devoid of the Holy Spirit and unregenerate in Jesus Christ. The great seducer will catch them unawares. They will be swayed by his moralistic and pious rhetoric. The plan of Satan is to try to persuade mankind that his vicar, the Antichrist, is the long-awaited messiah. His true nature will be concealed. He

will play the role of a world benefactor.

## Recognizing our Enemy

The would-be christs will "come in my name," Jesus warns. Such Christ-pretenders claim their authority under the guise of religious propriety. In other words, they plead religious legitimacy and ecclesiastical sanction. They exercise authority in the name of Christ.

Such usurpers of Christ's authority do not oppose Christ or show the slightest indication they are adverse to Christ or the teachings and traditions of the Church. Indeed, they plead their adherence to Orthodoxy. They name the name of Christ, but play only lip service to Him. They use His name only to bolster their own authority and power.

St. Paul describes the Antichrist as the "man of sin" and the "son of perdition." This means that all the little antichrists who come before the final Antichrist are also men of sin and sons of perdition, because they are filling a role in Satan's program for the close of the age. If the final Antichrist is the "abomination of desolation," according to Daniel and Christ Himself, then each forerunner is an "abomination of desolation," though in relative sense of the designation.

Pertaining to the coming Antichrist St. Hippolytus of the Early Church states the following: "*The Deceiver seeks to liken himself in all things to the Son of God. Christ is a lion, so Antichrist is also a lion; Christ is a king, so Antichrist is also a king. The Savior was manifested as a lamb; so he, too, in like manner, will appear as a lamb, though within he is a wolf. The Savior came into the world in the circumcision, and he will come in the same manner. The Lord sent apostles among the nations, and he in like manner will send false apostles. The Savior appeared in the form of man, and he, too, will come in the form of a man. The Savior raised up and showed holy flesh like a temple, and he will*



raise up a temple of stone in Jerusalem” (On Christ and Antichrist 28).

A would-be Messiah or Christ is one who pretends to be and to accomplish what Jesus was sent by His Father to accomplish – to meet the needs of the total man, to secure general prosperity and universal peace in the world. The purpose of Jesus was to establish a kingdom of solidarity, prosperity and peace on earth through obedience to Him. But the false messiahs in effect come to usurp the position and claim of Jesus Christ. Ordinarily, the actual name “Christ” is not given to them. **This makes their schemes more subtle and are more apt to escape detection.**

Scripture tells us: “Christ is our peace” (Eph. 2:14). Jesus is “wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God, the Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). Antichrist also says: “I am the Prince of Peace.”

### Signs of the Times

To be sure, Christ withheld the knowledge of the exact day and hour of His return from those who inquired about it. He said: “But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only” (Matt. 24:13). Nevertheless, our Lord made it clear to us in His word that He wanted us to know what the general circumstances would be under which He would return. He called them “signs of the times.” As a matter of fact, we read in Matthew 16:2, 3 how the Lord rebuked the Pharisees and Sadducees for not discerning the “signs of the times.”

Granted the “days and the seasons” are withheld from by God, but there are two signs pointing to the Lord’s return which are distinctly and unmistakably revealed to us in God’s word. The first one is the *Apostasia* (falling away) which is to occur not only in the unregenerate world at large, but particularly within the Christian world. God’s prophetic word warns us that, however unbelievable, a segment of the visible Church will “leave its first love”

in preparation for a capitulation to the Antichrist.

As the day of the Antichrist draws closer, there will be an alarming increase in immorality. Wickedness of every description “will multiply” and rebellion against God will become rampant the world over. Within the Church much of this spiritual malaise will be cloaked under religious propriety and the “form of religion.”

After the birth of Christ there have been numerous leaders who came out of the Christian faith and who sought world rule, the worship of all mankind and who surpassed their predecessors in the enormity of



their ruthlessness. **In all these ambitious rulers Satan was looking for a likely candidate for his Antichrist. It is for this reason that John speaks of many antichrists.**

Every generation has had its would-be world conquerors whom Christians regarded as the end-time Antichrist. Some believed that Adolf Hitler was the Antichrist and others Joseph Stalin, and in the past Napoleon and Genghis Khan were thought to be Antichrist. Apsostolos Makrakis in his commentary on the book of Revelation states that Mohammed was the Antichrist. “Little children, it is the last hour; and as ye have heard that Antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists, whereby we know that it is the last hour” (1 John 2:18). It is not fashionable to teach about the Antichrist in the Orthodox Church today.

Those who should be exercising the ministry of preaching and teaching the flock of Christ are mute. They think it is apocalyptic sensationalism to warn God’s people that the time of the Antichrist is very near. Yet, the Church Fathers who lived more distant from the end-times alerted those they shepherded that the day of the Antichrist could be at the door. The Church Fathers as shepherds were motivated out of pastoral concern to teach about the Antichrist and concerning the signs of the times leading up to the Antichrist. Those to whom the souls of God’s people have been entrusted must show the same pastoral sensitivity and enlighten their flock lest they be taken by surprise and unprepared for the evil day.

The Christian believer should not be afraid of the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. For the believer it is the “blessed hope.” The person that is unsettled over the prospect of Christ’s coming back is the unrepentant sinner. But when you are in a right relationship with God, you have nothing to be afraid of when Jesus appears again to exercise judgment over all men. When you are truly a child of God, born of God and living in the center of His perfect will, you will say spontaneously in your daily prayers: “Come.” You will call upon the Lord not to put it off too long: “*Even so, come, Lord Jesus!*” (Rev. 22:17, 20).

**The return of Christ will signal the close of the Christian Dispensation. It is the last great promise that remains to be fulfilled.** We priests need to teach the people in the Church about what is coming ahead, and you who are laymen need to do some searching. There is no question but that we are living in the last hour and we need to get ready. I think the most appropriate way to end this message is to quote again the words of Hippolytus: “*Having the mystery of God in our hearts, we ought to fear to keep faithfully what has been told us by the blessed prophets, in order that when those things come to pass, we may be prepared for them, and not deceived. For when the times advance, he too (Antichrist), of whom those things are said, will be manifested!*”